

VLADIMIR NABOKOV (VLADIMIR SIRIN)

Born April 22, 1899 Gregorian calendar, April 10, 1899, Julian calendar which was in use at the time of his birth and caused occasional confusion about his exact date of birth, in St. Petersburg, Russia into a prominent and wealthy family. His mother, Elena Ivanovna was the daughter of Ivan Vasilievich Rukavishnikov, a landowner, justice of the peace and philanthropist, son of a millionaire industrialist. His father Vladimir Dmitrievich came from a family that had been in the service of the Tsar for many centuries. The house that he was born in and where the family lived 47 Bolshaya Morskaya was part of Elena's dowry and still exists. Vladimir's brother Sergie was born less than a year after Vladimir and they were constant companions including sharing a bedroom Vladimir dominated sibling. His mother doted on Vladimir and spent a great deal of time with him including reading books to him from their massive library. The other siblings, Olga in 1903, Elena in 1906 and Kirill in 1911 were cared for primarily by governesses. Vladimir inherited his father's fondness for boxing and butterflies.

In 1905 there were turbulent times and V.D. Nabokov was involved with the uprising and was elected to membership in the Central Committee of the newly formed, parliamentary style Duma. During the turbulent times in St. Petersburg the family moved to one of their country estates. While they were in the rural location the boys were tutored in French, as well as Russian and English with plenty of free time to roam. During this period Vladimir became obsessed with butterflies. He learned to chase rare swallowtails and common pearl-bordered fritillaries. He learned how to dispatch them with ether, insert a pin through the thorax, and spread their veined wings for display and classification. The longer they stayed in the country, due to the instability in St. Petersburg, the greater the collection of butterflies became. Secondary to the political activism of his father, who was sentenced to three months in solitary confinement and who had been advised earlier to travel abroad because he had been placed on an assassination list. Given the political upheaval the themes of flight, revolution, political

tyranny, anti-Semitism and imprisonment would become recurrent themes in Vladimir's work. All of this occurred before his tenth birthday. Nabokov was taught at home by governesses and tutors until about the age of 12. One of the tutors was Jewish and was despised by some members of the household when Vladimir's liberal parents were not around, the staff would harass him and Vladimir became very protective. In general though Vladimir had adversarial relations with his tutors and he tracked the speed at which he could wear them out and drive them away.

In 1911, age 12, he was enrolled at the Tenishev School, known for its progressive spirit and democratic makeup. Nabokov was a brilliant student and a confident athlete but the school opened up a new, discouraging universe. For the first time, he was forced into ongoing proximity with people unrelated to him by blood or friendship. He did not want to use the filthy hand towels in the bathroom or feel comfortable on overnight school field trips.. His teachers thought his interest in butterflies eccentric and he resisted engagement in any activities promoting social change or democracy. At the same time his father was having meetings, at their home, that were politically motivated which could lead to arrest and prison. Anti-Semitism was wide spread and V.D. Nabokov was strongly opposed to it which would later make its way into Vladimir's work.

In the summer of 1914 the world went to war, and Vladimir Nabokov became a poet. He wrote romantic poetry and it was linked to his romance with Lyussya Shulgin, a fifteen-year old Petrograd girl staying for the summer at a dacha in the village. The affair survived the bitter winter of 1915-16 sustained by furtive meetings in which the lovers had little privacy. He continued composing poetry in tribute to their passion. The following summer, romance returned when they met again in the idyllic, more permissive countryside.

Nabokov immortalized his first love by publishing his own poems about her. It was a vanity project. Nabokov's literature professor, Vladimir Hippius (a poet himself), obtained a copy of the book

and brought it in to mock the most intimate lines out loud in front of Vladimir and his classmates. The book was savaged by the local press and a poet of some distinction, told Nabokov's father that Vladimir under no circumstances would make it as a writer. As the war entered its third year, his Uncle Ruka died and the young Nabokov inherited Ruka's two-thousand-acre country and a fortune that made him a millionaire. In clear contravention of the rules of romance, by the time Nabokov got the money, he had lost the girl. He would move on to a series of affairs, from one-night stands to more earnest associations, the two sometimes overlapping.

The following year, in Russia, was followed by the internal struggles with the Bolsheviks coming out on top. It was a time of great brutality and anti-Semitic pogroms since the Jews were blamed for many of the problems. Vladimir and his family had escaped to the Crimea. Nabokov's verse began to find publication in local newspapers and he had time to make his stage debut in the lively regional theater. The political and military conditions continued to deteriorate with the White Russians being defeated by the Bolsheviks. The family escaped by driving to the port city Sebastopol and setting sail aboard a cargo ship named *Nadezhda* ("Hope"). They traveled together along with their servant and companion Eugenia Hofeld, who had run the household since 1914. They possessed little more than a handful of valuables grabbed by a chambermaid as the family fled Petrograd.

