

**Lina Bernstein**

**MAGDA NACHMAN:  
A FOOTNOTE IN NABOKOV'S BIOGRAPHY**

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In his biography of Vladimir Nabokov, Brian Boyd writes: “Magda Nachman-Acharya, a friend of Anna Feigin, lugged from the state library volume after volume of Chernyshevsky and the enormous tomes in which Russian explorers... recount their Central Asian expeditions.”<sup>1</sup> Who was this little-known friend and the writer’s humble assistant, Magda Nachman-Acharya? A reader of Nabokov’s novel *Glory*, who has a copy of the book with the original dust jacket and is sufficiently taken by the portrait of the author on the back, will find this attribution in the inside flap: “Pastel by Magda Nachman, 1933.”

Even the most minor bit player who utters a single line and then exits stage left never to be seen again has a life offstage. By happenstance, I became interested in Magda Nachman’s life and recently published her biography.<sup>2</sup> In addition to its association with Nabokov—through the portrait mentioned above and the book-delivery service—Magda’s name also appears in connection with some of the important figures of the Russian Silver Age, such as Marina Tsvetaeva, but she remained in their shadows, revealing herself primarily through her work and in her private correspondence, some of which miraculously survived the turbulent twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 400. The other friend who performed similar services was George Hessen.

<sup>2</sup> *Magda Nachman: An Artist in Exile*. Academic Studies Press, 2020.



**Figure 1:** Magda Nachman, pastel portrait of Vladimir Nabokov, 1933.  
Vladimir Nabokov papers, 1918-1987, Berg Coll MSS Nabokov.  
Copyright 1971 by Véra Nabokov, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

Magda was not a striver after fame or greatness. Her natural inclinations were in the direction of modesty, sensitivity, quiet, not putting herself forward. What she strove for was to create art that animated the spirits of her subjects, and throughout all the years of tribulation and life on the run, through steadfast courage and perseverance, she continued to paint and create art that is original, compelling, and in its depictions of its human, and even animal, subjects, deeply moving, while her age lent a hand in hiding her away from the public eye.

Born into an upper-middle-class St. Petersburg family in 1889, Magda Nachman studied art at the Zvantseva Academy under the tutelage of Léon Bakst and Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin. She exhibited in Moscow and Petersburg, spent a summer at the Crimean dacha of the poet and artist Maximilian Voloshin – and then came the cataclysm of revolution and civil war. After several years of peripatetic existence in the Russian countryside, in 1921 or 1922 she met and married the Indian nationalist M. P. T. Acharya, who was in Moscow seeking help in the struggle for Indian independence. But it did not take long for him to become thoroughly disillusioned with the Bolsheviks' methods of exercising power, and the couple left Russia for Berlin, never to return.

There, Magda became a close friend of Anna Feigin, Véra Slonim's first cousin. I do not know whether Anna and Magda had been acquainted back in St. Petersburg. Anna had come to the capital from Minsk to study piano at the St. Petersburg conservatory, and it is possible that their love of music brought them together. Magda had season tickets for the major music venues and passes to special concerts, such as Pablo Casals's performance in 1910. As an aspiring pianist, Anna Feigin likely frequented the same venues.

No matter whether they had been acquainted back in their Petersburg days, there was much in common in their backgrounds to throw them together in Berlin. And it was Anna who introduced Magda to her cousin Véra, who would soon become Mrs. Nabokov. It is difficult to imagine that Anna would bring home a casual acquaintance and that the Nabokovs would accept just anyone into their house. Knowing Nabokov's penchant for secrecy regarding his sources and antecedents, he must have trusted Magda with the knowledge of his literary sources, as attested by Boyd. Later, on meeting Paul de Reul in Paris, Nabokov wrote to Véra that "his book about Swinburne I remember well (Magda brought it over when I was sick)."<sup>3</sup> Judging by his casual mention of her name, Magda must have been a familiar figure in the lives of the couple.

In 1928, in Berlin, Magda had a solo exhibition, and a review of her show was published by none other than Vladimir Nabokov, in the Russian-language Berlin newspaper *Rul'* on November 1, 1928. It opens thus:

A person who has a feeling for colors is fortunate in a fortunate world, in which a pouring rain is not a harbinger of a runny nose but a wonderful iridescence on the asphalt, and in which an enticing speck of light burns on the most insignificant object of everyday life. Mrs. Nachman-Acharya possesses such a feeling, and she knows how to use it to the full.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See the letter of January 18, 1936, in *Vladimir Nabokov, Letters to Véra*, ed. Brian Boyd and Olga Voronina (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 233. In a letter of October 24, 1932, Nabokov makes a casual reference to Acharya as well: "Khodasevich looks like a monkey or even like Acharya, and all those Hindu movements too" (*ibid.*, 193).

