

NABOKOV AND HIS FICTION

New Perspectives

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Jewish questions in Nabokov's art and life

Maxim D. Shroyer

Man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he?

Job 14:10

What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards.

Nabokov, *The Gift*

... the brown wigs of tragic old women who had just been gassed.

Nabokov, *Lolita*

INTRODUCTION

Although this essay will only consider two major novels and a short story, Jewish characters, as well as authorial reflections on anti-Semitism, appear in much of Nabokov's fiction.¹ In addition to a series of remarkable Jewish characters, Nabokov also populated his works with non-Jewish characters who exemplify an entire spectrum of attitudes toward the Jewish Other, from anti-Semitism to Philo-Semitism. Nabokov's interest in the Jewish question increased gradually under the influence of his upbringing, his marriage, and his contacts with Russian-Jewish exiles. His Jewish themes had evolved in his Russian fictions by the early 1930s to reach a crescendo in his third American novel, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1957). These themes were intensified by the rise of Nazism and given their ultimate shape by the Holocaust. Jewish characters are assigned distinct functions in Nabokov's works. Faced with peripeties of exile and catastrophes of the modern age, they confront death, ponder the post-mortem realm, and model immortality. They also enjoy a special relationship with art and facilitate the process of writing. Finally, the deaths of Jewish characters in the Nazi Holocaust, as well as encounters with anti-Semitism, compel their non-Jewish friends to modify their ethical and metaphysical beliefs.

JEWISH QUESTIONS IN NABOKOV'S BIOGRAPHY

Nabokov's father, V. D. Nabokov, was an outspoken opponent of anti-Semitism in pre-1917 Russia, famous for his reporting on the Beilis trial (*SM*, 176 [ch. 9]).² In the Constitutional-Democratic Party (CD), his close comrades-in-arms were Jews: Iosif Gessen, Avgust Kaminka, and Maksim Vinaver. Nabokov reminisced in *Speak, Memory* (1966) that growing up he "[had gotten] quite used to the . . . cartoons which appeared from time to time – [his] father and Milyukov [the leader of the CD Party] handing over Saint Russia on a plate to World Jewry" (*SM*, 188 [ch. 9]). Prior to entering high school, one of Nabokov's tutors was Filipp Zelensky, a convert to Lutheranism like many Russian Jews trying to surpass anti-Semitic quotas. In 1911–17, Nabokov attended the cosmopolitan Tenishev School, where two of his close friends in high school were Jewish, Samuil Rosoff and Savely Grinberg (*SM*, 180–88).³ The great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, a Jew by birth, studied at the Tenishev School in 1900–07.

In exile, much more so than in Russia itself, Nabokov got to know a wide-variety of Jewish characters and types, from penniless poets and philosophers to unbending *Geschäftsmacher*. There were two main reasons for Nabokov's proximity to the Russian-Jewish community. One was historical: the high proportion of Jews among Russian expatriates. Russian Jews were active in émigré politics and education, and were particularly visible in publishing. Three figures among Russian-Jewish littérateurs were instrumental in launching Nabokov's literary career: Iosif Gessen who showcased Nabokov's early writing in Berlin's *Rul'* (The Rudder); the satirical poet Sasha Cherny who showed much kindness to the young Nabokov; Yuly Aikhenval'd who encouraged Nabokov's talent in reviews. Other notable Russian-Jewish littérateurs and intellectuals whom Nabokov came into contact with in Europe and America included Mark Aldanov, Il'ia Fondaminsky, Roman Grinberg, Abram Kagan, Solomon Krym, Grigory Landau, Sofiia Pregel', Anna Prismanova, Marc Szeftel, Savely Sherman (A. A. Savel'ev), Mark Tsetlin (Amari), Mark Vishniak. Russian by culture, some of the above converted to Christianity, others continued practicing Judaism, others yet were secularized but retained symbolic affiliations with Jewish traditions. In the United States, Nabokov befriended a number of Jewish academics, including Harry Levin and M. H. Abrams.

The second reason for Nabokov's heightened interest in the Jewish question was personal: his marriage in 1925 to Véra Slonim. Nabokov witnessed Russian anti-Semitism in his childhood and youth, ranging from his aunt's aristocratic condescension to his tutor's Jewish origins (*SM*, 160 [ch. 8]) to his Cambridge room-mate's trying to "foist upon him" a copy of *Protocols of The Elders of Zion*.⁴ However, a marriage to a Jew truly opened Nabokov's eyes and awarded him a personal connection with the Jewish past and present. Although raised in St. Petersburg – in financial comfort and relative privilege as compared to the vast majority of Russia's Jews of the Pale – Véra Nabokov experienced anti-Semitism full well. Following the 1889 ukase barring Russia's Jews from practicing law, Véra's father Evsei Slonim refused to convert to Christianity and left the legal profession.⁵

Commentators both objective and racially biased emphasize that Véra's Jewishness had an impact on Nabokov's career. While some have regarded Véra as Nabokov's Jewish muse, others have charged her with ruining Nabokov's talent or converting him into an "un-Russian" author. Vengefully settling her scores with the Nabokovs, Zinaida Shakhovskoy wrote of Nabokov's talent "withering" under Véra's Jewish influence.⁶ An émigré correspondent of Shakhovskoy emphatically described how shortly after his marriage, Nabokov had become "sovershenno enjuive" ("completely *Jewified*," my italics).⁷ Encumbered as it is by a chronic lack of Nabokov's own statements concerning religious beliefs, the question of Véra's impact on Nabokov's faith is a rather complex one, deserving of a separate investigation. It would suffice to say here that Nabokov's marriage to a Jewish woman most likely completed the cycle of his separation from organized Christianity.

