

“FOLDING AN UMBRELLA,
NOT FINDING ITS SECRET BUTTON”

Vladimir Nabokov’s 1970 Interview to an Israeli Newspaper

Introduction

It all started with a letter dated 5 January, 1970, sent from Pfannenstielstr 33, Zurich. In it, Nurit Beretzky, a young Israeli journalist addressed Vladimir Nabokov:

Dear Mr. Nabokov

For a few days now I have been trying to compose a list of questions. I have discovered that it’s a hard task to translate badly-phrased Hebrew questions to adequate English.

Please excuse my lame English.

What followed was a massive text of fifteen dense questions – some of which definitely aroused Nabokov’s curiosity. As a result, the writer agreed to a meeting and even invited Beretzky to pay a visit at the Montreux Palace.

Nurit Beretzky (b. 1944) was raised in Even Yehuda, a small Israeli town named after Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, one of the enthusiasts responsible for the historical revival of the Hebrew language in the early 20th century. Beretzky studied in England and then worked as a reporter for the major Israeli newspaper, *Ma’ariv*. Soon after her meeting

with Nabokov, she also authored and published, in her native Hebrew, two collections of poetry: a children's book, *Lumfumfum* (לומפומ / Tel Aviv: Bitan, 1971); and *Yamim ba-'aremot-'aremot* [ימים-ערמות-בערמות / *The Days in Garbage Piles*] (Tel Aviv: Bitan, 1972).

Out of the suggested list, Nabokov encircled a total of 13 questions. He separated clauses in a professional editorial manner, marked and underlined some of them, and assigned the numbers – in his own hand – to those he deemed worth responding. Nabokov left out the two last questions. The first one concerned the feminist issue (“Which of the women you wrote about is your favorite? I would have liked to ask a lot about your view of women but I don't know how to put the questions”); the second one was a somewhat coquettish request: “Is there a question you have never been asked by journalists and would like to be asked?”

The meeting took place in the afternoon of Monday, January 19th, 1970.

As noted by Nurit Beretzky, the actual conversation differed somewhat from the recorded account which has been preserved in Nabokov's private archive: the author himself prepared the typescript in two pages. Beretzky's list of questions is also typed, except a hand-written signature, in blue ink: “Yours, Nurit Beretzky ‘MA'ARIV’.” This interview is being published in its original form, in English, for the very first time.

The editor would like to express his special gratitude to Mrs. Beretzky, to The Vladimir Nabokov Estate, the Berg Collection of New York Public Library, and the Wylie Agency for their cooperation and kind permission to reprint this conversation.

— *Yuri Leving*

VLADIMIR NABOKOV,
AN INTERVIEW WITH NURIT BERETZKY
RECORDED IN 1970

BERETZKY: Why do you live in Switzerland?

NABOKOV: I am comfortable here. I like mountains and hotels. I detest strikes and hooligans.

BERETZKY: Do you still feel in Exile?

NABOKOV: Art is exile. I felt an exile when I was a child in Russia among other children. I kept goal on the soccer field, and all goalkeepers are exiles.

BERETZKY: Can one adopt a foreign country for a homeland?

NABOKOV: America, my adopted country, is the closest thing to my idea of home.

BERETZKY: Is being a refugee means being rootless?

NABOKOV: Rootlessness is less important than a confirmed refugee's capacity to branch and blossom in a complete – and very pleasant – void.

BERETZKY: In which language do you think, count and dream?

NABOKOV: I do not think in any language, I think in images, with some brief verbal surfacing of a utilitarian sort in any of the three tongues that I know, such as “damn those trucks” or “espèce de crétin”. I dream and count mostly in Russian.

BERETZKY: What is the difference for you between writing in English and writing in Russian? Will you write in Russian again?

NABOKOV: In my prose and poetry during more than half a century of work I have provided enough examples of that difference, whether implicit or creatively expressed, for scholars to analyse. I still use Russian in my translations (e.g. of *LOLITA*) and in an occasional poem.

BERETZKY: Why do you write? Is there joy or pain in writing?

NABOKOV: Since in writing my books I am supremely indifferent to historical, humanistic, religious, social and educational matters, I cannot tell why I do it. As to the pain and the pleasure, I have nothing new to report after Flaubert wrote about that in his letters.

BERETZKY: How far do you get involved with the characters while writing? Do you think of them after the book has been published?

NABOKOV: I suspect that the Almighty's interest in Adam and Eve was neither very sincere nor very enduring, despite the success, on the whole, of a really marvelous job. I, too, am completely detached from my characters, while making them and after making them.

BERETZKY: How do you want your books to be read? Do you think about your readers?

NABOKOV: I cannot expect any reader to know any of my books as well as I do, but if his mind cannot retain at least a certain percentage of specific details then he is a bad reader, that's all.

BERETZKY: Do you re-read your old books?

NABOKOV: I have to re-read them very closely at least a dozen times: when correcting galleys, when correcting page proofs, when proofreading paperback editions, and when checking and proofreading translations.

BERETZKY: What do you think of the films that were based on your books?

NABOKOV: The two pictures I have seen, *LOLITA* and *LAUGHTER IN THE DARK*, were made without my supervision of the filming; the results were good movies with splendid actors, but only very vague versions of my books.

BERETZKY: What is boring for you? What is most amusing for you?

NABOKOV: Let me tell you instead what I hate: Background music, canned music, piped-in music, portable music, next-room music, inflicted music of any kind.

Primitivism in art: “abstract” daubs, symbolic bleak little plays, junk sculpture, “avant-garde” verse, and other crude banalities. Clubs, unions, fraternities, etc. (In the course of these last twenty-five years I must have turned down some twenty offers of glamorous membership).

Oppression. I am ready to accept any regime – Socialistic, Royalistic, Janitorial, – provided mind and body are free.

The touch of satin.

Circuses – especially animal acts and robust ladies hanging by their teeth in the air. The four doctors: Dr. Freud. Dr. Schweitzer, Dr. Zhivago and Dr. Castro.

Causes, demonstrations, processions. “Concise” dictionaries, “abridged” manuals. Journalistic clichés: “The moment of truth,” for example, or the execrable “dialogue.”

Stupid, inimical things: the spectacles case that gets lost; the clothes-hanger that topples down in the closet; the wrong pocket. Folding an umbrella, not finding its secret button. Uncut pages, knots in shoelaces. The prickly aura of one's face after skipping one's morning shave. Babies in trains. The act of falling asleep.

BERETZKY: What do you think of the situation in the Middle East?

NABOKOV: There exist several subjects in which I have expert knowledge: certain groups of butterflies, Pushkin, the art of chess problems, translation from and into English, Russian and French, word-play, novels, insomnia, and immortality. But among those subjects, politics is not represented. I can only reply to your question about the Near East in a very amateur way: I fervently favor total friendship between America and Israel and am emotionally inclined to take Israel's side in all political matters.

