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SITES AND SOUNDS
OF POMERANIA IN NABOKOV’S WORLD*

Introduction

In the summer of 1927, Vladimir and Véra Nabokov vacationed on the island of Rügen in Western Pomerania, presently in Germany’s federal state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. They spent July and August of that year in or around the resort of Binz on Rügen’s eastern shore (Ill. 1).

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During the Weimar years, when the Nabokovs visited Rügen, Germany still owned a much larger part of the greater historic Pomerania than it does today, the post-World War II border between Germany and Poland having shifted to the west (Ills. 2 and 3).

Ill. 2. Weimar Germany; Alexander Ganse, 2002.

Ill. 3. Germany; www.lonelyplanet.com.
For part of their Pomeranian vacation, the Nabokovs chaperoned the Bromberg siblings, to whom Véra was related through her father’s second marriage. Some information about the 1927 vacation on the Bay of Pomerania may be found in Andrew Field’s books (Field interviewed Nabokov about it in the 1960s), Brian Boyd’s biography (Boyd interviewed Véra Nabokov in the 1980s), and Stacy Schiff’s biography of Véra Nabokov (Schiff interviewed Abraham Bromberg in the 1990s). Boyd has also incorporated evidence from Nabokov’s letter to his mother, Elena I. Nabokova, dated 22 September 1927. Written in Berlin already after the couple’s return from Rügen, the letter captured some anecdotes about the vacation. The most significant known key to understanding the trace of Western Pomerania and Rügen in Nabokov’s artistic memory is the letter Nabokov sent to his senior colleague Yuli Aykhenvald on 27 July 1927, with Véra contributing a postscript. The letter to Aykhenvald yields valuable details about the Binz vacation, revealing the name of the hotel where the Nabokovs were staying in July and August, Villa Brunhilde:

[…] Я сегодня пробежал по пляжу верст пять, снял трусики, свернул в лесок и там совершенно один и совершенно гольный бродил, лежал на траве, высматривал бабочек, — и чувствовал себя сущим Тарзаном: чудесное ощущенье! Тут хорошо. Верин загар розоватокоричневый, мой же глубокого оранжевого оттенка. Мы с ней часами лежим на песке — а не то баращаемся в воде и играем в мяч. Мальчики, наши ученики, оказались прелестными: они измываются над моим немецким языком. […] И это море, и белесый песок, и сосны, и тысяча полосатых будок на пляже, и русская чета в вилле Брунгильда, — все зовет вас, дорогой Юлий Исаевич, приехать покупаться в море и покопаться в песке. Решитесь! […]


[…] Today I ran about five versts [about 5 km.] on the beach, then took off my trunks, turned into a little forest and wandered there, naked and completely alone; I lay in the grass checking out butterflies—and felt like a true Tarzan, what a wonderful sensation! It’s nice here. Véra’s tan is pinkish-brown, and mine is of a deeply orange hue. She and I lie for hours in the sand — or else we splash around in the water and play ball. The boys, our charges, have turned out to be lovely: they taunt me for my German. […] And this sea, and the whitish sand, and the pines, and a thousand striped booths on the beach, and the Russian couple at Villa Brunhilde — all of this summons you, dear Yuli Isaevich [Aykhenvald] to come here and swim in the sea and dig in the sand. Do come! […] (tr. MDS)

It was, by all existing accounts, a fabulous vacation, and a surviving photograph of Vladimir and Véra in the company of their Jewish-Russian charges and Berlin friends captures that particular glow of the Weimar-era interwar émigré happiness, still unthreatened by the rise of Nazism, of which Nabokov wrote elsewhere (Ill. 4).

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In the poem “Snapshop” (“Snimok”), the only literary work Nabokov is known to have completed while on Rügen, the writer projected notes of his then yet-unrealized fatherhood onto a fictionalized scene that takes place at the beach:

На пляже в полдень лиловатый,
в морском каникульном раю
снимал купальщик полосатый
свою счастливую семью.

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Upon the beach at violet-blue noon,
in a vacational Elysium
a striped bather took
a picture of his happy family.⁴

The poem’s Russian original appeared in *The Return of Chorb* (1930), a transitional volume of earlier stories also showcasing some of Nabokov’s better poems from the 1920s. The Russian text preserved the date and the place of composition; Binz; 1927. While Englishing the poem for its inclusion in *Poems and Problems* (1970), Nabokov raised the original’s pitch of happiness; for example, in stanza 2 he rendered “pesok veselyi” (literally, “merry/happy sand” as “sandy bliss.” In the poem’s stanza 5, Nabokov chose to translate “sogliadatai” (the title of his short novel of 1930) not as “the eye” but as “the spy.”

