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THE BENEFICIAL ROLE OF JEWS
IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S
LIFE AND CAREER

In memoriam Dmitri Nabokov

Jewish-related subjects in Vladimir Nabokov's life and works, such as his uncompromising position on anti-Semitism, his resolute condemnation of the horrors of the Holocaust, and his sympathetic depiction of Jewish characters, have long been addressed by students of the writer's literary legacy.¹ Nabokov's indebtedness to Jews throughout his life and career, however, seems largely to have escaped the deserved notice of Nabokov scholars. This article attempts, at least in part, to fill this gap. One stipulation is in order before the subject at hand is broached: the article discusses actual assistance rendered to Nabokov by Jews, and does not address their intellectual impact on the writer.²

It is widely known that Nabokov's wife, Véra (née Slonim, 1902–91), was of paramount importance to her husband's life and career.³ It is also well known that Dmitri Nabokov (1934–

¹ See, for example, Shroyer, "Jewish Questions in Nabokov's Art and Life," esp. 83–87; Sommers, "The 'Right' versus the 'Wrong' Child," esp. 45–50; Shapiro, *The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord*, 77–95.

² In this regard, suffice it to mention the literary critic Iulii Aikhenvald and the philosopher Grigorii Landau. See, for example, Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*, 46–49; and Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, 24, 54–55, 79, respectively.

³ On this all-important figure in the writer's life, see Schiff, *Véra*. In his final interview, Dmitri Nabokov provides a perfect summation: "My mother did more for my father as a person and a writer than anyone else in the world could have." See the transcript of Maxim D. Shroyer's interview with Dmitri Nabokov in December 2011, approximately two months before his death, "Vladimir Nabokov's Son Says Famous Father 'Was Close to Jewish Culture.'"

2012), aside from being a professional opera singer, was a prolific translator of his father's works, from the English translation of *Priglasenie na kazn'* (*Invitation to a Beheading*, 1959) to the English and Italian translations of *Volshebnik* (*The Enchanter*, 1986; *L'Incantatore*, 2011).⁴ Like Véra before and together with him, Dmitri continued to be the steward and executor of his father's literary estate.

Less well known is that many Jews outside the Nabokov household played a fundamental, at times fateful, role in his life and career. These individuals may be divided into four main categories:

1. Those who played an essential part at a given stage in Nabokov's life due to sheer serendipity.

2. Those who lent support to Nabokov out of great respect for his father, Vladimir Dmitrievich, a renowned jurist and statesman, especially out of gratitude for his courageous stance against anti-Semitism.

3. Those who were associated with Nabokov senior and initially assisted Nabokov in recognition of his father's accomplishments, but later also did so in appreciation of his writerly prowess.

4. Lastly, colleagues, editors, and publishers in his "American years," who were helpful to the writer solely in acknowledgment of his immense literary talent.

Samuil (Shmuel) Rozov (1900–1975) constitutes an example of the first category. Rozov and Nabokov were classmates and close friends at the Tenishev School, from which they both graduated in 1917. After spending a year and a half in Crimea in the aftermath of the Bolshevik coup d'état, and amid peregrinations with his family by way of Greece and France, Nabokov eventually arrived in London and decided to enter Cambridge University. However, in order to be exempted from entrance exams, prospective students had to have their school diploma in hand, which Nabokov did not. Luckily, Nabokov ran into Rozov. The Rozovs came to the English capital in 1918. Samuil was admitted that year to City and Guilds College of the University of London, from which he graduated in 1922 with a degree in civil engineering.⁵ In 1924, Rozov would settle

⁴ For the latter, Dmitri Nabokov won the prestigious international literary prize "Russia-Italia. Attraverso i secoli" ("Russia-Italy. Through the Centuries"), awarded annually for the best literary translation from Russian to Italian. See "Italia-Russia: incontro tra poeti e premio a Nabokov e Parisi."

