

## Saving Jewish-Russian Émigrés

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I have previously argued for the centrality of Jewish characters, themes, and predicaments to Nabokov's biography and artistic vision.<sup>1</sup> *The Gift* (1937-38; complete ed. 1952) with its Jewish-Russian muse Zina Mertz and crypto-Jews the Chernyshevskys, and its anatomy of smug antisemitism, offers a rich body of Jewish and Judaic evidence; this evidence should be set against the backdrop of Jewish life in Russia Abroad and correlated with the rise of Nazism. The works of the 1920s and 1930s paved the way to Nabokov's post-Shoah English-language prose, in which the ethics and metaphysics of seeking redemption through—and in—art are measured by the immeasurable Jewish losses and weighed on the broken scales of history.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I wish to present further evidence for Nabokov's Jewish concerns and Judaic explorations by turning to his Russian stories.<sup>3</sup> At the heart of my inquiry lies one of the finest stories of the middle period, "Perfection" ("Sovershenstvo," June 1932), in which a Russian émigré tutor saves a Jewish-Russian boy.<sup>4</sup> The story was, reportedly, a "personal favorite" of Véra Nabokov.<sup>5</sup> In "Perfection," composed in Berlin less than two years before the birth of Nabokov's son Dmitri (10 May 1934), Nabokov already anticipates a horrific scenario of Jewish loss while charging his privileged representative Ivanov with the task of rescuing David not only from physical death but also from loss of a dual, Jewish-Russian identity.

In a brief note on "Perfection" in *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories* (1975), Nabokov wrote: "Although I did tutor boys in my years of expatriation, I disclaim any other resemblance between myself and Ivanov."<sup>6</sup> Scholars have identified Nabokov's Jewish tutees in Berlin and investigated possible parallels between Ivanov and his creator. Among Nabokov's Jewish tutees and charges were Aleksandr Zak, Sergei Kaplan, and Mikhail Gorlin;<sup>7</sup> each and all might have informed David's character. In August 1926 the Nabokovs accompanied three Bromberg children (ages 10-16) to the Baltic resort of Binz on the island of Rügen; the Brombergs were relatives of Véra Nabokov.<sup>8</sup> This is significant, but it is not what I am after.

What do we know about David's background and identity? He is a boy from an upper-middle class family living in Weimar Berlin. His mother, we assume, is Jewish-Russian. We are not sure about his father's background—whether he is an émigré like David's mother or a native of Germany; whether or not he is Jewish. In the Englished text, Nabokov added a clause about David's mother: "the Russian wife of a Berlin businessman" (*Sobranie* 3: 593; cf. *Stories* 340)<sup>9</sup>. David is described as being "fair-haired" (in the Russian it is even more deliberate, "belokuryi"), as having "pale-gray" eyes ("bledno-serye"), his appearance not corresponding to the phenotypical racial stereotype of a Levantine-looking Jew (*Sobranie* 3: 591, 594; *Stories* 338, 340). Furthermore, David is not portrayed as a stereotypical Jewish boy with a penchant for learning: he is not a good student, but a passionate athlete, a jock. We are told that at home David speaks predominantly German and refuses to speak Russian, even with his

mother: "He had been raised abroad and spoke Russian with difficulty and boredom" (*Stories* 340). Incidentally, the detail about David's having been "raised abroad" was also added in translation and actualized the possibility that David had been born in Russia and brought to Germany as a small child. Cultivating one's native language in children presents a real challenge to émigré parents. Note that while Ivanov is hired to tutor David in general school subjects, David's mother specifically charges him with working on the boy's Russian: "Above all, I want him to speak Russian more often" (*Stories* 341). David, who is already thoroughly Germanized, regards the Russian language (and the Russian cultural background, broadly speaking) as a useless commodity.