The impressions and observations collected during the 1927 vacation on the Bay of Pomerania left lasting imprints on Nabokov’s memory, informing the composition and entering the worlds of at least two prewar works of fiction, the novel *Korol’, dama, valet* (*King, Queen, Knave*, 1928) and the short story “Sovershenstvo” (“Perfection,” 1928). In the 1960s and 1970s Nabokov revisited the memories of Rügen as he co-translated his second novel and forty-third story with his son Dmitri. (In 1975, “Perfection” was collected in *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*). And yet, apparently no investigative work has been conducted with the purpose of identifying what specific raw material from the 1927 summer vacation Nabokov fictionalized in the originals of *King, Queen, Knave* and “Perfection.” Similarly, little has been done to investigate what Nabokov may have had in mind when he introduced further changes and emendations while co-translating, with Dmitri Nabokov, the Pomerania-related scenes and episodes.⁵

“Perfection”

For the purposes of this investigation, “Perfection” is seminal because Nabokov had planted a reference to Pomerania in the story’s Russian original (in the scene where David is having a rough time imagining a lush tropical forest as he walks through a beech forest with Ivanov), (Ill. 5 and Ill. 6):

Лес был густой, со стволов спархивали окрашенные под кору пяденицы. Давид шел молча и нехотя. “Мы должны любить лес, —

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⁵ In her analysis of the transformations of *Korol’, dama, valet* into *King, Queen, Knave*, Jane Grayson does not deal with specific Baltic and Pomeranian references. See *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov’s Russian and English Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 90-118.
говорил Иванов, стараясь развлечь воспитанника”. — Это первая родина человека. В один прекрасный день человек вышел из чаши дремучих наитий на светлую поляну разума. […] Иванов потерял спиной, — она нестерпимо горела и чесалась, — о ствол дерева и задумчиво продолжал: “Любуйся природой данной местности, я всегда думаю о тех странах, которых не увижу никогда. Представь себе, Давид, что мы сейчас не в Померании, а в Малайском лесу”. […]

The forest was dense. Geometrid moths, matching the bark in coloration, flew off the tree trunks. Silent David walked reluctantly. “We should cherish the woods,” Ivanov said in an attempt to divert his pupil. “It was the first habitat of man. One fine day man left the jungle of primitive intimations for the sunlit glade of reason.” […] Ivanov rubbed his unbearably burning and itching back against a tree trunk and continued pensively: “While admiring nature at a given locality, I cannot help thinking of countries that I shall never see. Try to imagine, David, that this is not Pomerania but a Malayan forest” […] (emphasis added).}

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The revisions in the text of “Perfection” are generally consistent with Vladimir Nabokov’s strategies for Englishing his other Russian short stories. The revisions exhibit features of self-correction, self-historization, and self-perfection:

Дом был расположен в тылу городка, простой, двухэтажный, с кустами смородины в саду, отделенном забором от пыльной дороги. Желтобородый рыбак сидел на колоде и, щурясь от вечернего солнца, смолил сеть. Его жена провела их наверх. Оранжевый пол. Карликовая мебель. […] Давид торопился, ему не терпелось увидеть море. Солнце уже садилось.

Когда, через четверть часа ходьбы, они спустились к морю, Иванов мгновенно почувствовал сильнейшее сердечное недомогание. (595)

The house was located at the rear of the little seaside town, a plain two-storied house with red-currant shrubs in the yard, which a fence separated

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from the dusty road. A tawny-bearded fisherman sat on a log, slitting his eyes in the low sun as he tarred his net. His wife led them upstairs. Terracotta floors, dwarf furniture. […] David was in a hurry. He could not wait to get a look at the sea. The sun had already begun to set.

When they came down to the beach after a fifteen-minute walk, Ivanov instantly became conscious of an acute discomfort in his chest. (338)

Not much of the Rügen landscape or the Binz resort- scape may be found in the text, as though Nabokov did not wish to be any more specific about his sources in the English translation than he was in the Russian original.

