

QUESTIONS WITH NO ANSWERS:

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE *LOLITA* PUBLISHER

In Memoriam of Lord George Weidenfeld
(13 September 1919 – 20 January 2016)

George Weidenfeld was born in Vienna, in 1919, and fled to England once the Nazis tightened their grip of Austria, making it no more a welcoming place for Jews. He co-founded a publishing house with Nigel Nicolson in 1949. “Much-married womanizer, teetotal party-giver, and grand old man of publishing,” as called by *The Telegraph* at the very day he passed away, Lord Weidenfeld had also left the undeniable imprint in the literary biography of one of his favorite authors, Vladimir Nabokov.

The *Nabokov Online Journal* proposed this interview to the legendary publisher over two years ago, but Weidenfeld’s health proved to be too frail: he agreed in principle, but asked to wait until he feels better. We arranged, through an agent, to send him the *NOJ* questions in writing. Per our editorial practice, following intensive research we submitted a long list of questions from which our subject was asked to choose the most relevant topics and thus narrow down the list. In Lord Weidenfeld’s case, due to the dense history of his relationship with Nabokov, the initial inquiry turned out too lengthy and detailed, something that perhaps added to the initial postponing of the unrealized exchange in writing. At one point, the hope was that Barbara Wyllie, our London-based Associate Editor, would be able to conduct this conversation in person – we were especially interested in the prospective interviewee’s clarifying and elaborating on the alleged meeting between the writer and the actor Charlie Chaplin, mentioned only in Weidenfeld’s memoir – not in Vladimir Nabokov’s biographies. But then Lord Weidenfeld’s condition took a turn for the worse: around the New Year of 2015 the response got delayed indefinitely, and until the sad news arrived – the publisher died in London, at the age of 96.

As an exceptional and, to a certain extent, conceptual gesture, we have decided to run this *empty* interview anyway: we hope that the questions themselves, though being left unanswered forever – at least, not by George Weidenfeld himself – will serve as a kind of a testimony to that everlasting connection between the influential aesthete and his author.

– *Ed. note.*

Interview questions for Lord George Weidenfeld

By Yuri Leving, Nabokov Online Journal

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

- When did you read Nabokov for the very first time? What was the title?

- Upon reflection, what is your favorite Nabokov novel now? Do you have a favorite short story?

- Could you describe your very first meeting with Vladimir and Véra Nabokov? What did you know about the couple prior to this first encounter?

- After meeting the Nabokovs, did your impression of them change? How?

- It took you a long time to gain Véra Nabokov’s confidence. What helped you to break the ice in approaching someone, who, in your own characterization, loyally defended her husband “like a tigress”? Did you resort to gallantry and flowers or do you think that perseverance played a crucial part?

- The 1969 edition of *Ada* that is in your possession bears this inscription: “For young George from old Vladimir” and is adorned with an elaborate butterfly drawing. It also includes the page number in brackets: “p. 332.” What does this reference allude to? [reproduced in *Remembering My Good Friends*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, pp. 308-309].

- Did Nabokov personally present you with this edition during one of your meetings?

- Do you have other similar inscriptions from Nabokov in your private library?

PUBLISHING LOLITA: CATAPULTING THE WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON FIRM INTO THE HEADLINES – AND NABOKOV INTO THE LITERARY CANON

– According to Andrew Field, the writer’s first biographer, when Nabokov arrived in London and met you and Nigel Nicolson, he avoided the subject of his novel for hours. Field also states that you “joined him in this strange omission, as if by mutual consent,” but the author finally began to talk about *Lolita* when you were going from one party to another in a taxi. It was then, Field maintains, that Nabokov admitted that he intended the book as a tragedy (“The tragedy of the book is that having started the affair from purely selfish motives, [Humbert Humbert] falls in love with her when she is beyond loving”). Did you feel any awkwardness in Nabokov’s long silence (if this was the case indeed)? Did such an interpretation of the most controversial book in your publishing career sound convincing from the outset?

– In a letter to you from 1958, Nabokov attacks Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* and asks that his *Lolita* not to be compared to it. (“Now, the following little matter may seem to you trivial but it bothers me. I suspect the phrase ‘Mr. Nabokov is a second Pasternak’ is a reporter’s distortion. It might be correct to say, perhaps, as some have been doing that Pasternak is the best Soviet poet, and that Nabokov is the best Russian prose writer but there the parallel ends”).¹ What did you think of the Pasternak affair then and what is your opinion today?