The marriage to a Jewish woman who, it seems, could not and would not embrace Christianity, most likely called for a practical compromise, resulting in a secular matrimony. As for Nabokov's metaphysics, the impact of his Jewish muse might have been such that by the end of the 1920s Nabokov had embraced a *sui generis* system of cosmological beliefs combining features of Old Testament monotheism and pantheism. Central to Nabokov's metaphysical vision is the existence of a timeless otherworldly realm that hosts idealized memories and provides personal immortality.⁸ Also crucial for Nabokov's beliefs is the intuition that souls of the deceased inhabit a parallel world, communicate with the living, and participate in their lives.

While by the end of the 1920s, vestibules of any organized religion had become too narrow for Nabokov's talent and sensibility, he was far from indifferent to cultural history of religious ideas.⁹ Just as his protagonist Krug in *Bend Sinister* (1947), Nabokov probably regarded Judaism and Christianity as a single religious continuum:

Incidentally in one compact sentence [Krug] had referred to several religions (not forgetting that wonderful Jewish sect whose dream of the gentle young rabbi dying on the Roman *crux* had spread over all Northern lands), and had dismissed them together with ghosts and robolds. (*BS*, 193 [ch. 16])

What might have intrigued Nabokov in Judaic thought?

Much more so than other monotheistic religions, the development of Judaism from the Biblical period – through rabbinical writings, the Kabbalah, and Hasidism – to modern-day Jewish theology has been marked by an ongoing modification of the notions of the afterlife and immortality. In fact, Judaic notions of post-mortem survival are still in progress, and the second-half of the twentieth century witnessed a revival of Jewish metaphysics of the afterlife.¹⁰ Before going any further, it is important to make one distinction. I am not speaking about Nabokov's interest in Judaism as a form of religious communal living. There is little doubt that Nabokov was just as indifferent to Jewish religious practices as he admittedly was to Christian or any other organized forms of worship. (In a 1964 interview, Nabokov spoke of his "indifference to organized mysticism, to the church – any church" [*SO*, 39].) I am, however, hypothesizing about a mediated impact of Judaic religious philosophy upon Nabokov's own models of post-mortem existence, the unique models that he cognized through and envisioned in his fictions.

Nabokov's wife became the lifelong source radiating Jewish traditions. Following his marriage, opposition to anti-Semitism became a leitmotif of Nabokov's living.¹¹ Living in Germany in the 1930s with a Jewish wife and a half-Jewish son, Nabokov observed the advent of Nazism, the Holocaust already in the making. Fleeing Germany for France in 1937, Nabokov had every reason to fear not only for his family's safety, but his own. In 1938, a repugnant anti-Semitic opus in Berlin's pro-Nazi *Novoe slovo* (New Word), placed Nabokov on the same (death) row with Russian-Jewish artists: "There, in the boiling pots, all those 'exercises' by the sirins [Sirin was Nabokov's pseu-

donym], the chagalls, the knuts, the burliuks [David Burliuk was often mistaken for a Jew], and hundreds of others will be cleansed entirely. And all those 'works of genius' will flow where flows all filth, opening the passage to fresh, national art."¹² Upon his arrival in the United States, Nabokov re-experienced the familiar anti-Semitic ways of a part of the émigré community: "A teacher of Russian at Columbia complimented him ... on his magnificent aristocratic pronunciation: 'All one hears here are Yids'."¹³ Nabokov also tasted of the reticent social anti-Semitism of the Anglo-Saxon intelligentsia, as well as of the popular anti-Jewish sentiments, still visible in small-town America well into the 1950s (Boyd, *AT* 311; Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* 275).¹⁴ Always watchful for hints of prejudice, he recoiled at restaurant signs "stipulating only 'gentile clientèle'."¹⁵

Finally, as a Russian émigré writer in Europe, Nabokov received assistance from Russian-Jewish patrons of the art.¹⁶ The Nabokovs sailed to America on board a liner chartered by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). For the rest of his years, Nabokov remained grateful for the Jewish support. He made financial contributions to Jewish organizations.¹⁷ He took a passionate interest in the Jewish state and rejoiced over the end of the Six-Day War: "I triumph now, saluting the marvelous victory of Israel."¹⁸

JEWISH QUESTIONS IN NABOKOV'S LITERARY WORKS

Death, religious conversion, anti-Semitism in The Gift

The Gift offers an in-depth investigation of major themes in Jewish history and thought. I shall examine four issues in the novel: conversion of Jews to Christianity; models of post-mortem survival; anti-Semitism; the impact of the protagonist's half-Jewish Muse.

One of the principal characters, Alexander Chernyshevski, goes insane after the suicide of his son Yasha in Weimar Berlin. Chernyshevski's Jewish grandfather is said to have been baptized and given his last name by a Russian Orthodox priest, the father of the prominent radical Nikolai G. Chernyshevski (1828–89). The fictional Chernyshevski suggests that the protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, write a biography of the historical Chernyshevski. Both husband and wife Chernyshevski try to orient the protagonist toward writing about their family lore, and he worries that in addition to Chernyshevski's biography, he would be "cornered" to

undertake a "long short story depicting [their son's] fate" (*Gift*, 40 [ch. 1]).