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "Vystavka M. Nakhman-Achariiia. Galereia Kaspar," *Rul'*, November 1, 1928, translation by the author.

No matter that Magda was living almost on the brink of starvation, taking home meager earnings from whatever pictures she managed to sell in a tight Berlin market (her husband had no official documents and no work permit; she was the breadwinner throughout their married life). Still, Nabokov calls her “fortunate,” understanding from his own experience, outlook, and poverty what is essential in the life of an artist. Magda is a kindred spirit, an indomitable fellow-artist. He ends his review with the statement that Magda’s work “demonstrates once more the high standing of Russian art.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1933, Magda painted pastel portraits of Vladimir, Véra, and Vladimir’s mother, Elena Ivanovna. Magda’s is one of only two known portraits of Vladimir from his Berlin years (see figure 1). The other was done in Paris by one of Magda’s teachers, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky. Later, when Magda moved to Bombay, art critics would write of her portraits that the artist painted not just the faces of her sitters but their very essence. And so it is with Vladimir’s portrait: with a slight self-possessed smile on his lips, Nabokov seems to be looking inside himself and into the future.

The fate of the Nabokov family portraits was the same as that of many works by Magda: they disappeared. The Nabokovs took them from Berlin to Paris when they moved there in 1937. On leaving for the United States in 1940, they left a trunk with their papers and pictures with their friend Ilya Fondaminsky. When Fondaminsky was taken by the Gestapo in 1941, the trunk and its contents went missing.

Years later, first in 1971 and then again in 1976, the Nabokovs tried to recover Magda’s works through advertisements in the Paris newspaper *Russkaya mysl’*, to no avail. Fortunately, a photograph of Nabokov’s portrait survived. It is this photograph that Nabokov chose for the dustjacket of *Glory*, the English version of *Podvig*, which was written at approximately the same time as the portrait. Véra wrote to the editor that “it is an excellent likeness and has never been published before.”<sup>6</sup>

By placing a portrait of himself by Magda on the dust jacket of his novel and placing Magda’s name inside, I like to think that Nabokov was in part paying tribute to Magda as a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> From Véra Nabokov’s letter to Anne Dyer Murphy, editor of the Trade Books Division of McGraw-Hill Book Company, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

courageous artist, who, like the author and his novel's protagonist, allowed herself to be driven by fate only so far.

Magda and her husband left Berlin for Switzerland and then France in 1934. In 1936, Magda followed her husband to India. Vladimir and Véra wrote a long letter to Magda, dated December 16, 1937.<sup>7</sup> In it, Véra explained their long silence by stating that they had both wanted to write, but “V. V. had been so terribly busy, and so we postponed a letter until a free minute, which does not want to arrive.” She told Magda about their difficult departure from Berlin, recounting step by step their progress toward Paris: Vladimir's business trip to Paris in January, her and Anna Feigin's preparations to leave Berlin, fighting for visas, traveling first to Prague and reuniting there with Vladimir, and their journey to Menton, in the south of France. She wrote about their son, Dmitri, and sent a photograph. She wrote that Vladimir had been working harder than ever, cataloging in detail what he had written in the last five months, including the number of pages.

The first, and longer, part of the letter was written by Véra. Then Vladimir added that he agreed with everything that his wife had written. He went on to write of being glad to be out of Germany (“thrice-damned Germany is far away”) and about his dental problems (“they extracted two teeth, and so I am staying home with a crooked mouth”). The author told Magda that in Paris he had met Dobuzhinsky, and they had spoken about her. He also confided that they would be “terribly happy” for any news from her and ended by saying that they had heard about her successes (presumably from Anna Feigin or other mutual friends with whom Magda was corresponding from India). In closing, he “kisses her little hand” and gives regards to her husband.

The year 1937 was a trying period for the Nabokovs' marriage. Vladimir's affair with Irina Guadanini had ended in September, and typically of Vladimir and Véra, there was not a hint in their letter to Magda that their relationship had gone through a crisis. What is evident in the letter is that both of them felt an obligation to write to her, asking her to excuse them for their long silence. The content of the letter – including the minutiae of their life – reflects a wish, after a long silence, to resume an interrupted conversation with a fond acquaintance.

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<sup>7</sup> Berg Collection, New York Public Library, manuscript box, Nachman-Acharya, Magda, ALS to 1939 (?), Dec. 16, 1 p, correspondence out. Translation from the Russian by the author.