– Do you think that Nabokov’s unequivocal view was tainted by the ongoing rivalry between *Lolita* and *Zhivago*? Did you like Pasternak’s novel?

– Can you remember any instances in which you might have challenged Nabokov’s literary tastes?

¹ Nabokov continued, stating that the novel’s historical background was quite false (inaccurate, even) and was quite in keeping with the Communist party line, but stressed that he was “not concerned with any but the artistic aspects of the book” (12 January, 1958; in *VN: Selected Letters*, 274). He added in a letter to you: “ZHIVAGO is a sorry thing, clumsy, melodramatic, with stock situations and trite characters. Here and there a landscape or metaphor recalls Pasternak the gifted poet but that is not sufficient...”

– Even without needing to be translated, *Lolita* required meticulous preparation to be published in England. Brian Boyd, Nabokov’s second biographer, credits you personally as someone who “mapped out a strategy and drew on the talents of literary figures who supported the book’s right to an audience.” Could you recount the way in which you devised this strategy so successfully? For instance, did you make up a list of possible supporters and reviewers?

– Had you prepared any fallback positions if *Lolita* failed – either commercially or politically? Did you consider the possibility of criminal charges or were you and your partner too young and daring to be concerned with such matters?

– In a postscript to one of the letters to you Nabokov writes: “Perhaps it is too early to discuss this matter but before you decide on the binding and jacket of LOLITA may I suggest that you take a look at the pictures on [the] jacket and cover of the Dutch edition. They are perfectly and enchantingly right. On the other hand, the Swedish edition has a horrible young whore instead of my nymphet.” How did it happen that the Weidenfeld and Nicolson edition of *Lolita* was published with that particular cover?

– Do you recall any editorial deliberations with regards to the appearance of the book, the cover design, and its relevance to potential sales figures?

– Once Nabokov wrote rather harshly to you: “There is something important I have been nursing. Here it is: I am not very happy, as you may have guessed, about the sales of my books in England. And the more I think of it the more convinced I become that this is in a large measure due to a lack of publicity. <...> I am royally indifferent to nincompoop reviews in the British papers but am commercially sensitive to publicity supplied by my publishers” (June 30, 1971). How seriously did you take Nabokov’s criticism? In reflection, do you think that concerns had any merit?

– My understanding is that authors are usually not so vocal about promotional strategies for their books as this is the domain of the publisher. What did you think of Nabokov’s strong opinions regarding the sales and advertising strategy for his book?

– Nabokov found your idea of gradually publishing all of his works most appealing. Why, in fact, did you suggest this to Nabokov? Was it a ploy to lure him into your business orbit or were you already confident at that point in the literary merits of Nabokov’s entire oeuvre, including his not yet translated Russian novels, which, I presume, you didn’t have in the original (*The Gift*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Luzhin Defense*, and others)? Back in 1958, wasn’t it a risky offer?

– When it was reported in *The Times* that Nigel Nicolson, during a meeting at Bournemouth, said that the publishers were not considering publication of *Lolita*, you cabled Nabokov that “it is almost impossible to know exactly what was said in the heat of an angry political meeting and he may well have inadvertently used this phrase.” In fact, this did not represent the publisher’s official policy. I wonder, did your co-publisher have second thoughts at that moment? (One recalls that Nigel’s father opposed publishing *Lolita*.)

– Were there any internal debates or behind-the-scenes dramas that you were not willing to disclose to your client, who, in his own turn, wished to spare no time with the publication process despite the controversial frenzy?

– Weidenfeld & Nicolson persuaded Nabokov that regardless of the publication date of *Lolita*, the whole point was to impress critics by publishing Nabokov’s entire opus. To what extent was this motivated by the goal to associate your fledgling publishing business with intellectually refined prose? Was it a purely aesthetic desire; an intelligent business move; belief in Nabokov’s literary merits (or a mixture of all three)?

– As the publisher, you proposed to start off with *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, “followed by the short stories and your Russian novels. *Bend Sinister* could be

sandwiched in between the first and second Russian novels.” Why this particular order (Nabokov had suggested a slightly different line-up, starting with *Bend Sinister*)?

POLITICS, CENSORSHIP, PHILOSEMITISM

– The scenario under which *Lolita* would be banned in England was quite serious in 1958. Political waves were felt as well because Nigel Nicolson was in Parliament, and he was having a difficult time with his constituency, so the fear was that the *Lolita* affair might damage the Conservative Party’s image. Is it possible that British society was more mature than its politicians at the time?