For Alexander Chernyshevski, as for many more Jews who were converted to Christianity, the acquired religion amounted to an illusory ticket to mainstream Gentile society.¹⁹ Culturally a Russian, and spiritually an agnostic, the exile Chernyshevski hovers between his ancestral Judaic past and his assimilated and displaced present. Despite a seemingly materialist and secularist orientation of his ideas, he becomes the author's agent for exploring the metaphysics of death. The loss of his son plunges Chernyshevski into despair and mental illness. At first he believes that his son exists in some parallel world. Ironically, Godunov-Cherdyntsev, who mourns the loss of his own father, is not indifferent to the daunting task of communicating with the souls of the deceased. During the second stage of his derangement, Chernyshevski rejects the possibility of otherworldly encounters with his son. Temporarily released from the mental institution, Chernyshevski had "grown thinner and quieter after his illness . . . but Yasha's ghost no longer sat in the corner" (*Gift*, 195 [ch. 3]).

Godunov-Cherdyntsev calls on Chernyshevski just before the publication of his controversial biography. Full of deliberate ambiguities, the episode of the protagonist's last visit with Chernyshevski opens with a pseudo-philosophical discussion of death and immortality with references to and quotations from Delalande's *Discourse on Shadows*. The French philosopher serves as a fictional disguise allowing Nabokov to expound upon his views of death and the other world. Remarkably, after a page or so of Delalande's discourse, the narrator's philosophizing voice flows into the voice of Chernyshevski, who ponders his own imminent death. So gradual is the transmogrification of the former voice into the latter, that for a while the reader is not sure where one ends and the other starts. Nor is the reader clear whether Delalande's discourse is a product of the narrator's consciousness or a figment of Chernyshevski's inflamed imagination. At a certain point Chernyshevski unequivocally interrupts the rendition of Delalande's discourse by voicing skepticism about Christian notions of the afterlife:

If the poor in spirit enter the heavenly kingdom I can imagine how gay it is there [a parodic evocation of Christ's Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs," Matthew 5:3]. I have seen enough of them on earth. (*Gift*, 310 [ch. 5])

Now that he is dying, Chernyshevski confesses, his previous belief in ghosts as well as his experiences of communicating with his son's spectral presence, appear to him as something base. The paradox of Chernyshevski's pre-mortem vision lies in a recognition that "in dying [he gets] farther away from [his son], when the opposite should have been true – ever nearer and nearer" (*Gift*, 311 [ch. 5]). On the eve of his death, in a "moment of lucidity," Chernyshevski utters: "What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards" (*Gift*, 312 [ch. 5]).

What do the words of the dying Chernyshevski mean? That death is not a passage to the other world? That whatever the destiny of the surviving soul, it is only significant for the living, insofar as the living remember the deceased and try to communicate with them? That traditional religious models of salvation are forms of popular communal living, and not at all models of individual immortality? The reader learns that Chernyshevski "had turned out at the last minute to be a Protestant [Lutheran in the Russian]" (*Gift*, 312 [ch. 5]). Chernyshevski's religious affiliation with Protestantism, and not Russian Orthodoxy, highlights his *pro forma* Christianity, his conversion in a minor key.

Godunov-Cherdyntsev finds vexing his own inability to "imagine some kind of extension of [Chernyshevski] beyond the corner of life" (*Gift*, 314 [ch. 15]). As he ponders Chernyshevski's disappearance, "at the same time he [cannot help] noticing through the window of a cleaning and pressing shop near the Orthodox church, a worker with devilish energy and an excess of steam, as if in hell, torturing a pair of trousers" (*Gift*, 314 [ch. 5]). Such a cinematic superimposition of two spaces, an Orthodox church and a cleaning shop, evokes a traditional Christian notion of an anthropomorphic hell where the wicked undergo torment. In their own ways, both Chernyshevski and Godunov-Cherdyntsev have rejected such models. From a "troubled and obscured state of mind," the protagonist passes "with a kind of relief" (*Gift*, 286 [ch. 4]) to a new cosmic awareness:

as if the responsibility for his soul belonged not to him but to someone who knew what it all meant – he felt that all this skein of random thoughts, like everything else as well [...] – was but a reverse side of a magnificent fabric [iznanka velikolepnoi tkani], on the front of which there gradually formed and became alive images invisible to him. (*Gift*, 314 [ch. 5])²⁰

This newly arrived *sui generis* model of the other world helps the protagonist, an aspiring author and thinker, to make sense of his own existence. In fact, Godunov-Cherdyntsev's account of his encounters with the Chernyshevskis, culminating in Alexander Chernyshevski's death, intertwines with the narrative of his falling in love with Zina Mertz. Right after the funeral service, Godunov-Cherdyntsev finds himself "on a bench where once or twice at night he had sat with Zina" (*Gift*, 314 [ch. 5]). The parallel unfolding of Chernyshevski's quest for details of post-mortem survival and Godunov-Cherdyntsev's own quest for a transcendent love strongly suggest a linkage. The protagonist needs the spiritual travails of the teetering Jewish convert Chernyshevski to realize that the realm of the afterlife is only meaningful when one believes that it affects one's life in this world, rather than that it is a goal to which one aspires throughout one's life or that it is another chance to make a difference in the universe. Such an understanding permeates the development of Judaism.