⁵ See Tsoy, "Shorashav shel haadrikhal Shmuel Rozov, Sankt-Peterburg—London—Cheifa," 45–46.

in the Land of Israel, where he would eventually become one of the most prominent Haifa architects.⁶ Rozov, who had taken his Tenishev School diploma with him into emigration, readily lent it to Nabokov. The future writer presented his classmate's certificate to the Cambridge University admissions committee and explained that his was identical.⁷ This, however, was not quite accurate: Rozov had been a straight-A student, whereas Nabokov got a B in physics and A- in "sacred history." On the strength of Rozov's diploma, the committee, whose members could in any case not read Russian, waived the entrance exam requirement and admitted Nabokov to Cambridge.⁸

Nabokov and Rozov remained lifelong friends, as witness their correspondence, Rozov's coming to see Nabokov in Switzerland in 1962, and Nabokov's plan to respond in kind by visiting Rozov in Israel in the early to mid-1970s.⁹ When an interviewer asked Nabokov whether he had "any ties with Israel," Nabokov replied, "Many old and dear friends; that's why Israel is the only country where I would like to give a lecture."¹⁰ In speaking of "old and dear friends," Nabokov undoubtedly had in mind Rozov, first and foremost. He paid tribute, moreover, to his former classmate in *Pnin*: in demonstrating how Russian speakers address one another by name and patronymic, one of the examples the narrator gives is "Samuil Izrailevich"—those of Rozov.¹¹

Twenty years after that fortuitous diploma-lending in Cambridge, another instance of Jewish-related serendipity, one that would prove far more significant to Nabokov's career, occurred in Paris. Throughout the 1930s, and especially shortly before and after the outbreak of World War II, Nabokov desperately sought an academic position in Great Britain or the United States, but to no avail. At this critical juncture, Providence intervened. The solution came by way of Nabokov's friend and fellow writer Mark Aldanov (the pen name of Mark Landau, 1886–

⁶ *Ibid.*, 66 ff.

⁷ In his letter to Rozov of September 4, 1937, Nabokov recalls: "You rendered me a very great service by lending your school diploma: I displayed it at Cambridge, prevaricated that I had one just like it (it even seems to me that people understood it to be my own)—that liberated me from taking the entrance examination"; for the original Russian, see Leving, "Palestinskoe pis'mo V. Nabokova," 16; this English translation cited from Leving, *Keys to "The Gift"*, 493.

⁸ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 166.

⁹ See also Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 477–78, 513, 554. According to Leving, altogether, twelve of Nabokov's letters to Rozov have been found, spanning 1937 to 1976, and three drafts of Rozov's replies, spanning 1960 to 1970. See Leving, "Palestinskoe pis'mo V. Nabokova," 12n2.

¹⁰ "De nombreux très vieux et chers amis; c'est un peu pour ça qu'la, Israël est le seul pays où j'aimerais faire une conférence." Colombo, "Si Nabocov [sic] vient en Israël ce sera à cause des papillons de Jérusalem," 6. Here and henceforth, all translations are mine unless otherwise attributed.

¹¹ Nabokov, *Pnin*, 105. This was first noted by Yuri Leving in "Samuel Izrailevich."

1957).¹² In 1939, Aldanov received an invitation to teach a summer course in Russian literature at Stanford University. At the time, Aldanov did not intend to relocate to the United States, and recommended Nabokov in his stead.¹³ The official letter from Stanford paved the way for Nabokov to obtain an American visa and immigrate to the United States. While the invitation was of primary significance, Nabokov had to fulfill other formalities. Thus, he had to secure affidavits in support of an American visa application for himself and his family. One such affidavit came from Serge Koussevitzky (1874–1951).¹⁴ Koussevitzky, a distinguished double-bassist and legendary conductor, had been born into a Jewish family of professional musicians. Koussevitzky was well acquainted with Nabokov's parents, at whose St. Petersburg residence he had given private concerts.¹⁵ Between 1924 and 1949, Koussevitzky served as director and conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and so his affidavit carried a great deal of weight. Koussevitzky, who belongs to the second of the categories enumerated above, provided the affidavit, no doubt as a token of gratitude to Nabokov's parents for supporting his musical career and especially to Nabokov senior for his brave opposition to anti-Semitism. In response to the question on *The List, or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States Immigrant Inspector at Port of Arrival*, as to "Whether going to join a relative or friend, state name and complete address, and if relative, exact relationship," Nabokov answered that he and his family would join Koussevitzky, whom he characterized as a friend, and provided the conductor's address: "88 Druce Str., Brookline, Mass."¹⁶ Many years later, after furnishing Nabokov and his family with the affidavit, Koussevitzky and his orchestra performed Pushkin's poem "I have seen again that corner of the earth..." ("Vnov' ia posetil tot ugolok zemli..."), translated by Nabokov into English and set to music by his cousin Nicolas.¹⁷

Following the protracted bureaucratic ordeal of visa obtainment, Nabokov and his family were to set sail on a New York City-bound ship for Jewish refugees, chartered by HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. The president of the HIAS New York chapter was Yakov Frumkin

¹² Nabokov characterized Aldanov as "wise, prim, charming"; see Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 287. In the Russian version of his memoir, *Drugie berega (Other Shores)*, Nabokov writes: "For me, Aldanov's astute mind and kindly restraint were always full of charm" (*Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 5: 318).