King, Queen, Knave

In the case of King, Queen, Knave, the Pomeranian memories, impressions and observations underwent a more complex and self-conscious transformation. In the foreword to the novel’s translation, penned in Montreux on 28 March 1967, Nabokov revealed the working method he (and his son) employed in Englishing the Russian original:

I do not wish to spoil the pleasure of future collators by discussing the little changes I made. Let me only remark that my main purpose was not to beautify a corpse but rather to permit a still breathing body to enjoy certain innate capacities which inexperience and eagerness, the haste of thought and the sloth of word had denied it formerly. Within the texture of the creature, those possibilities were practically crying to be developed or teased out. […] I confess to have mercilessly struck out and rewritten many lame odds and ends, such as for instance a crucial transition in the last chapter […] in order to get rid temporarily of Franz, who was not
supposed to butt in \textbf{while certain important scenes in the Gravitz resort} engaged the attention of the author […]” (emphasis added).\footnote{Vladimir Nabokov, \textit{King, Queen, Knave}, tr. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage, 1989), ix; hereafter parenthetical page references within the main text.}

Some of the most significant changes occurred in the novel’s final chapters, 11, 12, and 13, where Dreyer, Martha and Franz travel from Berlin to a resort on the Baltic Sea. Nabokov’s original is silent about the location of the resort, which remains unnamed throughout the Russian text. In fact, in the Russian text it takes a conjectural leap to understand that the Dreyers and Franz are indeed going to Germany’s Baltic Coast. Compare how the Russian and the English versions introduce the idea of a beach vacation:

\begin{quote}
\text{[…] — Я думаю, — сказал Драйер, вопросительно взглянув на жену, — что мы поедем к морю. […] Душа моя, а ведь правда, мы поедем к морю? Франца с собой возьмем. Тома. Побарахтаемся, загорим…

И Марта улыбнулась. […] Ей представился длинный пляж, где они как-то раз уже побывали, белый мол, полосатые будки, тысяча полосатых будок... они редеют, обрываются, а дальше, верст на десять, пустая белизна песка вдоль сияющей, серовато-синей воды.

— Мы поедем к морю, — сказала она, обернувшись к Вилли […].\footnote{Vladimir Nabokov, \textit{Korol’, dama, valet}, in \textit{Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda}, 2 (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 1999), 267; hereafter parenthetical page references within the main text.}}
\end{quote}

“[…] My love, I know you hate the seaside but let’s go there once more. We’ll take Franz and Tom with us. We’ll splash and puddle. And you’ll go boating with Franz, and get as brown as milk chocolate.”

And Martha smiled. […] \textbf{The magic lantern of fancy slipped a colored slide in—a long sandy beach on the Baltic where they had once been in 1924}, a white pier, bright flags, striped booths, a thousand striped booths—and now they were thinning, they broke off, and beyond
for many miles westward stretched the empty whiteness of the sand between heather and water. What do you do to extinguish a fire? An infant could tell you that.

“**We’ll go to Gravitz,**” she said, turning to Willy […] (emphasis added). (211-212)

A little later in Chapter 11, the Englished text places much more emphasis on the location of the Dreyers’ Pomeranian vacation:

Instead of arts and adventures, he meanly contended himself with a suburban villa, **with a humdrum vacation at a Baltic resort**—and even that thrilled him as a smell of a cheap circus used to intoxicate his gently bumbling father.

**That little trip to Pomerania Bay was in fact proving to be quite a boon for everybody concerned,** including the god of chance (Cazeltty or Sluch, or whatever his real name was), once you imagined that god in the role of a novelist or a playwright, as Goldemar had in his most famous work. Martha was getting ready for the seaside with systematic and blissful zest. Lying on Franz’s breast, sprawling all over him, strong and heavy, and a little sticky from the heat, she whispered into his mouth and ear that the torments would be soon allayed. […]” (emphasis added). (224)
In its insistence on being “overexplicit” (to borrow Nabokov’s term from the poem “Slava”/”Fame” [1942]), the English version identifies the coastal area where the Dreyers go on vacation. Moreover, Nabokov marks the location of the resort on the Bay of Pomerania with a bilingual pun, casualty/sluchai—a play on “choice” posing as “chance.” Finally, he endows the added passage with a self-conscious signature of authorial presence.

