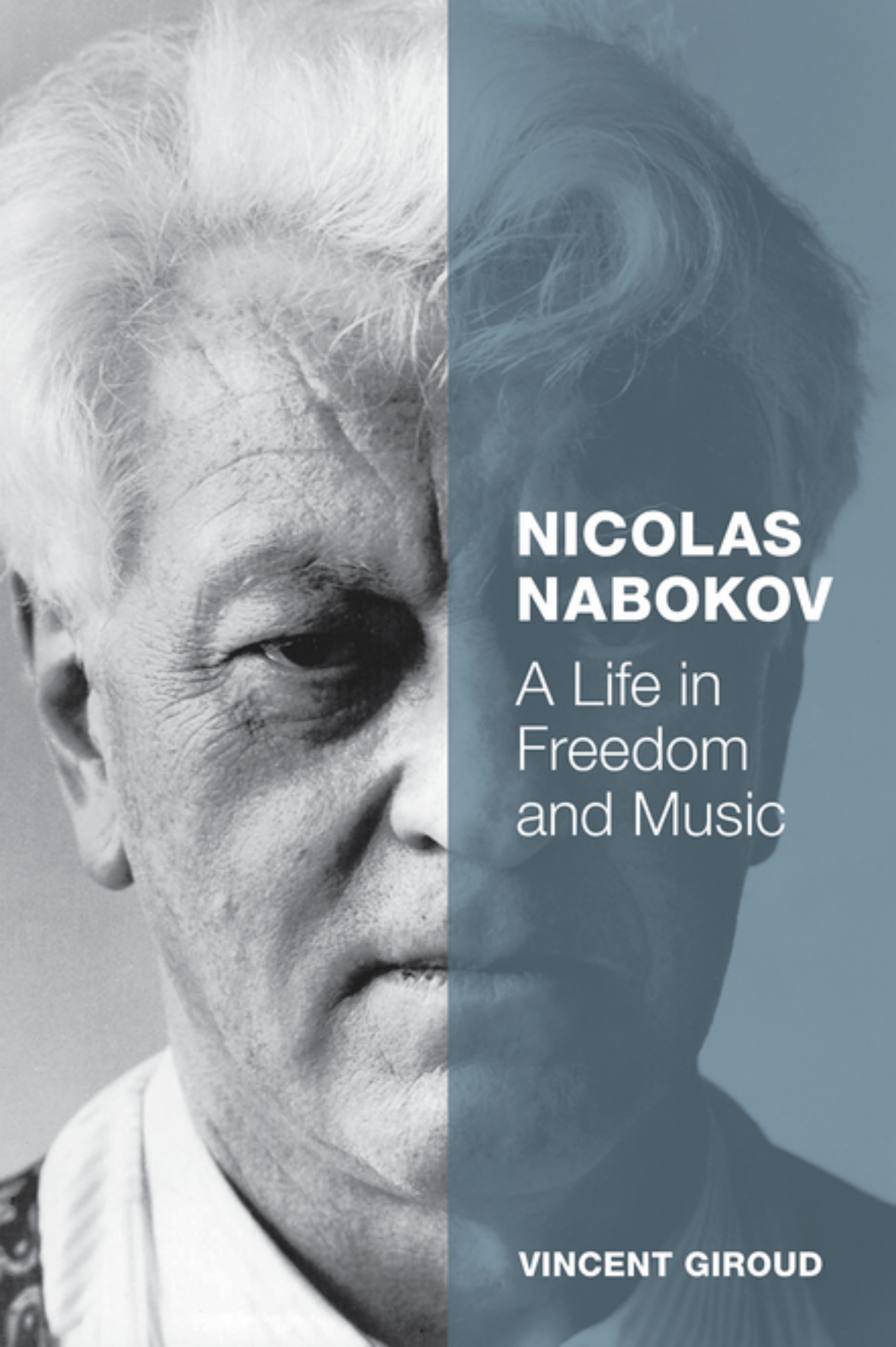

# NICOLAS NABOKOV

## A Life in Freedom and Music

VINCENT GIROUD

*Nicolas Nabokov*

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*For Dominique*
*and in memoriam Elliott Carter*

# *Contents*

# *Acknowledgments*

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Finally, I should mention the help and support I received throughout this project from my life partner, Robert Pounder, who was, as always, my first reader, and whose contribution could never be sufficiently acknowledged.

# *Introduction*

WHEN, AT THE twilight of his life, Nicolas Nabokov characterized his century as an age of emigres and exiles, he was describing his own condition. Born to a famous liberal family in imperial Russia, he was an adolescent when historical circumstances forced him to trade a life of wealth and privilege for one of rootlessness and uncertainty. The remainder of his existence was an uninterrupted Wanderjahre, in Western Europe first, then in the United States, and after the war constantly back and forth between the old and the new worlds. A self-professed cosmopolitan, he was acutely aware that he had not become one by choice. The cosmopolite, he once told a television audience, is above all a homeless person. His real fatherland, he added, was music.

Exile and emigration are themselves a crucial part of twentieth-century music history. By contrast with the previous age, when issues of nationality and nationalism were paramount, some of the leading figures of modern music—Bartók, Hindemith, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, to name the greatest four—spent part of their careers away from their native soil. The present biography is thus largely the story of the struggles of a composer who found himself cut off from the support structures normally available to musicians in a national environment and which make possible performance and recognition.

Yet, for all the hardship that came with it, exile did not break Nabokov. It made him a free spirit in every possible sense—morally, philosophically, politically, aesthetically—by broadening his perspectives and stimulating his intellectual curiosity. As his more famous cousin Vladimir was able to reinvent himself as an American writer after resettling in America (in part with Nicolas's help), so Nicolas Nabokov, in the 1950s, emerged as an international cultural force, taking on political responsibilities few if any composers have ever assumed. His life thus intersects with a vast array of people in a great variety of fields, well beyond the confines of classical music, and in every part of the world.