Almost at the very end of the novel, when the protagonist and Zina have firmly linked their lives together, Godunov-Cherdyntsev recalls his meetings with the Chernyshevskis. Previously, the protagonist was having a difficult time holding on to the image of the deceased. Now "he was seized by a panicky desire not to allow [all the memories] to close and get lost in a corner of his soul's lumber room There is a way ["Est' sposob"] – the only way" (*Gift*, 337 [ch. 5], *SSoch*, III:303). The ultimate suggestion is that memory is a form of postmortem survival, and art awards individual immortality by making Chernyshevski a character in Godunov-Cherdyntsev's nascent novel.

Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's project might not have been undertaken had it not been for his half-Jewish Muse. The entire novel becomes, in the words of its protagonist and presumed author, "a kind of declaration of love" (*Gift*, 364 [ch. 5]). Nabokov's authorial intention, disguised as fate, brings Zina and Fyodor together as the young writer rents a room in the apartment of the Shchyogolevs. Zina's mother married Boris Shchyogolev after the death of her Jewish first husband and Zina's father, Oscar Mertz. Upon seeing Shchyogolev for the first time, Fyodor thinks that his new landlord has "one of those open Russian faces whose openness is almost indecent" (*Gift*, 143 [ch. 2]). A former prosecutor and a ceaseless imitator of the Yiddish accent, Shchyogolev exemplifies a

widespread variety of anti-Semitism, the anti-Semitism of Jewish jokes and of pseudo-sociological meandering on the subject of an international Jewish conspiracy.²¹

Zina is burdened by having to live with her anti-Semitic step-father. Although he outwardly treats Zina with care, he still manages to remind her of her "alien" Jewish origins. At dinner, after Zina pushes away a plate of borscht, Shchyogolev ventures to change her mind: "Come on, eat, Aïda" (*Gift*, 159 [ch. 3]). The latent anti-Semitism of Shchyogolev's remark become transparent if one considers the sources of the nickname "Aïda." On the one hand, Aïda is the female protagonist of the eponymous opera by Giuseppe Verdi (1871). In the opera, set in Egypt in the age of the Pharaohs, Aïda is a captive Ethiopian girl and a beloved of the commander of the Egyptian army, Radamès. At the end of the opera, Aïda chooses to die in Radamès's arms as both are entombed alive. On the other hand, Aïda points to "aid" (pronounced "ayeed"), the Russianized version of the Yiddish for "a Jew"; when speaking Russian, Russian Jews frequently use the word "aid" as a private code, as in "On aid" ("He is Jewish").

Later in the novel, the narrator provides a lengthy explication of Shchyogolev's anti-Semitism. The reader learns that after the death of Zina's father, her mother married "a man whom Mertz would not have allowed over his threshold, one of those cocky and corny Russians [bravurnykh russkikh poshliakov] who, when the occasion presents itself, savor the word 'Yid' as if it were a fat fig" (*Gift*, 185 [ch. 3]; *SSoch*, III:166). One of Shchyogolev's favorite books is the notorious forgery, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Shchyogolev offers his tenant an analysis of the Jewish impact upon his wife and step-daughter:

My better half . . . was for twenty years the wife of a kike and got mixed up with a whole rabble of Jew in-laws [prozhila s iudecm i obrosla tselym kagalom]. I had to expend quite a bit of effort to get rid of that stink. Zina . . . , thank God, doesn't have anything specific – you should see her cousin, one of these fat little brunettes, you know, with a fuzzy upperlip. (*Gift*, 187 [ch. 3]; *SSoch*, III:168)

Not finding in Zina any screaming features of a Jewish phenotype, Shchyogolev even speculates that Zina is a progeny of her mother's extra-marital affair with an ethnic Russian:

one can't help being drawn to one's own people, you know. Let her tell you herself how she suffocated in that atmosphere. . . . And to think that her

mother was a lady-in-waiting of the Empress . . . and she went and married a yid – to this day she can't explain how it happened: he was rich, she says, and she was stupid, they met in Nice, she eloped to Rome with him. . . . (*Gift*, 187 [ch. 3])

Zina imparts to Fyodor an image of her deceased father as a Jewish aristocrat, adoring "trotting races and music" and reciting "Homer by heart" (*Gift*, 187 [ch. 3]). She tries to select details of her father's image that might "touch Fyodor's imagination, since it seemed to her she detected something sluggish and bored in his reaction to . . . the most precious thing she had to show him" (*Gift*, 187–88 [ch. 3]). Fyodor, who "in general did not give a damn about the classification of people according to race, or racial interrelations" (*Gift*, 188 [ch. 3]), found it embarrassing that Zina would concede that he harbored shades of anti-Semitism. Fyodor realizes that Zina's "morbidly acute pride" is fueled by her daily contacts with household prejudice against her Jewish origins. Zina's sense of her own Jewish identity is not without contradictions; to her a Jewish boss was "a German Jew, i.e. first of all a German" (*Gift*, 188 [ch. 3]). Zina's Jewish identity is a composite image of genetic and historical features (according to Jewish Law, Zina would not even be considered Jewish since her mother is not Jewish). Religion never surfaces in her discussions of her Jewishness. From a cultural standpoint, she is a Russian, brought up on the same poetry and cultural mythology as Fyodor himself. An antidote against Russian xenophobia, Zina's Jewish identity is to a large degree a self-definition by negation. Be that as it may, Zina still transforms Fyodor's attitudes toward the Jewish question. Godunov-Cherdyntsev's changing attitude, formerly an abstractly liberal belief in equality of all men, and subsequently a "personal shame for listening silently to Shchyogolev's [anti-Semitic] rot" (*Gift*, 188 [ch. 3]), mirrors Nabokov's own transformation under the influence of his Jewish wife. Intolerant to even slightest nuances of anti-Semitic behavior, the mature Nabokov fought not only his wife's but his own Jewish battles.