¹³ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 511.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 514; Wyllie, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 107.

¹⁵ See Field, *Nabokov*, 86.

¹⁶ Barabtarlo, "Nabokov's First American Questionnaire," 14.

¹⁷ See, respectively, Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi*, 52; Giroud, *Nicolas Nabokov*, 418–19.

(1880–1971). Frumkin also represents an example of the second category. A graduate of St. Petersburg University Law School like Nabokov senior before him, Frumkin knew V. D. Nabokov back in the imperial capital both personally and professionally. Among other things, Frumkin was a contributor to the legal weekly *Law (Pravo)*, of which Vladimir Dmitrievich was a coeditor. Frumkin held V. D. Nabokov in high regard for his valiant stand against the Kishinev pogrom, which found its expression in the article “The Kishinev Bloodbath” (“Kishinevskaia krovavaia bania”).¹⁸ As a token of appreciation for Nabokov senior, Frumkin offered Vladimir Vladimirovich and his family a first-class cabin for half fare (\$560.00).¹⁹ Nabokov, of course, did not have the money. To defray the travel costs, a certain Mrs. Marshak organized a benefit reading for Nabokov.²⁰ In addition, to solicit more funds, Aldanov and Frumkin took him to various wealthy Jewish families.²¹ This concerted effort on the part of Russian Jews in Paris saved the lives of Nabokov and his family. The Nabokovs left for the United States on May 19, 1940, less than a month before Nazi forces seized Paris (June 14, 1940).²² Nabokov remained friendly with Frumkin in the United States, for instance inviting him to literary evenings and sending copies of his books.²³

Sasha Chernyi (the pen name of Aleksandr Glikberg, 1880–1932), a poet and children’s writer, constitutes an example of the third category, that is, individuals who initially aided Nabokov out of respect for his father, but continued to do so in appreciation of the writer’s literary talent. At the request of V. D. Nabokov, with whom he was on friendly terms, Chernyi rendered valuable assistance to the budding writer. Chernyi helped to select and arrange the poems and came up with the title for Nabokov’s verse collection *The Empyrean Path (Gornii put’*, 1923), and printed it at the Grani publishing house, of which he was the editor. Chernyi was also in charge of the eponymous literary almanac, in which he published Nabokov’s poem “Childhood” (“Detstvo”)

¹⁸ See Frumkin, “Iz istorii russkogo evreistva,” 60, 72. For the text of “The Kishinev Bloodbath” in both the Russian original and English translation, see Shapiro, *The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord*, 231–37.

¹⁹ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 521. Gennady Barabtarlo, however, surmises that the Nabokovs traveled in a third-class cabin. Barabtarlo also believes that the cabin fare figure quoted by Boyd was actually in French francs, not US dollars (“Nabokov’s First American Questionnaire,” 13).

²⁰ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 521. Mrs. Marshak (Marchak in French spelling) presumably was Roza Markovna (née Bril’), the wife of Vladimir Marshak, a son of the famed jeweler Iosif Marshak. Like his brother Aleksandr and many other members of the Marshak family, Vladimir was a “fervent art and literature lover”; see Cerval, *Marchak*, 135.

²¹ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 521–22.

²² Barabtarlo, “Nabokov’s First American Questionnaire,” 10.

²³ See Glushanok, “A. A. Gol’denzev i Nabokovy,” 141.

and his play *The Wanderers* (*Skital'tsy*); and where Chernyi also published Nabokov's essay on Rupert Brooke, accompanied by Nabokov's own translation of several of Brooke's poems. In addition, Chernyi edited the literary section of the magazine *Firebird* (*Zhar-ptitsa*), in which he printed several poems by Nabokov, such as "Crimea" ("Krym"), "A Feather" ("Pero"), and "Spring" ("Vesna"). Nabokov did not forget Chernyi's generosity. In his eulogy for Chernyi, Nabokov writes:

I consider it my indispensable duty to relate how A[leksandr] M[ikhailovich] helped me some eleven or twelve years ago.... There are two kinds of help. There is praise signed by a big name, and then there is help in its direct sense: an elder's advice, his comments on the manuscript of a novice,—a wavy line of bewilderment [*volnistaia cherta nedoumenia*], a carefully corrected bit of illiteracy—his fine, restrained encouragement and his totally unrestrained assistance. It was this latter kind of help—the most important kind—that I received from A[leksandr] M[ikhailovich].... With his help, I published in *Firebird*, *Facets*, and elsewhere. Not only did he facilitate the publication of the book of my juvenile poems, but arranged these poems, came up with the collection title, and edited the proofs.²⁴