Indeed, rather than as a musician, Nabokov today is probably remembered above all for his association with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Paris-based international organization he headed from 1951 until 1966. However,

while the Congress has received much attention from historians in the past three decades, much of the discussion has focused on its financing, largely—though not exclusively—through American funds channeled through the CIA. This has unfortunately resulted in biased, unfair accounts of this remarkable institution. Nabokov's own image has suffered owing to this state of affairs, and in two ways: first because his own role within the Congress has been misunderstood and misrepresented; and secondly because the exclusive focus on his political activities has caused his achievements as a composer to be ignored and minimized. By telling the whole story for the first time, this biography proposes to rectify a double misperception.

It does Nabokov a grave injustice to see him primarily—or only—as a Cold War cultural warrior, which he never really was in any case, being above all passionately hostile to fascism and totalitarianism in all their forms. Nor is he a mere footnote in twentieth-century music history. By 1933, when he moved to the United States, his name was frequently mentioned, in France and elsewhere, as one of the rising stars of the younger generation of contemporary composers. He thus entered the Larousse dictionary well before his cousin Vladimir, who, under the pseudonym Sirin, was little known beyond the limited readership of the Russian emigre community in Berlin and Paris.[1] Launched, like so many others, by Diaghilev, his career is yet another proof of the far-reaching importance of the Ballets Russes in the history of artistic modernism. It will be no surprise to see that Nabokov's life is intertwined with those of several of the great names that emerged in the wake of this movement: George Balanchine, Jean Cocteau, Serge Lifar, Leonide Massine, and, above all, Stravinsky, as well as with more peripheral figures such as Harry Kessler and Henri Sauguet. However, those unfamiliar with Nabokov's musical career will be surprised by the size and range of his production, as documented in the checklist that will be found at the end of the volume. They will discover that his works were performed by the likes of Maurice Abravanel, Claudio Arrau, Leonard Bernstein, Antal Dorati, Roger Désormière, Serge Koussevitzky, Evelyn Lear, Igor Markevitch, Nathan Milstein, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Pierre Monteux, Charles Münch, Eugene Ormandy, Hermann Prey, Mstislav Rostropovich, Gérard Souzay, and Shirley Verrett, among others.

More generally, reliving Nabokov's life often feels like going through a Who Was Who in the twentieth century, so vast and diverse were his friendships and acquaintances. From Serge Prokofiev to Virgil Thomson; from Henri Cartier-Bresson, who once referred to Nabokov as his "spiritual father,"[2] to Robert Oppenheimer; from Alexis Léger—the poet Saint-John Perse—to W. H. Auden and Robert Lowell; from Jacques Maritain to Isaiah Berlin; from Yehudi Menuhin to Leontyne Price; from Willy Brandt to Indira Gandhi: the list could go on and on of the artistic, intellectual, and political figures whose path crossed Nabokov's and who will be encountered at some point in the following pages. As the reader will

discover, Nabokov's expansive personality—"witty, creative, warm-hearted, and irrepressible," in the words of William Glock—seldom failed to fascinate those who came into contact with him.[3] While admitting he himself wore "the outer shell of an undemonstrative person," George Kennan felt compelled to write to Nabokov in 1972 that, after a friendship of three decades, he felt towards him "a mixture, deep and abiding, of admiration, of real affection, and of a very special sort of gratitude." Singling out what he described as Nabokov's "enormous power of instinctive understanding for the rest of humanity," he praised him for having exerted it "gallantly, graciously, generously," never ceasing to give of himself to others, "never yielding to pettiness or despair."[4]

This biography hopes to give as complete a picture as possible of the struggles, successes, and failures of an uncommon man. What it could not possibly achieve is to give more than a glimpse of the rich and fascinating personality which dazzled Kennan along with so many others. At least I hope to have gone part of the way in fulfilling the late Elliott Carter's wishes when he encouraged me in my task. "Nicolas," he said, "deserves a large book."[5]

# *Note on Transliteration of Russian Names and Phrases*

RUSSIAN PROPER NAMES are given according to the Library of Congress authority system, either in the form sanctioned by usage (Tchaikovsky, Tchelitchew) or in transliteration, except when the system departs from standard scholarly usage (Meyerhold, not Meĭerkhol′d). For the sake of typographical clarity, double capitalization (Tsvetaeva, not TSvetaeva) and diacritics (Suvchinskii, not Suvchinskiĭ) are omitted. Also, to avoid confusion, names of family and friends nevertheless appear as cited in the sources (Onya rather than Oniia; Tolya rather than Tolia).

*Nicolas Nabokov*

Lubcza, the house where Nabokov was born and spent a large part of his early childhood (Dominique Nabokov archives).

Nabokov's mother in court dress, ca. 1910 (Dominique Nabokov archives).

Preobrazhenka, the estate of Nabokov's maternal grandmother, unidentified contemporary drawing (Dominique Nabokov archives).

The Nabokov siblings' string quartet: from left to right, Onya, Mitya, Mitya's violin teacher, and Nicolas (Dominique Nabokov archives).

Onya's wedding to Viktor Fasolt, Berlin, September 1920. Vladimir Nabokov is second from left at the top; Nicolas is below, ninth from left (courtesy of Nikolaus and Sophie Fasolt).