In the middle of the novel, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev formulates "what [it] was about [Zina] that fascinated him most of all":

Her perfect understanding, the absolute pitch of her instinct for everything that he himself loved? . . . And not only was Zina cleverly and elegantly made to measure for him by a very painstaking fate, but both of them, forming a single shadow, were made to the measure of something not quite comprehensible, but wonderful and benevolent and continuously surrounding them. (*Gift*, 177 [ch. 3])

The recognition that Zina and Fyodor complement perfectly the faticid patterns of their lives, the patterns designed by a transcendent source, amounts to a guiding principle in the composition of Godunov-Cherdyntsev's and Nabokov's novel, *The Gift*. In the novel, Zina the Muse not only inspires the writing and serves as the first reader and judge, but also symbolizes the kind of Russia, both idealized and feminized, that Nabokov strove to preserve in exile. In this immortal and nebulous Russia, half-Slavic and half-Jewish, the Jewish question is harmoniously resolved – Nabokov's perfect if unattainable dream.

Holocaust, remembrance, responsibility in Pnin

The novel *Pnin* (1957) is the pinnacle of Nabokov's Jewish theme. Nabokov reactivates two central themes of *The Gift*, namely the theme of post-mortem survival of consciousness and the theme of love between an ethnic Russian man and a Jewish woman. While in *The Gift* the two lovers are united by a benevolent fate that oversees their lives, in *Pnin* Nabokov pursues a tragic scenario. At first, Timofey Pnin and his beloved Mira Belochkin are separated by the Russian Revolution and Civil War; subsequently, Mira perishes in a Nazi concentration camp while Pnin struggles to preserve the pure memories of his beloved and make sense of his own post-Holocaust existence. He seeks to justify his own survival in view of Mira Belochkin's martyrdom and death.

Pnin is a canonical Russian *intelligent*. Like Godunov-Cherdyntsev, he comes from a St. Petersburg liberal milieu that made no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles.²² On a park bench in a strange American town, by means of an operation that Nabokov called "cosmic synchronization" (*SM*, 218 [ch. 11]), Pnin travels to his Russian childhood while also contemplating his forthcoming lecture at Cremona Women's Club. The narrator underscores Pnin's near-death experience of remembering: "And suddenly Pnin (was he dying?) found himself sliding back into his childhood" (*Pnin*, 21 [ch. 1]). Having survived the excruciating pain of remembrance, but still remaining under the impact of his "seizure" (*Pnin*, 25 [ch. 1]), Pnin endures a fleeting if "limpid . . . vision" (*Pnin*, 27 [ch. 1]) as he is being introduced to his audience. In his vision, in place of the members of the Cremona Women's Club, he imagines a room full of his dead loved ones, including Mira:

Next to [one of his Baltic aunts], shyly smiling, sleek dark head inclined, gentle brown gaze shining up at Pnin from under velvet eyebrows, sat a dead sweetheart of his. . . . Murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people. (*Pnin*, 27–28 [ch. 1])

Before such an audience, Pnin's every word must reverberate with intellectual honesty.

Throughout the novel, Pnin thinks of the afterlife and continues to encounter both Jewish characters and anti-Semitism. He comes in contact with memories of his deceased Jewish friends, including a "Samuil Izrailevich" and an "Ilya Isidorovich Polyanski." In "the course of one of those dreams that haunt Russian fugitives" (*Pnin*, [ch. 4] 109), Pnin sees himself and Polyanski waiting for "some mysterious deliverance to arrive in a throbbing boat from beyond the hopeless sea" (*Pnin*, 110 [ch. 4]). Pnin's dead friend Polyanski has the same first name and patronymic as Nabokov's good friend Fondaminsky, who died in a Nazi concentration camp.²³ Additionally, Samuil Izrailevich shares his name and patronymic with Nabokov's friend Rozoff (Zavyalov-Leving, "Samuel Izrailevich").