Although initially Chernyi helped Nabokov out of respect for and friendship with his father, the dynamics of their relationship gradually changed. While Nabokov always held Chernyi in high regard as a writer and person, Chernyi also learned to admire the burgeoning talent of the young author.²⁵

Similarly to Chernyi, Iosif Gessen (1865–1943), a coeditor of the Berlin Russian daily *The Rudder* (*Rul'*), initially provided a publication platform for Nabokov out of respect for and in the memory of Nabokov senior, his close friend. In his obituary for Gessen, Nabokov recalls: "He was my first reader. Long before my books started coming out in his publishing house, he, with paternal leniency, allowed me to feed *The Rudder* with my unripe verses."²⁶ Eventually, however,

²⁴ Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 3: 704.

²⁵ See Boyd, "Envelopes for the Letters to Véra," xxii. For more on the subject, see Leving, "Vladimir Nabokov i Sasha Chernyi"; Milenko, *Sasha Chernyi*, 245–47.

²⁶ Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 5: 594.

Gessen learned to appreciate Nabokov's outstanding literary gift, hailing him as "a phenomenon of genius" and "the most outstanding modern Russian writer."²⁷ By "his publishing house," Nabokov means Slovo, of which Gessen was the director.²⁸ In this tribute, Nabokov expresses his deep appreciation for Gessen's having published his earlier works at Slovo: his translation of Romaine Rolland's *Colas Breugnon* under the title *Nikolka Persik* (1923), his first three novels, *Mashen'ka* (1926), *Korol', dama, valet* (1928), and *Zashchita Luzhina* (1930), as well as the prose and poetry collection *Vozvrashchenie Chorba* (1930). Slovo was a subsidiary of the Ullstein Verlag.²⁹ It is highly likely, therefore, that Gessen played a pivotal role in Ullstein's publication of translations of Nabokov's two earliest novels: the first, under the title *Sie kommt—kommt sie?* (1928) and the second, under the title *König, Dame, Bube: Ein Spiel mit dem Schicksal* (1930).

Ilya Fondaminsky (1880–1942), although not as explicitly as Chernyi or Gessen, also constitutes an example of the third category. Fondaminsky knew Nabokov senior through their collaboration in the Provisional Government of Aleksandr Kerensky: Fondaminsky was appointed commissar of the Black Sea Fleet, whereas Nabokov senior served as the Provisional Government's executive secretary.³⁰ In spite of their different political orientation—Fondaminsky was a Socialist-Revolutionary, Nabokov senior a Constitutional Democrat—Fondaminsky, like so many other Russian Jews, undoubtedly held V. D. Nabokov in high esteem for his relentless opposition to anti-Semitism.³¹ Perhaps initially Fondaminsky treated Nabokov well out of respect for his father, but over time, he learned to recognize the writer's great literary gift and became his close friend. On his visits to Paris, Nabokov habitually stayed at Fondaminsky's spacious apartment. Fondaminsky frequently supported the writer financially by organizing literary readings for him. Most important, Fondaminsky regularly published Nabokov's works in *Contemporary Annals* (*Sovremennye zapiski*), of which he was a coeditor. Nabokov spoke of Fondaminsky as "a saintly and heroic soul who did more for Russian émigré literature than any

²⁷ Gessen, *Gody izgnaniia*, 101; Gessen, *V dvukh vekakh*, 314.

²⁸ See Budnitskii and Polian, *Russko-evreiskii Berlin (1920–1941)*, 426.

²⁹ See Harcave, "Introduction," xix. On the history of the Slovo publishing house, see Kratz, "Materialy k istorii berlinskogo knigoizdatel'stva Slovo v zarubezhnykh kollekttsiakh"; Kratz, "Das Wort als Kosmos," esp. 163–66.

³⁰ See, respectively, Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva*, 68; and Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 125.