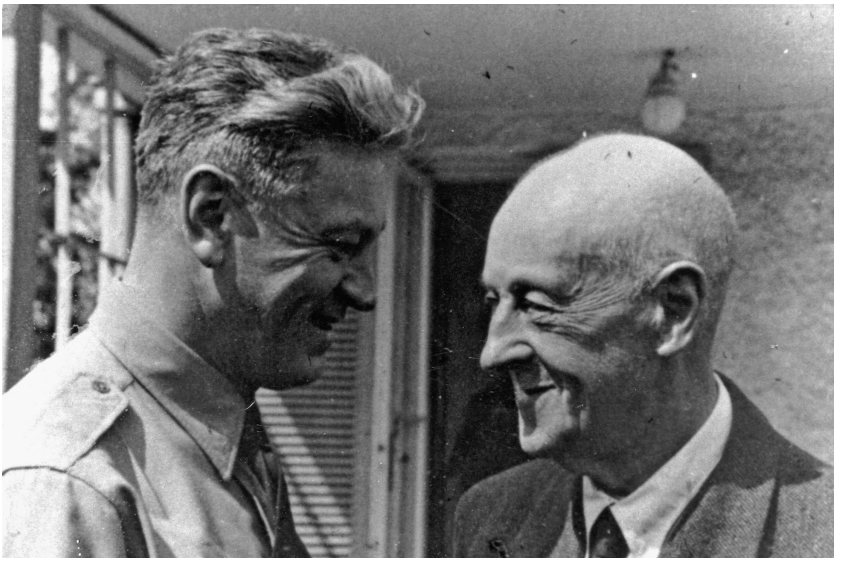
From left to right: Natalie Nabokov, Nabokov, Lina Prokofiev, and Sergey Prokofiev, during their June 1930 gastronomic tour (photograph Felix von Bethmann-Hollweg).

At a concert of La Sérénade, Strasbourg, 1932: from left to right, Vittorio Rieti, Henri Sauguet, Darius Milhaud, Yvonne de Casa-Fuerte, Nabokov, Madeleine Vhita, and Jacques Février (Dominique Nabokov archives).

Nabokov in 1934, photographed by Cecil Beaton (Dominique Nabokov archives, copyright Condé Nast).

Constance, Nabokov's second wife, at about the time of their wedding (courtesy Peter and Linda Nabokov).

Nabokov in the early 1940s (Ivan and Claude Nabokoff archives).



Nabokov and his father, Berlin, 1945 (Ivan and Claude Nabokoff archives).

Nabokov in 1946 with Charles Thayer (right) and the head of programming at Voice of America (Dominique Nabokov archives).

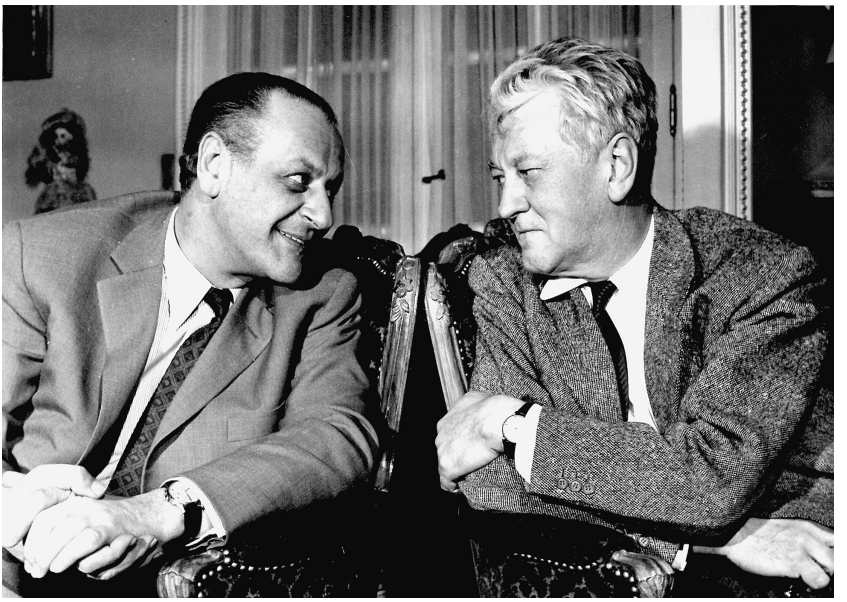
Nabokov and Balanchine with Stravinsky and his wife, Hollywood, December 1947 (Dominique Nabokov archives).


Nabokov signing copies of *Old Friends and New Music*, New York, 1951. Behind him are Virgil Thomson (left), Patricia Blake, and the painter Eugene Berman (Dominique Nabokov archives).

Nabokov and Marie-Claire at their wedding, 1953 (courtesy Alexandre Nabokoff).

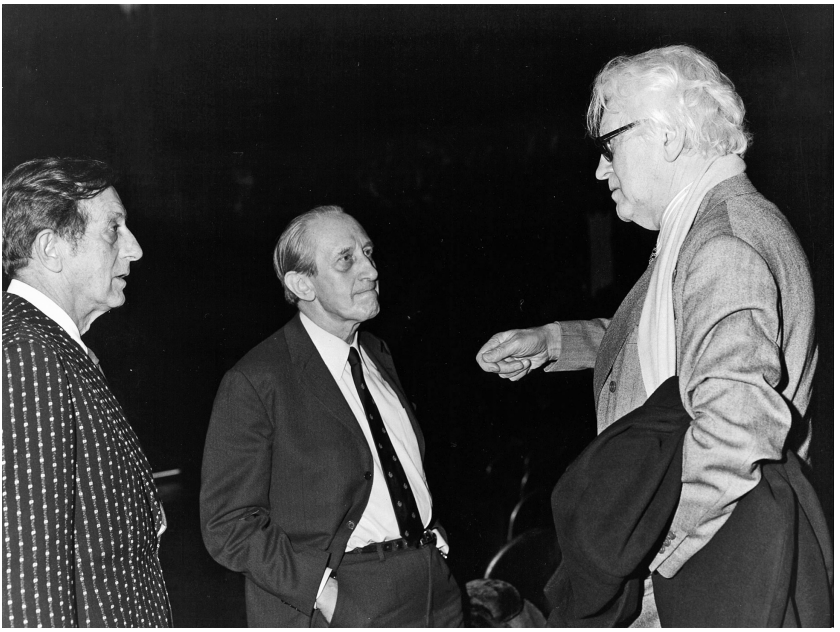
Nabokov and Igor Markevitch at Verderonne, 1950s (photograph by Topazia Markevitch, courtesy of Allegra Chapuis).