An analysis of the names of locations in close vicinity of Binz reveals some of the sources behind the synthetic name “Gravitz” (or “Grawitz,” to achieve the voiced consonant in German) (Ill. 7 and Ill. 8).

In coining the name “Gravitz” for the Englished text, Nabokov followed a phonetic and graphic pattern akin to the one he had used in creating the composite name of the fictitious rivierized resort in the story “Spring in Fialta” (1936)\textsuperscript{11}:

\begin{align*}
\text{Gravitz} & = \text{Binz} + \text{Granitz} + \text{Garftitz} \\
\text{Fialta} & = \text{Yalta} + \text{Fiume}
\end{align*}

As Alexander Dolinin suggested during my presentation at the Nabokov Readings 2012 in St. Petersburg, the $n$-$v$ change in Granitz-Gravitz may be a form of Nabokov’s signature.

In the English-language version of *King, Queen, Knave*, Nabokov situated the novel’s denouement not in a vaguely Baltic seaside resort but in Gravitz, a fictional, though thinly disguised and recognizable resort in the Bay of Pomerania on the eastern

\footnote{See Shrayer, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 208-209.}
shore of the island of Rügen. Forty years after the composition of the Russian original, Nabokov enhanced the historical and geographical accuracy and heightened the verisimilitude of the novel’s closing chapters. This brings me to the following research question: why did Nabokov amplify and augment the references to Western Pomerania and, specifically, to Rügen and the resort of Binz? In order to answer this question, one should first determine what specific details of his 1927 vacation Nabokov fictionalized in *King, Queen, Knave*.

In the letter to Aykhenvald, Nabokov identified the hotel where he and Véra stayed in Binz as “Villa Brunhilde.” My research confirms that a hotel by that name was indeed located in Binz at the time of the Nabokovs’ stay. Originally known as Haus Brunhilde, it was situated on Lottumstrasse, a street parallel to the waterfront promenade, in the resort’s main hotel area, near the intersection of Lottumstrasse and Goethestrasse (Ill. 9 and Ill. 10).

*Ill. 9. Plan of Ostseebad Binz (1910). Haus “Brunhilde” (No. 138); Hotel Am Meer (No. 30).*
Surviving 1920s photographs and advertisements for Villa Brunhilde give today’s student of Nabokov’s life and art an idea of the appearance of the hotel in the 1920s (Ill. 11, Ill. 12. Ill. 13, Ill. 14).
It was a mid-range comfortable pension on the second line from the sea, with 1927 prices for a double room ranging from 5-7 DM (8-9 DM for a double room and full board) in July-August 1927. (Binz’s top-end waterfront hotels such as Hotel Am Meer—to which we will return below—charged almost twice as much.) In the post-World War II decades, Villa Brunhilde and its next-door neighbor, Goethe-Haus, were conjoined into a single hotel, known as Hotel Binzer Hof (Ill. 15 and Ill. 16).
Ill. 15: the former Villa Brunhilde. April 2012. Photo by Maxim D. Shrayer.

Ill. 16: Hotel Binzer Hof. April 2012. Photo by Maxim D. Shrayer.
At German-speaking resorts, the Kurliste (a combined registry of guests, resort newsletter, and information sheet) often provides invaluable information on the visitors. In my research on the Nabokovs’ stay in Western Bohemia in the summer of 1937, I benefited greatly from the availability and accessibility of the Kurlisten published in Marienbad (Mariánské Lázně) and Franzenbad (Františkovy Lázně).¹² In the case of the Nabokovs’ stay in Ostseebad Binz in the summer of 1927, the research was complicated by the fact that Amtliche Kurliste, a separate publication for Binz, did not start appearing until 1930 (Ill. 17), and the prior records are not kept by Binz’s municipal authority.

The latter circumstance made it more difficult to corroborate the name of the actual hotel where Véra and Vladimir stayed for part of their vacation. At the time of the Nabokovs’ vacation, information on the visitors to Rügen’s resorts was incorporated into Rügensche Kurzeitung, a weekly publication appearing in Putbus, a town southwest of Binz, where

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in the 1810s, Prince Malte of Putbus had built a well-known Neoclassical ensemble (Ill. 18, Ill. 19, Ill. 20).