– Were you prepared to fight for the publication of *Lolita* at any cost or did you have your hesitations as well? If so, what helped you to overcome any insecurity, drifting between the letters of support (such as the one published in *The Times*) and open attacks (like the one in the Catholic paper, *The Tablet*)?

– You believed that the salient problem was one of timing. The Obscene Publications Bill had its formal second reading and was about to reach the crucial committee stage. Was this your legal advisers’ proposal or Nabokov’s own idea that a single copy of *Lolita* should be published, so that the attorney general could prosecute the firm for a technical publication without any member of the public at large having been corrupted?

– Do you think that Nabokov was ready for the question to be tested in court? Nicolson lost his Bournemouth seat on the issue, but what was at stake for the author himself?

– During a very nervous *Lolita* launch party at the Ritz hotel, a messenger delivered a note to Nicolson saying that the government had decided not to prosecute. You have vividly described Véra’s emotional reaction (where these really tears in her eyes?), but what about Vladimir?

– You mention Igor Stravinsky and the Berlins attending this party as well. Do you recall their interaction with Nabokov? Who else was present then?

– Prior to *Lolita*'s official UK release on 6 November, 1958, Nabokov reluctantly went to Cambridge to give a public lecture “under the second-rate auspices of a fringe department” (to quote from his correspondence with you). After he agreed, you rented a Rolls Royce to drive him there on 4 November. Was this to sooth his annoyance? Did you attend the lecture and the banquet afterwards?

– The topic of Nabokov's lecture, “Russian Classics, Censors, and Readers,” really resonated more with the volatile situation of his own book – on the verge of censorship in England. Today this context should be elucidated for contemporary readers, but did the audience understand the pointed intention of this public utterance against his opponents?

– As you, possibly, know, your friend and the former mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, had invited the Nabokovs to Israel in 1976 (unfortunately, due to VN's illness this never materialized). Vladimir also met several times with Arielevi, the Israeli ambassador to Switzerland, during the mid-1970s, expressing his firm support of the Jewish state. During the Six-Day War he sent a check to Israel's Ministry of Defense. Have you ever discussed with Nabokov the time when you served as political adviser and Chief of Cabinet to Chaim Weizmann in 1949?

– Did you have a chance to talk with Nabokov about Israel?

– Like you, Véra Nabokov narrowly escaped the European Holocaust right before the beginning of World War II. Did you talk with Véra about anything related to her Jewish background? Do you have any clue whether she or her husband had any religious sympathies or inclinations?

NABOKOV THE BUSINESSMAN

– *Lolita* was sold in hundreds of thousands of copies and put your firm on the map as one of the leaders in the publishing world. At the same time, Nabokov never relinquished his right to advise you of even better sales and deals, and was, what you call, “a hard taskmaster.” How and when, do you think, this émigré professor of literature acquired (and, maybe, mastered) such a solid marketing acumen?

– Was Nabokov different in this way from any other American or foreign writer in your client list?

– You have attested to the fact that Nabokov was “the most distinguished writer I have known.” Since you knew quite a few first-rate writers, what was it that made Nabokov stand out among so many respected authors?

– What was (and still is) your personal philosophy, as an entrepreneur, in dealing so successfully with literary giants? Extra-sensitivity? A show of respect? A readiness to compromise? The use of tact and charm?

– You nominated Nabokov to the Prix International de Litterature. Nabokov failed to receive a sufficient number of votes then, but the same also happened with the Nobel Prize for Literature. With his perfectly trained ear for public opinion and his powers of political persuasion, why do you think that Nabokov never received the highest literary award?

NABOKOV THE MAN

– There are very few people who could claim to be “firm friends” with the sometimes-stern Nabokov, but this is exactly what B. Boyd says about you (“Over the next three decades [GW] would continue to publish almost every Nabokov work he could, whether freshly written or newly revived. During the 1960s and 1970s, Nabokov’s most loyal

publisher and Weidenfeld's best author would become firm friends"; qtd. in *VN: American Years*, 381). Do you think that your relationship with Nabokov was a "true" friendship – something more than a mutually beneficial relationship?