Nabokov with W. H. Auden, Ischia, 1950s, possibly with the poet Jules Supervielle (Dominique Nabokov archives).



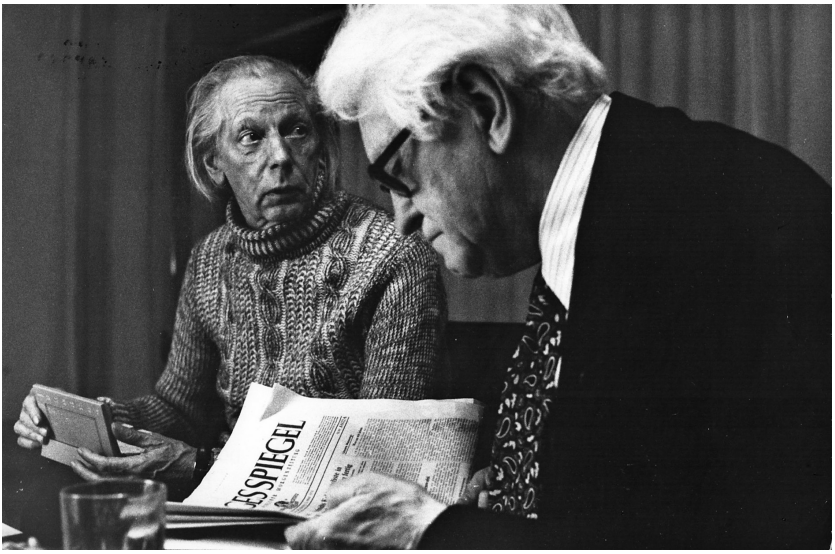
Nabokov and Rolf Liebermann, Paris, 1950s (Dominique Nabokov archives).

Nabokov with Artur Rubinstein and Vladimir Golschmann, Royaumont, mid-1950s (Ivan and Claude Nabokoff archives).



Nabokov with Alain Daniélou (Left) and H. H. Stuckenschmidt, Berlin, 1960s (photograph by Jacques E. Cloarec, FIND Foundation, Dominique Nabokov archives).

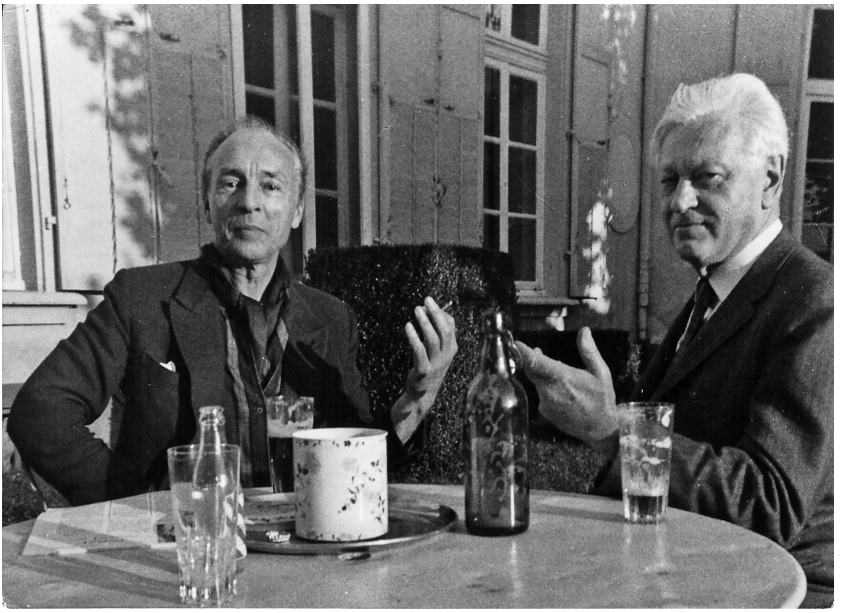
Nabokov and Leontyne Price, Berlin, 1963 (photograph by Hugh Dilworth, Dominique Nabokov archives).




Nabokov and Boris Blacher, Berlin, late 1960s (photograph by Dominique Nabokov).

Nabokov and Mstislav Rostropovitch, Berlin, 1967 (photograph by Dominique Nabokov).

Nabokov discussing with Willy Brandt the program of the 1965 Berlin Festival (photograph by Harry Croner, Dominique Nabokov archives, copyright Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin).



Nabokov and Balanchine at Kolbsheim in 1966 (photograph by Dominique Nabokov).

Nabokov with Stuart Hampshire and Isaiah Berlin, Headington House, Oxford, 1969 (photograph by Dominique Nabokov)

Nabokov and Dominique, 1967 (photograph by Jacques E. Cloarec, FIND Foundation, Dominique Nabokov archives).

Nabokov and Virgil Thomson in Thomson's Chelsea Hotel apartment, New York, 1970 (photograph by Dominique Nabokov).

Nabokov with Jacques Maritain and an unidentified clergyman, Kolbsheim, 1967 (photograph by John Howard Griffin, reproduced with the permission of the estate of John Howard Griffin and Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi, Dominique Nabokov archives).

Nabokov with Balanchine and Stephen Spender, Princeton, 1967 (photograph by Dominique Nabokov).