³¹ Russian Jewry recognized and much appreciated V. D. Nabokov's personal and political courage: almost twenty years after the publication of his famous anti-pogrom article, the Union of Russian Jews in Germany laid a wreath at his grave with the inscription: "To the noble author of the article 'The Kishinev Bloodbath,' the unforgettable V. D. Nabokov" ("Pogrebenie V. D. Nabokova," *Rul'*, April 4, 1922, 2).

other man.”³² Attesting to their close friendship is the fact that Nabokov entrusted Fondaminsky with his personal archive on the eve of his departure for the United States. Tragically, Fondaminsky was arrested after the Nazi invasion of France and perished in Auschwitz. Although Fondaminsky’s residence was ransacked and the papers were strewn in the street, his niece managed to retrieve most of the materials, which reached Nabokov in America after the war.³³ Nabokov memorialized Fondaminsky in *Pnin* by giving his close friend’s first name and patronymic—“Ilya Isidorovich”—to “Polyanski,” a friend of his title character.³⁴

Sylvia Berkman (1907–92) belongs to the fourth category of Jews who played a supportive role in Nabokov’s life and career. Berkman was Nabokov’s colleague at Wellesley College, where she taught in the English Department. As a scholar, Berkman is best known for her critical study of the New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield (1951). She also wrote short stories, a collection of which was published in 1959 under the title *Blackberry Wilderness*. Nabokov impressed Berkman as someone “who seemed to constitute ... a special kind of his own, an autonomous genus to which not a single other person belonged.”³⁵ Berkman became good friends with Nabokov and his wife, Véra. She helped Nabokov “to smooth his prose,” or as Nabokov himself put it, “checked the grammar of my first English stories that appeared in *The Atlantic* in the early Forties.”³⁶ Years later, Nabokov returned the favor, writing a letter on Berkman’s behalf in support of her candidacy for a Guggenheim fellowship. In this letter of September 24, 1956 to Henry Allen Moe, Nabokov describes her writing as “subtle and of real artistic value.” In another letter of December 16, 1958, to Pyke Johnson, Jr. of Doubleday, where Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* had come out not long before, and where *Blackberry Wilderness* was scheduled to appear, Nabokov is more elaborate in his praise of Berkman’s prose: “I think very highly of her talent, of the delicate brilliancy of her writing and am keenly interested in the success of her book.”³⁷

³² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 286–87. Nabokov also wrote of Fondaminsky: “Having found oneself in the radiance of this most humane of humans, anyone felt imbued with a rare tenderness and respect for him” (*Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 5: 316).

³³ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 392, 394–95, 522.

³⁴ Nabokov, *Pnin*, 110. This was first noted by Maxim D. Shroyer in his “Jewish Questions in Nabokov’s Art and Life,” 84.

³⁵ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 35.

³⁶ See Schiff, *Véra*, 134; Appel and Newman, *Nabokov*, 379–80.

³⁷ See, respectively, Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 188 and 270.

In 1953, upon the completion of *Lolita*, Nabokov began casting about for a publisher. Numerous American publishers recognized the novel's high literary merit, but refused to consider it for fear of litigation because of its taboo subject—pedophilia. After nearly two years of futile attempts, Nabokov instructed his continental literary agent, Doussia (Ida Mikhailovna) Ergaz (1904–67), to seek a publisher in Europe. Of Jewish origin, the Russian-born Ergaz was a French writer, the author of such novels as *The Australian Woman* (*L'australienne*, 1935), *The Favors of Heaven* (*Les Faveurs du Ciel*, 1946), and *The Time of Merit* (*Le temps du mérite*, 1954).³⁸ Ergaz also made a name for herself as a prolific translator of Russian literature into French, her renderings including Fedor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*) in 1931, Vladimir Nabokov's *Camera Obscura* in 1934, and Lev Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (*Voskresenie*) in 1964.

Ergaz's efforts proved successful when she put Nabokov in touch with Maurice Kahane (1919–90), better known under his mother's maiden name, Girodias, which he adopted prior to the Nazi conquest of Paris.³⁹ Girodias was the son of the Manchester-born writer and publisher Jack Kahane, who founded the Obelisk Press in interwar Paris. The Obelisk Press published works in English by such reputable authors as James Joyce alongside low-grade erotica.⁴⁰ In 1953, Girodias founded the Olympia Press, a rebranded version of his father's Obelisk Press, which published avant-garde books as well as salacious writings. After a score of American publishers had rejected *Lolita*, Girodias printed the novel. It was a case of both serendipity and his appreciation of its supreme literary quality.⁴¹ In all likelihood, Girodias hoped that the publication would propel him and his Olympia Press into notoriety and would generate a considerable monetary profit. Ulterior motives notwithstanding, Girodias published *Lolita* when no one else would dare, as Nabokov well knew: "I was (and am) deeply grateful to him for printing that book."⁴² At the same time,

³⁸ Ergaz arrived in Paris via Constantinople in 1920 and was educated at the Sorbonne; see Lubac, Rougier, and Sales, *Gabriel Marcel–Gaston Fessard, Correspondance (1934–1971)*, 66. Ergaz was a close friend of Jacqueline and Gabriel Marcel, a philosopher and playwright who called her "a novelist of great talent" (*ibid.*, 141). While in Paris, Nabokov met (possibly through Ergaz) and befriended Gabriel Marcel. In February 1937, under the auspices of Marcel's lecture series, Nabokov delivered a talk titled "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible" ("Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable"). See Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 86; Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 393, 434.