The listing on the Nabokovs appears in *Rügensche Kurzeitung* for 22 July 1927 as “Nabokoff, Wladimir, Schriftsteller, m. Frau, Berlin, V. Brunhilde” (Nabokov, Vladimir, writer, with wife, Berlin, Villa Brunhilde).

The description of the fictionalized resort—and of the hotel—enters *King, Queen, Knave* in Chapter 12 as the Dreyers and Franz arrive in Gravitz:

На первом месте, конечно, было море, легкое, сизое, с размазанным горизонтом, а над ним — тучки, плывущие гуськом, все одинаковые, все в профиль. Затем, вогнутым полукругом шел пляж, с тесной толпой полосатых будок, особенно сгущенных там, где начинался мол, уходивший далеко в море. Иногда одна из будок наклонялась и переползала на другое место, как красно-белый скарабей. [...] Комната четы Драйер выходила балконом на море. Комната Франца выходила на улицу, шедшую параллельно набережной. Дальше, по другой стороне улицы, тянулись гостиницы второго сорта, дальше — опять параллельная улица и гостиницы третьего сорта. Пять-шесть таких улиц, и чем дальше от моря, тем дешевле, — словно море — сцена, а ряды домов — ряды в театре, кресла, стулья, а там уж и стоячие места. Названия гостиниц так или иначе пытались намекать на присутствие моря. Некоторые это делали с самодовольной откровенностью. Другие предпочитали метафоры, символы. Попадались женские имена. Одна была вилла, которая называлась почему-то “Гельвеция”, — ирония или заблуждение. Чем дальше от пляжа, тем названия становились поэтичнее. [...] (278-279)

The main thing of course was the sea: grayish blue, with a blurred horizon, immediately above which a series of cloudlets glided single-file as if along a straight groove, all alike, all in profile. Next came the curve of the bathing beach with its army of striped booth-like shelters, clustering especially densely at the root of the pier which stretched far out amid a flock of rowboats for hire. *If one looked from the Seaview Hotel, the*
best at Gravitz, one could catch now and then one of the booths suddenly leaning forward and crawling over to a new location, like a red-and-white scarab. […] The balcony of the Dreyers acted the hotel’s name. Franz’s room sulkily faced a town street parallel to the promenade. Beyond that stretched the second-class hotels, then another parallel lane with the third-class accommodations. The father from the sea the cheaper they grew as if the sea were a stage and they, rows of seats. Their names attempted in one way or another to suggest the sea’s presence. Some of them did it with matter-of-fact pride, others preferred metaphors and symbols. Here and there occurred feminine names such as “Aphrodite” to which no boarding house could really live up. There was one villa that either in irony or owing to a topographical error called itself Helvetia. As the distance from the beach increased, the names grew more and more poetical. […] (emphasis added) (231-232)

In composing the Russian original of King, Queen, Knave—and later in Englishing and further historicizing the novel’s Pomeranian descriptions—Nabokov conflated two historical hotels: Villa Brunhilde, where he and Véra actually stayed, and a much fancier, waterfront hotel, Hotel Am Meer (Ill. 21).
Hotel Am Meer and Villa Brunhilde are situated within a three-minute stroll from one another (Ill. 22 and Ill. 23).
In fact, Nabokov may have given Franz a projection of the Nabokovs’ view from their room at Villa Brunhilde, while imagining a view from the Dreyers’ beachfront luxury room with a balcony at Hotel Am Meer (Ill. 24).

As the analysis of the Binz tourist listings from the late 1920s reveals, Nabokov seems to have based his narrator’s comments in the novel on the actual names and locations of the
resort’s hotels and pensions. Specifically, the resort’s “poetic,” “mythological” and “historical” feminine names included the following (Ill. 25):

   Sirene  
   Vesta  
   Frigga [Frigg]  
   Nixe [Nyx]  
   Saxonia  
   Brunhilde [Brynholdr; Brünhilde]  
   Charlotte  
   Gertrud  
   Undine  
   Helene  
   Anna  
   Asta  
   Fortuna  
   Freia [Freyja]  
   Iduna [Iðunn].