Nabokov with Elliott and Helen Carter and Leonid Berman (Left) at the house of Berman and Sylvia Marlowe in Connecticut, 1975 (photograph Dominique Nabokov).

Nabokov with his cousin Vladimir, Montreux, 1975 (photograph by Dominique Nabokov).

Nabokov and his three sons and two of his grandchildren, Paris, 1975 (photograph by Dominique Nabokov).

# *1*

# *The Lubcza Years*

NICOLAS NABOKOV, AS he came to spell his name—combining the French version of his given name and the English version of his family name—was born Nikolai Dmitrievich Nabokov on April 4 (old style) or April 17 (new style), 1903. Lubcza, his birthplace, now in Belarus, was his mother's estate on the Niemen river, halfway between Minsk and the current Polish and Lithuanian borders. Borders, however, have moved much over the centuries in that part of Eastern Europe, where one tended—and still does—to think of oneself less in terms of citizenship than of ethnicity, religion, or mother tongue. Before the region was incorporated into the Russian empire at the end of the eighteenth century, Lubcza had thus once been part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Fifteen miles south, Novogrudok, the district capital—Navahrudak in Belorussian—was where Adam Mickiewicz, the great national Polish poet, was born in 1798. Occupied by the German troops during the First World War, the area was given to the newly formed Polish Republic by the treaty of Riga in 1921. Invaded by the Red Army in 1939, it briefly became part of the Soviet Republic of Belorussia. Two years later, when Hitler declared war on Russia, the Nazi troops occupied it and annexed it into the Third Reich's Ostland, exterminating most of its Jewish community.

The tragic, chaotic history of the region where he was born is not without similarities with Nabokov's own destiny: an exile from the age of sixteen onwards, he had from then on a keen sense of his homelessness. While seeing himself a citizen of the world, as indeed he was, with his fluency in several languages and the range of his contacts in all continents, he retained throughout his life, like many fellow exiles of his generation, a deep-seated attachment to his roots. A "Russian cosmopolitan," as he described himself in the subtitle of his memoirs, he saw himself also as "forever a 'Beloruss.' "[1] Yet, paradoxically—as if to foretell his uprootedness in later life—none of the family roots were in Lubcza.

Made world-famous fifty-five years later by *Lolita*, the bestselling novel by Nicolas's first cousin Vladimir, the name Nabokov was widely known and respected in early twentieth-century Russia. As readers of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory* will remember, family legend has it that the Nabokovs originated from the historical city of Pskov, to the south of St. Petersburg, where a certain "Nabok Murza (*floruit* 1380), a Russianized Tatar prince" was supposed to have settled in the fourteenth century.[2] This mythical ancestor, reputed to be a tribute collector for the Khan, would have then married into a local Russian family and converted to Christianity. Musing, many years later, over this rumored exotic ancestry when writing his memoir, Nicolas Nabokov could not help extending the range of possibilities, as if to inscribe his own uprooted cosmopolitanism into his family tree: "Maybe he was a Tartar, maybe he was a Persian, or an Arab, or an Armenian, or a Jew."[3]

Whereas the family origin remains shrouded in myth, a well-documented feature of the Nabokov family tree, and a particularly relevant one from the point of view of this biography, is the Nabokovs' descent, on their German side, from a distinguished lineage of Saxon musicians, the Grauns, initially from Wahrenbrück in southwestern Brandenburg. The most prominent member of this family, Carl Heinrich Graun (1703 [or 1704]–1759), was first attached to the court of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, for which he wrote his first operas. He then joined his brother Johann Gottlieb—their elder brother August Friedrich was also a musician—in the employ of Crown Prince Frederick, the future Frederick II. When his royal protector ascended the throne in 1740, Graun was put in charge of the court opera in Berlin, where many of his own works were staged. The one most familiar today, *Montezuma* (1755) had a libretto adapted from Voltaire's tragedy *Alzire* by Frederick the Great himself.[4] Vladimir Nabokov, while acknowledging his lack of personal interest in music, was nonetheless evidently proud of this artistic background, pointing out in his autobiography that Graun's features, as reproduced in the portrait hanging in the Berlin Opera House, resembled those of his composer cousin Nicolas.[5] Carl Heinrich Graun's granddaughter Antoinette married a Prussian officer, Baron Nikolaus von Korff: their great-grandson was Nicolas Nabokov's father.

On the Russian side, the first illustrious Nabokov was Aleksandr Ivanovich Nabokov (1749–1807), who rose to the rank of general under the reign of Paul I. His youngest son Nikolai (1795–1873) retired in the Pskov province after a brief military career; his wife Anna Nazimova was the sister of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Nazimov (1801–88), who in 1825 had participated in the Decembrist uprising against Nicholas I. The second of thirteen children of Nikolai and Anna, Dmitri Nikolaevich Nabokov (1826–1904) reached greater prominence than any of his forebears, since he became the Russian Minister of Justice in 1878 when Czar Alexander II dismissed Count Pahlen. During his seven-year tenure,

D. N. Nabokov fought attempts to abolish or water down the relatively liberal judicial reform of 1864, which had brought the Russian legal system closer to Western standards. His position, however, became more and more untenable after Alexander II was assassinated by nihilists in St. Petersburg in March 1881. In 1885, he was forced to hand in his resignation to Alexander III, preferring a generous financial compensation to the title of count offered him by the Czar. Contrasting with this uncompromising political stance, his alliance with the Korff family was not devoid of scandal: it was preceded by an affair with the fiancee's mother—who in fact arranged the marriage.[6] D. N. Nabokov and his wife had nine children. Dmitri Dmitrievich, the father of our composer, being the eldest of the four sons, inherited the family *majorát*, an estate in Southern Poland, near Cracow, which the Czar had given Dmitri Nikolaevich to be passed on to his eldest son.