It is not clear whether this letter was sent: a holograph copy (or is it the unsent original?) resides in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. In any case, the connection between Magda and the Nabokovs did not end with her move to Bombay. In his biography of the writer, Andrew Field reported that Nabokov mentioned Magda Nachman to him as “a friend of the family” and that “the Nabokovs described her to me as ‘a tremendously sensitive person.’” This conversation took place on Field’s seeing a photograph of Nabokov’s portrait by Magda and her works from India at the couple’s home in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Magda could have sent those either directly to the Nabokovs or to Anna Feigin. I had the opportunity to correspond with Dmitri Nabokov, who had perhaps inherited Magda’s pictures, although, unfortunately, only toward the end of his life, when he was seriously ailing and could not remember much. I have been unable to locate any of Magda’s pictures that may have come into the Nabokovs’ possession.



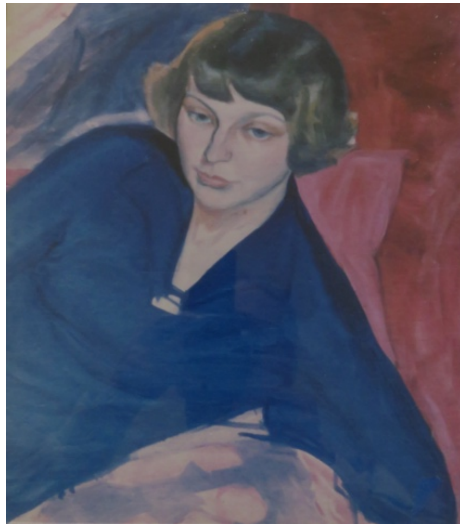
**Figure 2:** Magda Nachman. Kamal Wood, mid-1940s.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Field. *Nabokov: His Life in Part*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977, 187–188.



**Figure 3:** Magda Nachman. “Peasant Woman”, 1916.  
Located in the Museum of Fine Arts of the Republic of Tatarstan, Kazan.  
Recently exhibited at the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



**Figure 4:** Magda Nachman. Portrait of the poet Marina Tsvetaeva, 1913.  
The only lifetime portrait (oil, canvas) of Tsvetaeva painted in Koktebel.

There is yet another connection between Magda and Vladimir Nabokov, one that suggests that Magda’s niece Irina, daughter of her sister Adele, who lived in Switzerland, might have given Nabokov the idea for the disturbed girl Irina in the novel *Podvig*.

Born in 1918, the year of her father’s death from influenza, Irina contracted the disease in infancy and was left mentally impaired. In the novel, a deranged girl called Irina suffers from a trauma that occurred around the same time, but in this case as a result of witnessing her father

being pushed out of the window of a moving train by Red Army soldiers. Nabokov could have heard about Irina either directly from Magda, or learned about her fate from Anna Feigin, who was connected with Irina's mother, Adele, through a web of friendships; perhaps he even met her personally when she was in Switzerland. One of the folders in Dmitri Nabokov's Houghton Library archive contains letters by Anna Feigin to Dmitri,<sup>9</sup> several of which were written around the time when Dmitri resided in Milan in the 1950s and 1960s, where he was studying singing. In these letters, Anna mentions and recommends her oldest living friend, Shura – Alessandra Barbetti – who lived in Milan. Later, both Dimitri and Sonya Slonim visited Shura on several occasions. Shura was not only Anna's friend but Magda's and Adele's as well. In Adele's family archive I found a letter (unfortunately without a signature) from a visitor at Shura's in Milan. The writer describes Shura's life there, raving about how adroitly Shura takes care of her family, cooking, refurbishing old clothes, all along giving lessons in Italian, writing and translating, practicing music, and even finding time to go on holidays and excursions.



**Figure 5:** Anna Feigin and Shura (Alessandra Barbetti).  
Vladimir Nabokov papers, 1918-1987, Berg Coll MSS Nabokov.  
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<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Nabokov family papers, circa 1920–2000. MS Russ 140 (Box 12), Houghton Library, Harvard University.



Later, after Magda had moved to India, Adele complained to her that “Shura writes little.” And again: “They tell me that Shura asks and worries about you.”<sup>10</sup> It is clear that the Shura whom Anna recommended to Dmitri and the Shura from Adele’s letters are one and the same. There was thus a web of friends at the periphery of Nabokov’s life, but still very much present in it, who could have told him the story of Adele’s daughter, Irina.

On her arrival in India, Magda continued painting, exhibiting frequently in Bombay galleries and befriending a group of young Indian artists. Upon her death in 1951 she was hailed as the “great little lady of the Bombay art world.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Letters from Adele in Zurich to Magda in Bombay, February 20 and September 22, 1940.

<sup>11</sup> “Artist Dies 4 Hours Before Opening of Exhibition, Tribute to Magda Nachman,” *Times of India*, February 13, 1951.