Just days before his twentieth birthday Nabokov surrendered his homeland to the sorrows that had come into the century with him: the fury of Lenin, the blight of the concentration camps, the rabid anti-Semitism that could lay waste to a whole universe. But these things- and the memory of the dead- had only begun to shape his world. The ship was denied entry into Constantinople, delayed before entry at Athens and they finally arrived in Paris. There was an overabundance of anti-Bolshevik Russians in Paris and they moved on to England. Nabokov entered Trinity College, Cambridge. Sergei who had started at Oxford joined him after one semester. Nabokov boxed and played goalkeeper for the Trinity's

men's soccer team which brought him into the orbit of British students. But his chosen topics for poetry were still women and Russia. After one year in London the family moved to Berlin which was a much more affordable city. Events in Russia led Nabokov in a new direction, inspiring him to tackle fiction. He had fairy-tale type story published in 1921 in "Rul", a Russian language daily. From the first days of his career as a prose writer, he combined myth and fantasy with modern political horror. Nabokov had a close relationship with his father, who hounded him to keep him accountable and working. In 1922 when Nabokov returned to Germany for his Easter break, father and son finished preparing the next set of Nabokov's poems for publication under the pseudonym Vladimir Sirin (mythical half-human bird of paradise dangerous to mortals). Later that month V. D. Nabokov went to a political meeting and was assassinated by a second assassin while he restrained the initial shooter. That same year it became clear that the Bolsheviks were in control of Russia and that Nabokov lost not only his father but his country.

Nabokov did not care for Germany's Teutonic face or commercial character. But in 1922 it was mercifully cheap place for a writer without employment. He survived by teaching children and adults everything from English to boxing. What he did do enthusiastically was write and years of prior effort came to fruition all at once with the publication of four books under his Sirin pseudonym and a Russian translation of "Alice in Wonderland". He also began to write short fiction and turned out fifteen stories in 1923 and 1924. Nabokov was engaged to a 17 year old young lady, Svetlana Siewert but her parents ended the engagement due to Nabokov's lack of employment. He met a fair haired woman at a costume ball who was wearing a wolf's-head mask that she would not remove but she quoted his poetry back to him. He learned her name, Vera Slonim, from a wealthy Jewish family. She had been raised and tutored by governesses, had math lessons and language instruction that led her to speak not only Russian, but also German, French, and English. The romance progressed but the economy was terrible and before he could be married his mother and siblings were forced to move to Prague. Nabokov supported himself

by offering boxing, tennis, French and English lessons several days a week. But he continued to produce short stories at a steady clip with thoughts about how they could be turned into movies.

Once married he was able to complete his first novel "Invitation to a Beheading", a love story for his native land and "Invitation to a Beheading" about an overtly unpleasant group of characters. France was more appreciative of emigre authors and with the support of Vera, the breadwinner of the family, he was lured to Paris by Ilya Fondaminsky an editor with the Socialist Revolutionary emigre journal "Contemporary Annals". Over the next decade Nabokov wrote several novels and had multiple "readings" in Paris and Brussels but Vera remained the financial mainstay. During this period Nabokov was keenly aware of the repressive conditions in Russia and brings it into "Invitation to a Beheading". The political situation in Germany was continuing to deteriorate but Vera was able to continue working because of her translation skills. In a deception that Unknown to most, Vera had concealed a pregnancy and delivered a healthy son on May 10, 1934. On January 18, 1937, Nabokov boarded a train to Belgium with everything unsettled. In London and Paris Nabokov was well received but there was no financial security. He could not obtain a teaching position in England. While in Paris he formed a romantic liaison with Irina Guadanini, a divorcee with a reputation, who was beautiful, sophisticated and could speak multiple languages. She adored Sirin's poetry. Vera and Demetri after Kristallnacht went to Paris. In July and August of 1939 they moved to a pension on the Riviera, which was cheaper than staying in Paris. It was also the end on the infatuation with Irina.

After the start of the war the Nabokov's were desperate to leave Europe. The possibility of a teaching position, at Stanford University, for a summer course in Russian literature became available, but even with a destination, Nabokov faced months of preparation obtaining visas and affidavits. Even with visas, finding a means of departure remained problematic. At the last moment they had to switch their departure site from Le Harve to the coast of St. Nazaire because of the rapid advance of the

Germans. They were able to obtain passage on the “Champlain” and they were on their way to a new world. After clearing immigration they had to pass through customs. Vera could not find the key to their trunk and the locksmith that finally opened it accidentally relocked it. When the trunk was finally opened the officials commented on the collection of the dead butterflies that Nabokov had packed and started to spar with the boxing gloves they found inside. Welcome to America.