Pnin's ex-wife Liza, an immoral and manipulative woman, tells him about her new male friend: "His father was a dreamer, had a floating casino . . . but was ruined by some Jewish gangsters" (*Pnin*, 56 [ch. 2]). Uncomfortable with traditional notions of Heaven and Hell, and deterred by Liza's coquettish anti-Semitism, Pnin thinks to himself: "If people are reunited in Heaven (I don't believe it, but suppose), then how shall I stop it from creeping upon me, over me, that shriveled, helpless, lame thing, her soul?" (*Pnin*, 58 [ch. 2]). At that very moment, when Pnin seems "on the verge of a simple solution of the universe" (*Pnin*, 58 [ch. 2]), a squirrel interrupts his thoughts. The squirrel communicates an "urgent request," and Pnin understands her perfectly. "'She has fever, perhaps'" (*Pnin* 58). he thinks, pressing the contraption on a water fountain so the squirrel could quench her thirst. Possibly Mira's spectral presence²⁴ (Mira's last name, Belochkin, derives from the Russian *belochka* a diminutive feminine noun meaning "little squirrel") – the Jewish squirrel surfaces in the novel to remind Pnin of his moral responsibility and direct his increasingly unorthodox metaphysical quest. As though sensing Pnin's departure from organized religion, a Russian friend warns him that one day he will lose the "Greek Catholic cross on a golden chainlet that Pnin removed from his neck and

hung on a twig" before swimming. Pnin responds that "perhaps [he] would not mind losing it":

As you well know, I wear it merely from [*sic*] sentimental reasons. And the sentiment is becoming burdensome. After all, there is too much of the physical about this attempt to keep a particle of one's childhood in contact with one's breastbone. (*Pnin*, 128 [ch. 5])

The Jewish theme in the novel culminates in the episode where Pnin visits The Pines, a country estate of his Russian émigré acquaintance. At one point, just as previously, he is forced to sit down on a bench by an approaching "cardiac sensation," described as "an awful feeling of sinking and melting into one's physical surroundings" (*Pnin*, 131 [ch. 5]). At this very point, Pnin is accosted by Roza Shpolyanski, the wife of a Jewish liberal politician of the 1910s: "I don't think we ever met. But you knew well my cousins, Grisha and Mira Belochkin. They constantly spoke of you. He is living in Sweden, I think – and, of course, you have heard of his poor sister's terrible end . . ." (*Pnin*, 131 [ch. 5]).²⁵ Pnin resists a meeting with the past, but his memory perseveres. Thereafter follows a lengthy recollection, both tortuous and idyllic, of Pnin's first love, in part reminiscent of Nabokov's accounts of his own first love in *Speak, Memory* and elsewhere: summertime romance, oaths and kisses, gardens and kerosene lamps.

Why does Pnin resist remembering Mira? What does it mean that "in order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira" (*Pnin*, 134 [ch. 5])? Pnin's *modus vivendi*, his prohibition against remembering his dead beloved, is a direct consequence of the Holocaust. How can Pnin, a moral and compassionate human being, continue living in a post-Holocaust void by denying himself the right to remember its victims: "if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible" (*Pnin*, 135 [ch. 5])? Could it be that Nabokov's Russian protagonist has formulated a profound if grave truth that a human mind seeks to come to terms even with such incomprehensible disasters as the loss of six million Jewish lives?

The account of Pnin's intimations of Mira's death belongs to the finest pages of literature about the Holocaust:

One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those

gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. According to the investigator Pnin had happened to talk to in Washington, the only certain thing was that being too weak to work (though still smiling, still able to help other Jewish women), she was selected to die and was cremated only a few days after her arrival in Buchenwald, in the beautifully wooded Grosses Etersberg . . . an hour's stroll from Weimar, where walked Goethe, Herder, Schiller . . . and others. (*Pnin*, 135 [ch. 5])

Nabokov himself lost dear Jewish friends in the Holocaust. Nabokov's brother, Sergei, although he was not Jewish, "died of inanition" in a Hamburg concentration camp in 1945 (*SM*, 258 [ch. 13]). Right after the war, Nabokov wrote to Rozoff that Germany would have to be "reduced to ashes several times over in order to quench [his] hatred of it, whenever [he thought] of those who perished in Poland."²⁶ In the 1970s Nabokov spoke of making a further "statement" about the Nazi concentration camps: "There is a sense of responsibility about this theme which I think I will tackle one day. I will go to German camps and *look* at those places and write a *terrible* indictment . . ."²⁷

Much of Judaic belief was subject to re-evaluation by the Holocaust and the spiritual emptiness that it created. Jobian questions were being asked by Jewish thinkers after World War II. How does one make sense of God's omnipotence and goodness in view of a collective catastrophe resulting in the deaths of six million Jews? How can suffering of the righteous be explained and furthermore justified? What was the collective destiny of the Holocaust martyrs following their physical annihilation by the Nazis? What were the individual destinies of the loved ones the Jews lost in gas chambers? The daunting task of contemporary Judaism has been to reconcile Jewish philosophy of the afterlife and the incomprehensible reality of the Holocaust. Just as many a Jewish thinker after World War II, Timofey Pnin is skeptical of the existence and authority of an omnipotent and beneficent God. How can he go on living after what was permitted to happen during the Holocaust? How can he hope

for personal immortality when six million innocent people have disappeared, and no one seems to be able to explain their disappearance in either metaphysical or ethical terms?