Ill. 25: Binz hotel and pension listings. 1927.
As if to enhance the effect of his ocular authorial presence, Nabokov appears to have taken the protagonist of his Binz poem “The Snapshot,” revamped him as an itinerant master of visual images, and placed this metaphysically-graced artist in the Pomeranian pages of the novel:

По пляжу, пробираясь меж крепостных валов, окружавших каждую будку, куда-то спеша, чтобы этой поспешностью доказать ходкость товара, шел со своим аппаратом нищий фотограф и орал, надрываясь: “Вот грядет художник, вот грядет художник Божией милостью!” (280)

Weaving his way among the ramparts of sand that surrounded each bather’s ephemeral domain, hurrying to nowhere in order to prove by a great show of haste how much his merchandise was in demand, an itinerant photographer, ignored by the lazy crowd, walked with his camera, yelling into the wind: “The artist is coming! The divinely favored, der gottbegnadete artist is coming!” (234)

Before the photographer’s cameo appearance, Dreyer strolls around the resort and looks at the postcards with images of the town and the beach, some of them dating several decades (subsequently, Franz also purchases a postcard with a view of the Bay of Pomerania).

A student of the novel and a Nabokov biographer might get a taste of the 1920s Binz by looking at the surviving photographs (Ill. 26 and Ill. 27).
Better yet, on a visit to Binz, one can still find many vistas and buildings depicted in *King, Queen, Knave*, including a rebuilt pier (Ill. 28), balconies like the one on which Dreyer, Martha and Franz had coffee with pastries (Ill. 29), striped “scarabs” of beach cabins (Ill. 30), the Kursaal where Martha danced not long before her death (Ill. 31), and the seaside promenade (Ill. 32).
Ill. 28. Binz beach with a view of the pier.

Ill. 29. Binz beach with a view of Hotel Am Meer.

Ill. 30. Binz beach with a view of Hotel Am Meer and beach cabins.

Ill. 31. Binz Kursaal.

Ill. 32. Binz. Seaside promenade with a view of Hotel Am Meer and a distant view of the Kursaal. All photographs were taken by Maxim D. Shrayer in April 2012.
Views of and from the Hotel Am Meer help us to visualize the scene where the trio is reading the Kurliste (“the resort’s guest list” in the son-and-father English translation) on the hotel’s balcony:

Драйер выпил две чашки кофе и съел булочку с медом. Марта выпила три чашки и ничего не съела. Франц выпил полчашки и тоже не съел ничего. По балкону гулял ветер.

— По-ро-кхов-штши-коф, — вслух прочел Драйер и рассмеялся.
— Если ты кончили, пойдем, — сказала Марта, запахивая халат и стараясь не стучать зубами. — А то еще полет дождь.
— Рано, душа моя, — протянул он и покосился на тарелку с булочками.
— Пойдем, — повторила Марта и встала. Франц встал тоже. (282; emphasis added)

Dreyer drank two cups of coffee and enjoyed a roll with delicious transparent honey trickling over the edges. Martha drank three cups and did not eat anything. Franz had half a cup and ate nothing either. The wind swept across the balcony.

“Professor Klister of Swister,” read Dreyer. “Sorry. Lister of Swistok.”
“If you’re finished, let’s go,” said Martha.

“Blavdak Vinomori,” read Dreyer triumphantly.
“Let’s go,” said Martha, wrapping her robe around her and trying to keep her teeth from chattering. “Before it starts raining again.” (239; emphasis added)

In Englishing the Pomeranian episodes, Nabokov reconfigured the shape of his authorial presence on the scene. On the one hand, he un-Russianed the professor’s parodically rendered name (Po-ro-kkhov-shtshi-kof) while adding a more explicit anagrammatic signature (Blavdak Vinomori). On the other hand, the apparently Russian

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13 On some sources of the name “Po-ro-kkhov-shtshi-kof,” see Gavriel Shapiro, “A Funny Name in Korol’, Dama, Valet,” The Nabokovian 51 (Fall 2003, 7-11).
émigré couple, the young suntanned foreigner and his wife, are made Eastern European or Baltic, but not explicitly Russian, in the passage added to the opening of Chapter 12:

Martha counted at least three foreigners among the crowd. One, judging by his newspaper, was a Dane. The other two were a less easily determinable pair [...]. What language were they speaking? Polish? Estonian? (232)