The Nabokovs spent their first summer in rural New England to enjoy butterflies and Russian company. He was also introduced to the prominent critic Edmund Wilson. They “hit” it off and Wilson began to send commissions for book reviews to Nabokov which led to early connections to “The New Yorker” and “The Atlantic”. Through other networking Nabokov began to write for “The New York Times” and the “Sun”. In subsequent months, Nabokov filled out his free-lancing schedule tutoring students in Russian. He also volunteered at the Museum of Natural History and learned to dissect butterfly genitalia. He also wrote his first real article on Lepidoptera (butterflies). Vera settled Dimitri into school and obtained a secretarial position with a Free French newspaper. After a cross country automobile trip (old Pontiac, motels), which was an adventure by itself, the Nabokov family arrived in Palo Alto June 14, ten days before the start of classes. They moved into a tidy villa just across from the Stanford campus, and Nabokov prepared to teach a group of undergraduates Russian literature and writing. News from the war in Europe was relentless. The German advance was shocking as was the invasion of Russia. Nabokov spent his Stanford summer in the split reality of thinking about those trapped by war and also walking the hills above Palo Alto, catching butterflies. After the summer in California, Wellesley college offered him a writer’s residency at a yearly salary of three thousand dollars (an associate professors pay). His contract with Wellesley was not renewed. He moved to Cambridge, Mass., lived in a small apartment, received a small stipend from the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) and did a lecture tour with the Institute of International Education. His literary star had begun to glimmer with a contract to translate Russian poetry and write a short book on the Russian author

Nikolai Gogol. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1943 the first applicant over the age of 40 ever chosen. He also received a new contract to teach Russian at Wellesley. Which lasted several years but was unsatisfactory with low pay and year to year contracts. In 1947 his problem was solved, by Morris Bishop, the chairman of a search committee, at Cornell University, offering Nabokov a professorship of Russian literature.

Embarking on the teaching career he had coveted, Nabokov gained a financial stability he had not had since 1917. Literature Nabokov-style was an exciting enterprise. Authors could be analyzed as storytellers, teachers, or enchanters. The best ones had elements of all three. He was an exciting teacher. After his arrival at Cornell he took to summer road trips again, spending his breaks crossing the country hunting for butterflies. His wife Vera did all the driving while he played passenger. While at Cornell he worked prodigiously and wrote parts or all of “Lolita”, “Invitation of a Small Guest”, and “Speak, Memory”, short stories, poetry and translations of his own work and others’. He also composed his 1,895-page annotated translation of “Eugene Onegin” as well as much more. Nabokov finished *Lolita* in December 1953. He understood “*Lolita*” to be the best thing he had written in English; now it was up to America to receive it. Stepping away from the agony of crafting his tortured nymphet, he plotted a shorter, simpler tale that of Professor Timofey Pnin, a bumbling Russian exile incapable of navigating everyday life. Finding a publisher for “Pnin” was challenging and it took a year and a half from completion to make its way in print.

Bringing “*Lolita*” to America took much longer. If Nabokov was daring Americans to venture out of their comfort zone to tackle the novel, American publishers were not. Nabokov turned to a French publisher Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press and was published there to little fanfare. At the end of 1955, Vladimir Nabokov got the best Christmas present of his life. Novelist Graham Greene acquired a copy of “*Lolita*” and named it one of the best three books of the year. Copies began trickling

surreptitiously into the U.S. generating a great deal of attention, and publishers began to scheme to bring “Lolita” home. The Monday that “Lolita” hit stores, reorders soared, finishing up in the thousands before the end of the day. By Friday morning the book was in its third printing. With “Lolita” turning into a global sensation, Vera and Vladimir headed west to hunt butterflies and negotiate with the filmmaker Stanley Kubrick. His earlier anxieties that “Lolita” publication might put an end to his job were entirely correct - if not for the reasons that he had feared but due to his financial success. It became apparent that he would give up forever classroom teaching. He began to imagine his possible future, as free to move and live in the world as he had been doing, for decades, in his imagination. He and Vera moved into the Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland, on October 1, 1961 and stayed there for the rest of his life. From his sixth floor quarters he conducted his business and took tours to the Alps, Corsica, and Sicily to hunt butterflies. He died in Lausanne, Switzerland, July 2, 1977.

Roland Philip, April, 2019