Nicolas Nabokov's mother, née Lydia Eduardovna Falz-Fein, had acquired the Lubcza estate from two of her brothers, who in the early 1890s had purchased large pieces of land (about 100,000 acres) previously owned by the German princely family of Hohenlohe—the Lubcza castle itself having been their occasional residence. As their name suggests, the Fein-Falz were of German origin. One Fein ancestor had settled in the eighteenth century in Southern Ukraine, where he and his descendants had amassed a large fortune from the breeding of Merino sheep, purchasing vast estates in Crimea and around the Sea of Azov. "Falz"—a corruption from Pfalz—had been added to the name in the early nineteenth century when the only daughter of a wealthy Fein had married a man of much humbler status. By the early twentieth century, the name of Falz-Fein had attained an even greater prominence than that of Nabokov, internationally at least, owing to the fame of the natural park that Frederick Falz-Fein (1863–1920), Lydia's elder brother and Nicolas's uncle, had developed on his estate of Askania-Nova in Ukraine. Situated on the Taurian steppes, to the north of Crimea, Askania-Nova—the "old" Askania was a castle in the Harz Mountains—had been purchased by Falz-Fein's father from yet another German princely family, the Anhalt-Köthens—whose ancestor had been the patron of Johann Sebastian Bach from 1717 to 1723—with a view to making it a horse and sheep ranch. Frederick Falz-Fein had studied natural sciences at Dorpat University (the present-day Tartu) in Estonia. Upon inheriting the property in 1883, he made ambitious plans to create a vast natural preserve. By the end of the nineteenth century, it included a zoo (second in size to London and Amsterdam only) and, more importantly, long before the name was coined, a "biosphere" which gradually earned him the admiration of zoologists worldwide as well as official recognition in his own country: he was made a baron when Czar Nicholas II visited the estate in 1914. Though the Falz-Feins were expropriated at the time of the Revolution, Askania-Nova, miraculously, survived and is now recognized as a landmark in the history of ecology.[7]

Nabokov's parents separated when he was two. Whether the separation was caused by Dmitri Nabokov's infidelities (he was having an affair with the gamekeeper's wife, whom he subsequently married) or by his wife's own infatuation with Nicolas von Peucker, the man who would become her second husband, Lydia fled Lubcza with her three children in 1905, taking advantage of her husband's absence on a hunting expedition. An acrimonious divorce trial ensued, in the course of which accusations of adultery were made against her, bolstered by the allegation that Nicolas, the youngest child, had not been fathered by Nabokov but by Peucker. The claim came back to haunt Nicolas in his adolescence when a cousin called him a bastard to his face. Deeply troubled by the accusation, he was informed by another cousin of the rumors surrounding his birth. Understandably, he shied away from bringing it up with his mother or stepfather. Yet the topic came up much later in the course of a meeting with his mother on the German side of Lake Constance, a meeting he tentatively dates from the mid-1920s.

> After a long silence, without looking at me, she said somewhat solemnly but calmly: "Sometime before I die, I must tell you about yourself and your father . . ."
>
> Then she paused, as if hesitating.
>
> "But not now," she added. "Another time. Yes, later . . . Let us now go to the station.
>
> "Another time" never came. She never spoke to me about it again.[8]

Confronting the possibility of one's illegitimate birth is, obviously, a traumatic experience for a child—or indeed an adult. Reviewing the facts of the case in his autobiography *Bagázh*, Nabokov concluded by stating his firm belief "that the allegation made by the lady relative at the trial was gratuitous and utterly false."[9] Manuscript and typescript drafts of the autobiography, which contain a more extended discussion of the case than the published version, while wordier, are curiously more equivocal. Looking for evidence of his legitimate birth, Nabokov finds one in what he describes as a profound difference in temperament between him and his stepfather: "He: orderly, proper, un-hedonistic, non-intellectual and in no way interested in the arts; me: disorderly, shifty, sensual, unconventional and, on the whole, enjoying the air of artistic and intellectual stables." Another proof, a more convincing one according to him, is "the unusual relations that existed between my stepfather and my mother even after their marriage. They were so pure and at the same time tender, so profoundly respectful of each other and yet completely united in all the affairs of life, so penetrated by a kind of 'lawfulness' and rectitude (somewhat conventional and conservative, of course) that it is difficult for me to imagine either of them committing an act of adultery." That his mother and her second husband did not go to bed together until her divorce

was pronounced is finally ruled by Nabokov "not only possible but definitely probable, if not certain." As proofs go, one has to admit that these are certainly far less convincing, say, than cousin Vladimir's comment on the physical resemblance between Nicolas and their common paternal ancestor Graun. Even more persuasive, not to say definitive, is the striking facial similarity between Nabokov and his father as an adolescent, as photographed with his three brothers when he was a student at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence. The photograph, reproduced in *Speak, Memory*, shows, in particular, the peculiar Asiatic-looking eyes which characterized many male Nabokovs, especially in their youth.[10]

Many years later, when Nabokov found himself briefly reunited with his father in postwar Berlin, he took the opportunity to question him about the rumors that had been spread about the legitimacy of his birth. Dmitri Dmitrievich Nabokov firmly denied having ever made such claims himself. "The allegation, he said, had been made not by him, but by a mischievous relative, with whom he had been accused of having had a love affair."[11] The calumny against Nabokov's mother had been made in retaliation.

One should not read too much into Nabokov's oddly halfhearted denial of the claim of illegitimacy. Clearly, he was above all reluctant to convey the impression he was rejecting the strong emotional bonds that tied him to the man he called "Uncle Koló" and who became his adoptive father after his biological father had receded into the background. Indeed, although acknowledging his father's physical appearance and personal charm, Nabokov, in his autobiography, hardly disguises the fact that he never felt much affection towards him. On the other hand, he draws on his "confident and loving relations" with his stepfather, adding that "to all intents and purposes, until his death in August 1918, he was our real father."[12] If the ill-intentioned rumors he subsequently heard proved so upsetting, it was no doubt principally because of the shadow they suddenly cast on an otherwise cloudless relationship with a man who, besides, happened to be his godfather, and after whom he had been christened.