And yet, however spasmodic, memories of Mira's death help Pnin intuit a model of post-mortem survival that validates his experience in a post-Holocaust world:

Pnin slowly walked under the solemn pines. The sky was dying. He did not believe in an autocratic God. He did believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts. The souls of the dead, perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended to the destinies of the quick. (*Pnin*, 136 [ch. 5])

CODA

How strikingly and seamlessly biography dovetails with fiction when Nabokov thinks and writes about the Jews! This essay has only begun to raise and formulate some of the questions regarding the place of Jewish history and Judaic thought in his artistic career. In place of a conclusion – and to situate Nabokov further in the modern debates on the Jewish question – I would like to travel back in time to June 23, 1945, when the *New Yorker* ran its first in a long series of Nabokov's short stories. Titled "Double Talk" and later renamed "Conversation Piece, 1945," this American story owed much to Nabokov's feuilletonistic Russian stories of the early 1930s. The main character, a Russian émigré writer like Nabokov, is haunted by a double. He visualizes his "disreputable namesake, complete from nickname to surname," as a "very White émigré, of the automatically reactionary type" (*Stories*, 587). During the years both spend in European exile, his ubiquitous anti-self causes Nabokov's protagonist much chagrin. At one point, the writer receives a recall notice that "in exasperated tones" demands that he return a copy of *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (*Stories*, 587). The horrible namesake represents everything that the protagonist is not – a vulgarian, an anti-Semite, a diehard reactionary – and he too ends up in the United States. Just as in a fairy-tale where a virtuous prince finds himself trapped in the domain of villainy, the protagonist mistakenly accepts an invitation, intended for his evil twin.

Set in a Boston apartment building with an elevator attendant "oddly resembling Richard Wagner," this abominable soirée showcases anti-Semitic types including a "Colonel Malikov or Melnikov,"

who complains of the way "the Jewish Bolsheviks used to treat the Russian people" and adores Stalin, as well as a Mrs. Mulberry who is shocked by an old Russian Jew prepared "to strangle with his own hands the very first German soldier he met" (*Stories*, 591, 593). The stellar guest is one Dr. Shoe, who calls himself "a German . . . of pure Bavarian stock, though a loyal citizen of this country" (*Stories*, 590). Dr. Shoe's talk might have passed for a genuine plea to help the Germany of poets, philosophers, and musicians brought to destruction by mad Adolf – and help the Americans did! – had the speaker not focused on the origins and perceptions of the Holocaust. Do not be misled: this propagandist "with sleek, dark hair and a glistening brow" (*Stories*, 589) never uses the term "Holocaust." Rather, he speaks of "German boys proudly entering some Polish or Russian town," expecting a welcome reception by the local population but seeing instead streets "lined with silent and motionless crowds of Jews, who glared at them with hatred and who insulted each passing soldier" (*Stories*, 592–93). Dr. Shoe explains that

at first [the Germans] tried to fight that hatred with patient explanations and little tokens of kindness. But the wall of hatred surrounding them only got thicker. Finally they were forced to imprison the leaders of the vicious and arrogant coalition. What else could they do? (*Stories*, 593)

Dr. Shoe's malicious lies strike home among those present. A "stout woman who sat with her knees wide apart" exclaims that "any sensitive person will agree with what you say about [the Germans] not being responsible for those so-called atrocities, most of which have probably been invented by the Jews" (*Stories*, 593). Enchanted by the reception he receives among the Anglo-Saxon intelligentsia, Dr. Shoe attributes what the Americans heard about the Nazi concentration camps to "the workings of the vivid Semitic imagination which controls the American press," but also to what he labels "many purely sanitary measures which the orderly German troops had to adopt in dealing with the corpses" (*Stories*, 593). Dr. Shoe concludes his presentation by offering to play "The Star-Spangled Banner." At this point, the outnumbered and nauseated protagonist rushes out of the apartment. While this witty story continues to unravel, abundant as it is with metafictional delights, I would like to stop here in order to pay tribute to Nabokov's prophetic foresight. Writing brilliantly in an adopted language, Nabokov warns his post-war American readers, the Mrs. Halls and Mrs. Mulberries of the

story, about current (and perhaps future) attempts to falsify the history of the Holocaust. In fact, this is one of the earliest statement on the Holocaust in all of American fiction, and it sums up the discussions of anti-Semitism in his Russian works, including those in *The Gift*. Nabokov alerts all of us to the dangers of anti-Semitism, often dressed up and disguised by rhetoric that appeals to the cultured and the patriotic. Nabokov's verdict hits the nail on the head: anti-Semitism is fueled not only by hatred, but also by complacency. Before slamming the door on his way out, stammering with indignation, the Russian writer tells his hostess: "You are either murderers or fools . . . or both."

NOTES

I acknowledge the assistance of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies and the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation. I am grateful to Stanley J. Rabinowitz, Director, Amherst Center for Russian Culture, for permission to accede to and quote from Z. Shakhovskoy's papers. The only overview I know on the subject of Nabokov's Jewish theme is L. Kosman's brief article, "Vladimir Nabokov i evreistvo," *New American* 1.12 (1988): 47–48. Where a source of an English translation is not given, the translation is mine. Leona Toker considers Nabokov's treatment of the Holocaust in "'Signs and Symbols' In and Out of Context," in *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction*, ed. Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993), 167–80.

- 1 An incomplete catalogue of Jewish characters and topics includes: Klara in *Mary*; Dr. Weiner in "The Doorbell"; a decrepit Jewish chess genius in *The Defense*; Patkin and Iogolevich in *Glory*; a well-known member of the Black Hundreds in "Recruiting"; a mad old Jewish man in *Invitation to a Beheading*; Mr. Silbermann and Helene Grinstein in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; "a swarthy Russian girl in New York who was so troubled by the possibility of being mistaken for her notion of a Jewess that she used to wear a cross under her throat" ("Conversation Piece, 1945"; *Stories*, 589); the elderly Russian-Jewish couple in "Signs and Symbols"; Charlotte's friend John Farlow, who wrongly suspects Humbert Humbert of being Jewish (*Lolita*), and Humbert himself who envisions the Holocaust in his phantasmagorical dreams.
- 2 Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 27, 55, 101, 435, 539 n. 5.
- 3 See also Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 109–27.
- 4 Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 179; Field, *Nabokov*, 78.
- 5 Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 213.