³⁹ See Girodias, *The Frog Prince*, 352–54. Girodias's younger brother, Éric Kahane (1926–99), was the first translator of *Lolita* into French (1959).

⁴⁰ On Jack Kahane and his press, see Pearson, *Obelisk*.

⁴¹ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 266.

⁴² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 275.

Girodias's failure to abide by the contract quickly strained his business and personal relations with the author. Nabokov characterizes these relations thus: "From the very start I was confronted with the peculiar aura surrounding his business transactions with me, an aura of negligence, evasiveness, procrastination, and falsity."⁴³

Much more felicitous and therefore enduring was Nabokov's association with Jason Epstein (born 1928). A Cambridge, Massachusetts native and graduate of Columbia University, Epstein joined Doubleday in 1950. He was instrumental in publishing Nabokov's novel *Pnin* (1957) as well as the collection of his short stories titled *Nabokov's Dozen* and his translation of Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time (Geroi nashogo vremeni)* (both 1958). In 1957, Epstein, the founding editor of Anchor Books, an imprint of Doubleday, masterminded the special *Anchor Review* issue dedicated to *Lolita*.⁴⁴ Nabokov was most appreciative of Epstein's efforts: "Everything you have done for LOLITA until now delights me."⁴⁵ The issue undoubtedly paved the way for the novel's publication in the United States. As Epstein put it: "This became *Lolita*'s first publication in the United States, and since no legal difficulties arose I saw no reasons that Doubleday should not now publish the entire novel."⁴⁶ However, it was Putnam's, and not Doubleday, that eventually published the novel. As Epstein points out, one of the reasons for Doubleday's refusing to publish *Lolita* was the legal difficulties the press experienced with Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* after its "unsuccessful defense of Wilson's novel before the Supreme Court."⁴⁷ Epstein decided to quit the press, in large measure due to Doubleday's *Lolita* fiasco: "It was the *Lolita* mess that convinced me that now was the time to do so."⁴⁸ Upon leaving Doubleday, Epstein joined Random House, where he served as editorial director until his retirement in 1999. At Random House, he continued his cooperation, first with Nabokov and later with his family, on publication of his works. Nabokov and Epstein became friends, as witness the former's letters to the latter.⁴⁹ The relationship later soured, the falling out

⁴³ Ibid., 272.

⁴⁴ On Epstein's collaboration with Nabokov during the former's stint at Doubleday, see Tock, "Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov and Jason Epstein."

⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 191.

⁴⁶ Epstein, *Book Business*, 78.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁹ As Epstein put it: "Later, when he and I became friends..." (*Book Business*, 75). See also, for example, Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 205–6, 209–10, 217–18, 230, 274–75.

hinging on their different attitudes toward the Vietnam War, which Epstein opposed, and Nabokov supported as part of the struggle against communism. However, at their last, completely fortuitous meeting in Paris in the early 1970s, they “parted amid expressions of renewed friendship.”⁵⁰

While successfully collaborating with Epstein on the publication of his works in the United States, Nabokov also formed a fruitful association with George Weidenfeld (1919–2016) in the United Kingdom. Weidenfeld had been born into a cultured Jewish family in Vienna. His father was a classics scholar turned businessman. Weidenfeld attended the University of Vienna Law School and concurrently the Konsularakademie, a diplomatic college.⁵¹ Following the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938, he left for London, where ten years later he cofounded a publishing house with Nigel Nicolson. The decision to publish *Lolita* in the United Kingdom was a bold one. Furthermore, similarly to Epstein, Weidenfeld astutely prepared the ground for the novel’s publication. In Boyd’s words, “George Weidenfeld mapped out a strategy and drew on the talents of literary figures who supported the book’s right to an audience.”⁵² However, up until the novel went to print in 1959, Weidenfeld & Nicolson was in danger of prosecution under the obscenity laws. Fortunately, the British authorities ultimately decided against prosecution—a joyous piece of news that was announced at a reception in Nabokov’s honor on the eve of the novel’s publication.⁵³ *Lolita* sold well and confirmed the publisher’s daring reputation. As Weidenfeld gained Nabokov’s trust, especially in the wake of the falling-out with Girodias, the writer commissioned him to publish in the United Kingdom almost all his Russian works translated into English, which were in high demand on the heels of *Lolita*’s remarkable success. This is how Weidenfeld describes their collaboration:

My relationship with Nabokov deepened in the years to come, during which we published almost all of his works. He was a hard taskmaster, taking a keen interest in publicity, presentation and sales, but he was never unfair... I used to make twice-yearly pilgrimages to the Palace Hotel Montreux, where he and his wife lived simply but comfortably in a suite of rooms. The ritual was always the same. I would

⁵⁰ Epstein, *Book Business*, 77.