Nicolas von Peucker, Nabokov later remembered, was a man "of conservative outlook"—a conservatism reflected in his clothes and morals as well as in the management of his and his wife's financial affairs and in his politics. His monarchist sympathies may have been offended by the increasingly visible role played after 1905 by Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, Nicolas's uncle (and father of Vladimir) in the liberal opposition to Nicholas II's absolutism. "Part Balt, part Greek, and only a bit Russian,"[13] Peucker was a neighbor of the Nabokovs at Lubcza—a neighbor in a relative sense, since his estate of Pokrovskoe was about thirty miles away, but a neighbor all the same, considering the size of estates owned by the upper class in this part of the Russian empire. Built in the eighteenth century, Pokrovskoe had its own musical connections: its previous owner, Baron Karl von Meck, a Baltic engineer who had made his money in the railroad

business, was none other than the husband of Nadezhda von Meck (1831–94), Tchaikovsky's longtime protector and "beloved friend" as well as the young Debussy's employer in the early 1880s.[14] Both of these composers, to a different degree, remained important references for Nabokov in later years: in particular, he fully shared his friend Stravinsky's profound admiration for Tchaikovsky.

Nabokov's earliest years were of the peripatetic kind enjoyed by many such prosperous Russian families in the pre-Revolutionary period, with winters on the French Riviera and occasional stays in Dresden. He and his siblings—Sonia, the first-born, and Dmitri, his senior by two years—were looked after by a small army of Russian preceptors, German governesses, and French Mademoiselles in a perpetual multilingual environment. His earliest memories are of Czemin, another large family estate near Pilsen in Bohemia which belonged to another brother of his mother; there the Nabokov children and their mother spent an extended period before returning to Russia in 1908. From this period dates the episode he remembered as his first encounter with sexuality. Being the youngest in the group of children, he was asked to keep watch on certain afternoons when the other children held secret meetings in the playhouse. One day, unable to resist curiosity, he left his watch post and peeped in. The account he drafted, more graphic than the one published in *Bagázh*, evokes the boys masturbating while staring at the girls' genital organs. Inevitably, capping the fantasmatic character of the scene, the mother then appeared in the door frame. General punishment ensued, save for the little voyeur, who nevertheless met his own retribution by getting severely beaten up by two of his cousins.

Sometime in 1908, by which time the Nabokovs' divorce had been finalized and Lydia and Peucker had married—a daughter, named Lydia like her mother, was born in 1909—the family moved back to Russia, settling first at Pokrovskoe. This involved a long train journey which ended at Molczadz, on the line from Lida to Baranowichi, a major junction, located forty miles south of Nowogrudok, where the St. Petersburg to Odessa line met the one going from Moscow to Western Europe. There ensued a twenty-mile horse-drawn carriage ride to the former von Meck summer residence. The exiled Nabokov's later recollections of this return to Russia—his earliest memories of his native land—are colored with an intense nostalgia, as if the landscape, smells, and noises had remained vivid in his memory. A few months later, in the fall of 1908, Nabokov's mother fell ill and left for Vilnius with her husband to undergo surgery, while the remainder of the household departed by sleigh to Lubcza, which had just been renovated. Even more than Pokrovskoe, this return to the house where he had been born but which he had never consciously seen, filled him with a sense of "unique and overwhelming happiness."[15] Lubcza was to remain the family's main residence until the beginning of the First World War.

Since Nabokov's parents were often absent, the children were looked after by Aunt Karolya (Caroline Muller), a widowed cousin of their mother's; young Nicolas, the last-born, was her favorite, whom she nicknamed Nikooshka or Poompsie. There was no question, at that stage, of going to school. Language teaching, which came naturally through daily contact with governesses of various nationalities, chiefly consisted in learning short poems by heart—a habit Nabokov, like many Russians, kept alive throughout his life. In those days, he later recalled, Russian children from a well-to-do milieu like his were expected to speak French to their mother, Russian to their father, in German to one governess, and in English to another one.[16] The children also had a tutor, Piotr Sigismundovich Tsetsenevsky (a curious name apparently deriving from the African fly), "a blond young man with President Taft-like moustaches."

> He was of medium-height, wore a starched "Kitel," a uniform-jacket with a stiff collar, and the colors of the St. Petersburg University. He was to become our most beloved tutor. Intelligent, patient, at times exacting, but always kind and resourceful. He treated my brother and myself as his younger friends and immediately won our lasting affection.[17]

It was Tze-Tze, as Piotr Sigismundovich was called, who read to Nicolas the first book he remembered, a Russian translation of Raffaele Giovagnoli's *Spartaco*, the popular account of the revolt of Roman slaves in the early first century BC, first published in 1874 and greatly beloved in Russia long before Aram Khachaturian's 1958 ballet based on the same theme. On a visit to Italy many years later, Nabokov, looking for a copy of the original, realized to his surprise that his Italian contacts had never heard of the novel. Worse still, once he had managed to locate a copy in a "dingy public library," he realized that, his childhood recollections notwithstanding, the book was "a bore": "Irretrievably old-fashioned, grandiloquent and unabashedly sentimental: it was unreadable."[18]

The other person the adult Nabokov remembered as the most important person in his educational development was the cataloguer and bookbinder of the Lubcza library, an elder of the village's Hassidic community named Moisei Iosifovich, whose last name he never knew. A meticulous person, Moisei offered to rearrange the books by subject until Aunt Karolya made him put them back as they were, shelved according to size and binding color. To little Nicolas's requests to read something in Hebrew or comment on the star that had supposedly appeared in the Christmas sky when Jesus was born, he would respond with evasiveness. Perhaps Nabokov's ardent, lifelong philosemitism should be traced back to the affection he felt as a child towards the kindly librarian.