– I'd like you to talk about Nabokov's relations with the Nicolsons, father and son, whom you both knew informally. When Nabokov was shown a copy of Harold Nicolson's *Diaries and Letters, 1945-62*, he wrote an indignant letter to you, protesting against a statement attributed to him that all his life he, allegedly, "had been fighting against the influence of *Some People*" (January 20, 1969). The role of Harold Nicolson's *Some People* (1927) – "A peculiar amalgam of autobiography and fiction, memoir and imaginative improvisation," as Michiko Kakutani puts it in the review of the book's re-issue in *The New York Times* [December 29, 1982] – might have been "terribly exaggerated," as Nabokov claims. Nevertheless, Nabokov also admits that he "greatly admired *Some People*" and in his thirties (when writing *Sebastian Knight*) was "careful to steer clear of its hypnotic style." Did you show this note to Nigel Nicolson? If not, why not? Just for the record, Nabokov did request that his comments be shared with Nicolson. To what extent do you think Nicolson's literary style was of importance for Nabokov just as he was switching from Russian to English in the 1930s?

– Nicolson Sr. and his wife practiced an open marriage. Their son, Nigel, honestly discussed his parents' bisexuality in a book titled *Portrait of a Marriage*. Do you think that Nabokov had any genuine interest in the Nicolson's controversial lifestyle?

– Based both on the incident mentioned above, as well as your personal acquaintance with the writer, what do you think of Nabokov's insistence on his absolutely unique voice and extra-literary stance?

– Do similar mechanisms explain his general defiance of literary influences and self-declared independence of contemporary literary schools?

– You mention, rather ironically, your “twice-yearly pilgrimages” to the Palace Hotel in Montreux. Would you reconstruct that regular ritual to visit the Nabokovs and what it was like in their company? Details are particularly welcome: what did you and your host used to drink? What were Nabokov’s favorite dishes and could he be called in any way a gourmet?

– One of my favorite humorous episodes in your book of memoirs is the “Popeye” incident involving Nabokov and a local White Russian female oculist, which occurred during one of your visits at Montreux in the late 1960s. Could you recount it here once more?

VISUAL MEMORY

– Could you elaborate on the photograph of Nabokov from your own collection: on what occasion was it taken? Who took the photograph? It’s quite unusual to see Nabokov with the plate of food, looking somewhat perplexed by the presence of a photographer. Could you please provide the larger context that might explain to a casual observer all of the embedded information in this photograph?

– Did Nabokov consciously control his own public image and televised appearances in the post-*Lolita* period?

– Do you happen to have more pictures of Nabokov, or of yourself with Nabokov, in your private archive?

– As far as I know, you are the only person to tell of Nabokov’s personal meeting with Charlie Chaplin arranged through Countess Vivi Crespi. This is a very important meeting, considering Nabokov’s ambivalent interest in the Hollywood star and his movies. Could you tell us more about what you know of this brief encounter and why, in your opinion, it didn’t go so well?

– You mention that your wife Sandra once commented on the Russian film *War and Peace* and how Nabokov scorned her for this comment. I assume that this was the film directed by Sergei Bondarchuk (released in the USA on 28th April, 1968), eponymous for its epic-scale designs and decorations, involving thousands of professional artists and the Soviet military. Do you think Nabokov’s judgment of this film was clouded by ideological revulsion or aesthetic considerations?

– Did you ever discuss other movies with Vladimir? Do you have any sense of his taste in films?

NABOKOV’S MYSTERY: HALF A CENTURY LATER

– Could you elaborate on the unrealized project that Nabokov was working on, tentatively titled *Butterflies of Europe*?

– In 1966, Nabokov announced to you his decision not to continue with the butterfly book. B. Boyd describes the grand scale of this handsome volume with over a hundred large-format six-color plates. Is it true that at the point of Nabokov’s hesitation, you even offered him a \$10,000 advance? Is it also true that you have been trying to arrange for an international consortium of European publishers?

– Why were you personally interested in such a time-consuming and expensive project? Did you think that it would turn into an immediate bestseller? Had you read any of the text before Nabokov abandoned the project?

– Did you have a chance to read Nabokov’s last unfinished novel *The Original of Laura* (Knopf, 2008)?

– What do you think of this novel in fragments? Is this a departure from the Nabokov you knew?

– As a commercial publisher, would you have ventured to publish this piece?

THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

– You stated that since the late 1960s international publishing has undergone radical change and it is not always literary quality that makes for success. What do you think of the new e-books and the whole experience of reading a book off of a screen? Are you a user of a tablet or any other mobile device yourself?

– Would Nabokov’s novels – for example, *Pale Fire*, with its hypertextual links and multiple narrative agents – benefit from such an electronic edition and mixture of mediums?

– Final question. Lord Weidenfeld, you are one of the very few people who has experienced the entire “canonization” of Nabokov and his works. With all of your wisdom and experience of the last 50 years, what would you say to Vladimir Nabokov in the 21st century, if such a meeting were now to take place?