- 6 See Zinaida Shakhovskaia [Shakhovskoy], *V poiskakh Nabokova* (Paris: La presse libre, 1979). See also Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 396–97; Dmitri Nabokov, "The *Lolita* Legacy: Life with Nabokov's Art," *The Nabokovian* 37 (Fall 1996): 14. 26–7.
- 7 N. Krivosheina to Zinaida Shakhovskaia, July 4 [n. d., approx. 1950s], letter in the Personal Papers of Zinaida and Dmitry Shakhovskoy at Amherst Center for Russian Culture, Amherst College, box 2, folder 14.
- 8 For a study of Nabokov's metaphysics, see Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton University Press, 1990).
- 9 See, for instance, Boyd's account of Nabokov's conversation with a Cornell professor of fine arts, Peter Kahn, about the iconography of Christian saints (Boyd, *The American Years*, 291).
- 10 For a recent investigation of Judaic models of postmortem survival, see Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994). See also "World To Come," Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 599–601; "Afterlife," Geoffrey Wygoder (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 31–32; Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1973), 301–22. Useful observations are also found in Jack Riemer (ed.), *Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995); see esp. ch. 11.
- 11 In a letter of January 21, 1942, Nabokov angrily ("ia tak zol") criticizes a novel by Aleksandra Tolstaia, published in *Novyi zhurnal* (The New Review), for its alleged anti-Semitism; see Andrei Chernyshev, "Kak redko teper' pishu po-russki . . .," *Oktiabr'* 1 (1996): 130–31.
- 12 Andrei Garf, "Literaturnye pelenki," *Novoe slovo*, March 20, 1938, 6–7.
- 13 Boyd, *The American Years*, 22.
- 14 Boyd, *The American Years*, 311, and Field, *Nabokov*, 20, 275. See also Andrew Field, *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Crown, 1986), 302–03.
- 15 Boyd, *The American Years*, 107.
- 16 Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 421, 521.
- 17 Boyd, *The American Years*, 528–83; Field, *Nabokov*, 226.
- 18 "To Sergei Rozoff," 1967, letter quoted by Yuri Zavyalov-Leving in "Samuel Izrailevich: Pnin's Character, Nabokov's Friend," *The Nabokovian* 39 (Fall 1997): 16; see also Boyd, *The American Years*, 583, 650. For details about Nabokov's unrealized trip to Israel, see Yuri Zavyalov-Leving, "Phantom in Jerusalem, or the History of an Unrealized Visit," *The Nabokovian* 37 (Fall 1996): 30–43.
- 19 Svetlana Malysheva has recently discovered that one of Nabokov's great-grandfathers was a Jewish convert to Christianity; see Svetlana Malysheva, "Praded Nabokova, pochetnyi chlen Kazanskogo universiteta," *Ekho vekov* (Kazan), 1/2 (1997): 131–35. I am grateful to Yuri Zavyalov-Leving (Jerusalem) for providing this information.

- 20 Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow: Pravda, 1990) III:381. (Hereafter *SSoch.*)
- 21 I am grateful to Olga Proskurina for pointing out that Pavel E. Shchyogolev (1877–1931) was a literary scholar and historian who attacked the Russian-Jewish literary historian Mikhail Gershenzon. Note also that in his capacity as the Russian Minister of Justice from 1906 to 1915, Ivan G. Shcheglovitov (1861–1918) was instrumental in introducing and implementing anti-Semitic policies; he was one of the architects of the Beilis trial.
- 22 My argument about the attitudes of Nabokov's non-Jewish characters to the Jews is based, here and elsewhere, on a psychological, anthropological and cultural model of the Self-Other dichotomy. I therefore deem it central to Pnin's experience with a Jewish beloved as well as with anti-Semitism that he is *not* Jewish; he is both a Slav and at least outwardly an Orthodox Christian. In her book, *Pnin: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), Galya Diment explores the connections between Pnin's character and his alleged prototype, the émigré historian Marc Szeftel, who was Jewish.
- 23 Gennadi Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 188.
- 24 See W. W. Rowe, *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), 62–67. Barabtarlo disagrees with Rowe's interpretations (see *Phantom of Fact*, 22). Incidentally, Nabokov's use of the squirrel image to evoke a soul or spirit might originate in *The Gift*, where Fyodor watches a squirrel climbing a park tree, experiences a heart sensation, then observes "a golden, stumpy little butterfly," another shadow of his father's psyche, and then realizes again that "his father was nonetheless dead" (*Gift*, 305 [ch. 5]).
- 25 Barabtarlo believes Mr. Shpolyanski is based on Rafail Abramovich Abramovich, a Menshevik leader (*Phantom of Fact*, 198). It is not unlikely that the name was suggested by the birth name of the émigré satirical poet Don-Aminado (1888–1957), Aminad Petrovich Shpolyanski.
- 26 "To Samuil Rozoff," 1945, letter quoted in Zavyalov-Leving, "Samuel Izrailevich."
- 27 Field, *VN*, 104.