An avid reader from an early age, Nabokov was exposed to Russian and foreign classics, especially French, such as Dumas *père* and Maupassant. He loathed,

however, the novels written in French by the Comtesse de Ségur (née Rostopchin), which were immensely popular among Russian upper classes, and proudly recalls snatching *L'auberge de l'ange gardien* from the hands of the French governess and throwing it into the pond, declaring that it was as *bête* as his *caca*.[19] A great favorite, on the other hand, was Longfellow's *Hiawatha* in Ivan Bunin's translation, which he always preferred to the original.

Instruction in the orthodox faith—Russia's official religion, though it is worth noting that Nabokov's mother had been raised a Lutheran—took the form of twice-weekly sessions with the local priest and consisted essentially in learning to recite by heart prayers in Old Church Slavonic. As for religious services, there were Saturday Vespers and High Mass on Sunday in the village church. Later in life, Nabokov remembered with distaste the bastardized music heard on those occasions, which had nothing to do with the authentic Russian chant traditions and consisted, instead, of cheap adaptations of popular tunes from Italian opera. On the special occasions—Christmas Vespers and midnight Resurrection service at Easter—when he was able to hear the real thing, it left a profound impression, and one he would remember as having exerted a major influence on his own musical development. By the same token, he blamed composers like Rachmaninov and even his beloved Tchaikovsky for writing religious music that was too obviously indebted to Western European models and ignoring "a large body of ancient Russian church chant that was still being sung in remote monasteries, mostly in northern Russia, like Valaam on the Lake Ladoga or at Solovki, which has since become a Communist jail."[20]

According to a story he later told the Franco-Dutch musicologist Fred Goldbeck, Nabokov's first musical shock, which prompted his decision to become a musician, was hearing his mother play a Rachmaninov Prelude on the upright family piano at Lubcza.[21] Another family favorite was Mendelssohn's *Venezianisches Gondellied*, which "stuck to [his] memory like fly-paper."[22] Some degree of musical instruction was, of course, expected to be part of the upbringing of a child in his milieu. Yet the daily piano lessons under the supervision of the stern Fräulein A.[23] were subsequently remembered as a dreary chore, altogether unrelated to the future composer's calling. He responded much more, he recalled, to everyday sounds like the lumberjacks' evening songs on the Niemen river, which he compares to an antiphon filling the air "with solitude and desolation,"[24] or the gay ditties of peasant women returning from the harvest on summer evenings. The domestic repertory, both at Pokrovskoe and at Lubcza, varied from salon pieces played by his mother to pseudo-Fibich or Kreisler tunes scratched by sister Onya and brother Mitya on their fiddles. Children's songs in four different tongues were part of the language instruction. While granting that the Russian folk songs he and his siblings enjoyed were not of the most "authentic" kind, Nabokov retained a softer spot for them than for the "phony" hymns heard in church. On birthdays

and saints' days, Jewish musicians from the local community were invited to perform festive music and played "an extraordinary variety of music: potpourris of famous operas, military marches, Viennese waltzes, and the ooziest gypsy songs and Jewish dances, rampant with glissandos, tremolos, and tearful vibratos." "I particularly loved the violinists of these orchestras," he added, "for I enjoyed their scratchy, edgy tone, their ability to slide all over the bridge of their instrument, and their clumsy, harsh ways of intoning double stops (that Stravinsky so ingeniously copied in the *Histoire du Soldat*)."[25] In his enthusiasm, Nabokov asked his stepfather whether he could trade the piano for the violin but his request was turned down. By then, however, he had already started to learn playing the cello, for which he was secretly being coached by his mother.

Another testimony to the young Nabokov's fondness for the violin is a reminiscence he included in the second chapter of his 1951 memoir *Old Friends and New Music* but omitted from his 1975 autobiography. In the winter of 1910 his stepfather took him and his sister to Vilnius—or Vilna, as the Lithuanian capital was called in Russian—to visit their mother who was recovering from her operation. There, in the living room of the Jewish owner of a music store, the Nabokovs heard a child violinist with intense blue eyes wearing "a dark velvet suit and a Lord Fauntleroy collar," who was about to pursue his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and whose miraculous playing "enraptured and overwhelmed" Nicolas:

> A big, mellow, round tone fills the room, penetrating the darkest corners of the stuffy apartment, shaking the windowpanes under its powerful impact. Its force, its warmth, the fullness of life which it represents are such that I feel as if an extraordinary, a miraculous gift were being received by my ears. It makes me tremble with sensuous pleasure and choke with delight.[26]

In *Old Friends and New Music*, Nabokov claims that he recognized, in this young violinist, Jascha Heifetz, when he heard him two or three years later at a concert in the Russian capital. The date and place would match: born in Vilnius in 1901, Heiftez, in 1910, was indeed about to enter the Petersburg Conservatory to study with Leopold Auer. Yet, revisiting the episode for possible inclusion in *Bagázh*, Nabokov was less conclusive, especially since Heifetz, when he had asked him about their youthful encounter, had no recollection of it. Had Nabokov, in his 1951 memoir, followed with too much abandon his lifelong penchant for telling a good story?

Once Nabokov's mother had recovered, it was at long last possible for the family, beginning in 1910 or 1911, to start paying regular summer visits to their maternal relatives in Ukraine, especially the Falz-Fein grandmother. Née Sophia Bogdanova Knauff, and known to the children as Omama, she comes out as one of the most colorful characters evoked in the composer's memoir. Originally from