Compared to the original of what was arguably Nabokov’s most un-Russian émigré novel, the English-language version of King, Queen, Knave obfuscates the Russianness of exile to an even greater extent. This clouding of Russianness was the price that the American Nabokov sometimes paid for a more explicit articulation of a sui generis, Nabokovian self-fashioning quality of his poetics. At the same time, as noted above, Nabokov augmented his Pomeranian sources, as is evident, for instance, in the professor’s Germanized Slavic name, Swistok, or in the way Nabokov enhanced the illusion of the geographical context: “[Dreyer] was now speeding in a hired limousine […] through an infinite nocturnal expanse of woods and fields, and northern towns, their names garbled by the impatient darkness—Nauesack, Wusterbeck, Pritzburg, Nebukow […] when he reached Swistok, from which it was twenty miles to Gravitz” (264). In this list of seemingly fictional names, which are absent in the Russian text, the town of Nebukow conspicuously conjoins a real town located west of Rostock with Nabokov’s last name:

Nebukow = Neubukow + Nabokov.14

Had Nabokov been aware of Neubukow as the birthplace of Heinrich Schliemann, a visionary of field archeology? Was the father-and-son Nabokov team pouring over detailed maps of East Germany, to which Mecklenburg-Vorpommern belonged at the time, as they translated the novel?

14 In his commentary to the German translation of King, Queen, Knave, Stefan Mesch cryptically mentions that just as the novel’s resort of Gravitz (Grawitz) corresponds to Binz and another Baltic resort, Misdroy, so the name Nebukow corresponds to that of the town of Neubukow in Mecklenburg; see König Dame Bube, http://www.lit06.de/archiv_rat/head/thema/rez_zu0606/thema0606_02rez.html, 28 November 2012. However, one notes that while Nabokov had finished King, Queen, Knave in June 1928, it was not until July 1928 that he and Véra went on vacation to the Pomeranian resort of Misdroy on the island of Wolin, presently Międzyzdroje in Poland (Boyd, The Russian Years, 286).
In Closing

The status of the Pomeranian references in Nabokov’s Russian works and the subsequent transformation of the Pomeranian material in the English translations may lend further evidence in support of a three-stage model I proposed The World of Nabokov’s Stories (1998) and Nabokov: Themes and Variations (2000). From the 1920s to the 1960s, the biographical and historical traces of Pomerania in Nabokov’s works underwent the following metamorphosis:

Stage 1: testing and rehearsing in letters, diaries, and poems;
Stage 2: fictionalizing in Russian creative prose;
Stage 3: reconfiguring, reconstructing and historicizing in the Englished Russian fiction.

The English translations of Nabokov’s Russian fiction emerged, paradoxically, as a space and place of both self-mythologization and self-reconstruction, of establishing a biographical and cultural record in the absence of other privileged venues. During the American years, Nabokov became an artist of memory in the most literal sense of the word.

P.S. Bend Sinister and the Pomeranian Heritage

I do not believe that Western Pomerania has ever been examined as a possible linguistic and cultural model for the synthetic world of Bend Sinister (1947). In the Introduction added in the early 1960s, Nabokov spoke of “the hybridization of tongues” and of “the language of the country” being “a mongrel blend of Slavic and Germanic with a strong strain of ancient Kuranian running through it […].” Is it possible that Kuranian = Kuronian (Curonian) + Rani (Rujani)?

In other words, is it possible that Nabokov is hinting at his philological, linguistic, cultural, and historical sources by bridging interfaces between the Germanic and Baltic

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16 Vladimir Nabokov, Bend Sinister (New York: Vintage, 1990), xvi-xvi.
heritage (Curonian Spit) and between the Germanic and Slavic heritage? A mind as philologically keen as Nabokov’s would have likely found intriguing the abundance of Slavic-derived and/or Slavic-influenced geographical names in Western Pomerania and specifically on Rügen: Stresow, Vilmnitz, Zirkow, Pantow, Granitz, etc. When the time came to compose his first American novel, Nabokov might have tapped into his memories of the 1927 vacation on the island of Rügen. A future detailed investigation may very well reveal specific sources of Nabokov’s imagination both in Rügen’s landscape and architecture and in the island’s Slavic (Wendish; Polish; Russian), Scandinavian (Danish; Swedish), Baltic, German, and French cultural layers and residues. I would like to invite fellow Nabokovians to explore the place of Pomeranian history and the Polabian linguistic sources in the toponymy, language, mythology and culture of Bend Sinister.

17 The Rani or Rujani was a West Slavic tribe on Rügen; their Polabian language was made extinct by the early 13th century.