⁵¹ Weidenfeld, *Remembering My Good Friends*, 57.

⁵² Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 377.

⁵³ See Weidenfeld, *Remembering My Good Friends*, 248–52.

arrive at the hotel at around 12.30, announce my name at reception and wait for the Nabokovs to come down. First we would go to the bar for a drink, and then we would sit on the terrace over a long lunch. Then we might go for a walk in the park or up to their room for a *digestif*.... At the end of my visit Nabokov always saw me into the taxi which took me back to the airport.⁵⁴

The correspondence between the Nabokovs and Weidenfeld, although businesslike, was most cordial. For example, Véra Nabokov concludes her letter of October 27, 1964, to Weidenfeld, whom she addresses by his first name, George, as follows: “we are sending you our cordial greetings, and are still hoping that your peregrinations may some day touch Montreux.”⁵⁵ According to Boyd, “[d]uring the 1960s and 1970s, Nabokov’s most loyal publisher and Weidenfeld’s best author would become firm friends.”⁵⁶

Standing somewhat apart from all these categories was Nabokov’s relationship with Arieh Levavi (1912–2009), the Israeli ambassador to Switzerland (1967–75). Levavi’s first contact with Nabokov occurred in 1970. Ambassador Levavi played a crucial role in inviting Nabokov to visit Israel.⁵⁷ In his reply to Levavi’s letter, Nabokov writes:

I wish to thank you and your Government very warmly for inviting my wife and me to visit Israel. We shall be delighted to do so. Would April 1972 be an acceptable time?... I would be happy to give one or two readings of my works, I would enjoy visiting museums, libraries and universities, and I would like to take advantage of this wonderful occasion to do some butterfly hunting.⁵⁸

Having been inundated with work, and specifically with revising *Ada*’s French translation and checking and correcting its galley proofs, Nabokov was forced to put off his trip. Upon receiving another invitation, this time from Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem, to stay at Mishkenot Sha’ananim (“Dwellings of the Carefree”), Nabokov replied on January 15, 1975: “The

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 361.

⁵⁶ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 381.

⁵⁷ See Leving, “Nabokov’s Jewish Family.”

⁵⁸ Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 476.

very name of the place is so enticing—and I will not only admire but certainly visit for butterfly hunting the Moab Hills.”⁵⁹ The visit again did not materialize, and Nabokov wrote to Kollek almost two years later, on December 10, 1976:

I was delighted to learn from my cousin Nicolas that you still want me to come to Israel. I have been eager for quite a time to make this journey. This year has been a bad one for me: I have been hospitalized for several months with a grave illness and only now have begun to resume my usual mode of life. If convenient, I would like to come with my wife in the second week of May for a month or so.... For my part, I shall look forward to making your acquaintance after hearing so much about your superb activities. I am also looking forward to the museums and libraries, and, of course, to some butterfly collecting.⁶⁰

Although Nabokov planned the trip in earnest, it never came to fruition, first because of the writer’s extremely busy schedule and then due to his deteriorating health and death on July 2, 1977.⁶¹

As can be seen, Jews played a vital and most beneficial role in Nabokov’s life and career. While some assisted Nabokov out of sheer serendipity or in recognition of his literary talent, there were quite a few who did so as an expression of their gratitude to both Nabokov and his father. Staunch opponents of anti-Semitism, the Nabokovs made a significant contribution to combating this repugnant phenomenon.⁶² Dmitri Nabokov summed up this family tradition as follows:

I might mention here that I was born into a family utterly devoid of racial or religious prejudice. This was the continuation, on my father’s side, of the liberal aristocratic tradition of his own father, who consistently condemned injustice

⁵⁹ Boyd and Pyle, *Nabokov’s Butterflies*, 712. Mishkenot Sha’ananim is a Jerusalem neighborhood that houses an international cultural institution and conference center, with upscale lodgings for internationally acclaimed authors, artists, and musicians visiting Israel. Since Nabokov did not know Hebrew, it was presumably Ambassador Levavi who translated the neighborhood’s name for him.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 719.

⁶¹ See Shapiro, *The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord*, 94; Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 476, 480. For a detailed account of Nabokov’s unrealized visit to Israel, see Leving, “Phantom in Jerusalem, or the History of an Unrealized Visit.”

⁶² See Shapiro, *The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord*, 77–93.

toward the weak and the poor. He, like his son, had not an ounce of Jewish blood, but was a ferocious opponent of anti-Semitism in general, and pogroms in particular.⁶³

Dmitri Nabokov is correct in his assessment of the Nabokov family tradition with regard to anti-Semitism, except for one thing: his father did in fact have some measure of Jewish blood. According to an archival discovery, the writer's maternal ancestor, registered as Illarion Kozlov, a second-guild merchant from Buzuluk, a town in the Orenburg province, was born to Jewish parents and converted to Russian Orthodoxy.⁶⁴ One of his sons, Nikolai (1814–89), Nabokov's great-grandfather, pursued a medical career and attained the position of the "first president of the Russian Imperial Academy of Medicine."⁶⁵ Nabokov did not know about his Jewish heritage, which became public only in 1997; but judging by his attitude toward Jewry, he would most likely have been delighted to discover it. Nabokov's sister Elena (1906–2000), with whom the writer shared an outlook on a great many things, spoke proudly of her newfound Jewish roots during our meeting at her Geneva residence in May 1999.

While Nabokov's support and sympathy for the plight of Jews remained unchanged, his attitude toward Zionism evolved over the years. The above-mentioned Samuil Rozov reminded Nabokov in a letter that when they had been schoolboys together in St. Petersburg, "you always used to laugh at my Zionism!"⁶⁶ Rozov had grown up in a prominent Zionist family: his father, Israel Rozov, was one of Zeev Jabotinsky's "old friends and associates" and a founder and leader of the Revisionist Zionist organization, HaTzohar.⁶⁷ By contrast, it was in his adulthood that Nabokov came to recognize the validity of Jews' aspirations for their own homeland and became a strong supporter of the State of Israel. Thus, in the aftermath of the Six-Day War (June 1967), Nabokov wrote to Rozov, who resided in Haifa: "I have been with you with all my soul, deeply and anxiously, in the course of the latest events, and I triumph now, saluting the marvelous victory of Israel."⁶⁸ On January 5, 1970, Nurit Beretzky, a reporter for the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*,

⁶³ Nabokov, "Laura Is Not Even the Original's Name," 190–91.

⁶⁴ See Malysheva, "Praded Nabokova, pochetni chlen Kazanskogo universiteta," 132.

⁶⁵ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 65.

⁶⁶ Leving and Shrayer, "V svoikh knigakh Vy prodolzhaete okumat'sia v ledianuiu glubinu," 203.

⁶⁷ See Halkin, *Jabotinsky*, 175; Remba, *Kefi shehikartim*, 77–78.

⁶⁸ As cited in Leving, "Samuel Izrailevich," 16.

conducted an interview with Nabokov. When she asked Nabokov's opinion of the current situation in the Middle East, the writer responded: "I fervently favor total friendship between America and Israel and am emotionally inclined to take Israel's side in all political matters."⁶⁹ Upon the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War (October 1973), Nabokov sent a monetary donation to Ambassador Levavi, as he put it, "a small contribution to Israel's defense against the Arabolshevist aggression."⁷⁰ Earlier that year, Nabokov wrote to Itzchak Livni, editor of the Israeli weekly *Bamachaneh*: "I don't have to tell you what ardent sympathy marks my feelings toward Israel and her 25th anniversary.... I can only extend my heartfelt congratulations to your young ancient great little country."⁷¹

It turns out that during one of his visits to Nabokov in Montreux, Ambassador Levavi brought him a pile of books, "from works on Zionism to monographs on the governmental structure of [Israel]."⁷² Levavi did "not know whether [Nabokov] read anything related to political philosophy," and from their subsequent interaction got the impression that the writer "did not even look at those works."⁷³ However, Nabokov's reference to Israel as a "young ancient great little country" suggests that he was perhaps familiar with Theodor Herzl's novel *The Old New Land* (*Altneuland*, 1902), in which this father of modern political Zionism envisioned the establishment of the present-day Jewish state.

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⁶⁹ As cited in Leving, "Nabokov's Jewish Family."

⁷⁰ Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, 522.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 509.

⁷² Leving, "Nabokov's Jewish Family."

⁷³ *Ibid.*

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