What place do the Judaic traditions and Jewish origins occupy in David's identity? David is Halakically Jewish, but is he receiving a Jewish upbringing? The task, with which David's mother charges Ivanov, concords with the general sense, that for the overloaded identities of many of the educated Jewish émigrés living in Europe in the interwar years (e.g., Russian, Jewish, and German or Russian, Jewish, and French), nurturing their children's Russian self-consciousness seemed a higher priority than cultivating a Jewish cultural self-awareness beyond a basic Jewish religious education. Ivanov takes his task very seriously as he speaks Russian to David and tries to interest him in viewing the world through Russian cultural lenses. In this regard, as a Russian émigré and Nabokov's idealized *intelligent*, Ivanov sees his mission as one of saving David's identity from losing its hyphenation. One could say that Ivanov seeks to prevent David from losing a kind of exalted, unblemished, all-encompassing Russianness that Ivanov himself valorizes in the story. But I would also argue that in trying to prevent David's loss of Russianness, Ivanov seeks to preserve David's unique Jewish-Russian identity, an identity in which Judaic religious, historical, and ethnic parameters coexist with Russian cultural and linguistic aspects of the self.

David's identity clamors for a historicist reading.<sup>10</sup> Written—and set—before the Nazi takeover of Germany, "Perfection" recorded a measure of Nabokov's brooding about the destiny of his yet unborn children in Germany, in a marriage to a Jewish-Russian woman. It is a little trickier, on the story's own terms, to situate David's identity—and Ivanov's rescue of his young Jewish charge David—on the axis of Jewish-Christian relations.<sup>11</sup> Yet "Perfection" contains highly emblematic references to "maps of medieval Christendom . . . with the paradisiacal Orient at the top and Jerusalem—the world's golden navel—in the center" (*Stories* 338) as well as to pilgrimages and journeys of Orthodox monks to the Holy Land. The fact of Ivanov's training as a geographer lends further validity to these references. Not only does mapping of the physical space in the story serve to detail Ivanov's pain, both physical and metaphysical.<sup>12</sup> The information he stores in his memory—a weighty baggage of an Orthodox Christian, a Russian, and an émigré—includes historical atlases of Christian Judeophobia.

The reader would benefit from considering the prospects of David's drowning and death *both* literally and allegorically. Nabokov describes Ivanov's state of mind as he lies in bed next to the sleeping David in the rented room they share at the Baltic resort:

. . . Ivanov thought vaguely of several matters at once, imagining among other things that the boy who slept in the bed next to his was his own son. Ten years before, in Serbia, the

only woman he had ever loved—another man's wife—had become pregnant by him. She suffered a miscarriage and died the next night, delirious and praying. He would have had a son, a little fellow about David's age. When in the morning David prepared to pull on his swimming trunks, Ivanov was touched by the way his café-au-lait tan . . . abruptly gave way to a childish whiteness below the waist." (*Stories* 343)

Nabokov projects his own not yet experienced, only imagined, fatherly feelings. Moreover, the pathos of Ivanov's displacedly genuine fatherly love is enmeshed with notes of homoerotic desire. I suspect Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) is a viable subtext here (despite Nabokov's stated dislike of the novella), and Ivanov's sacrifice has a literary antecedent in Von Aschenbach's efforts to save the Polish youth Tadzio. That different kinds of love and desire, and not just ideological, ethical, or religious convictions, move Ivanov to commit the act of sacrifice, should underscore the Nabokovian complexity of motivations behind Ivanov's mission. Nabokov even anticipates a survivor's guilt, something he would subsequently deem central to Timofey Pnin's mission in view of his own survival and of Mira Belochkin's martyrdom and death in Buchenwald. As Ivanov is drowning in the course of the rescue mission, pangs of guilt are intertwined with other thoughts, sentiments, images and associations rushing through his head: ". . . he felt so sorry for David's mother, and wondered what would he tell her. It is not my fault, I did all I could to save him, but I am a poor swimmer, and I have a bad heart, and he drowned" (*Stories* 346-47).

To reiterate, Nabokov charges his idealized, philosemitic Russian representative Ivanov with the mission of rescuing the Jewish boy David. The story's final scene of saving David models a rescue from the threat of total assimilation, from drowning and *going under* as a Jew. In this connection, the story's haunting, final sentence deserves a fresh look not only in metaphysical but also in historical, anticipatory terms. The story ends with the words: "a fisherman, squinting in the sun, was solemnly predicting that not until the ninth day would the waves surrender the corpse" (*Stories* 347; cf. *Sobranie* 3: 600-601). The corpse is presumably Ivanov's corpse, and ". . . tol'ko na deviatyi den'" ("not until the ninth day") suggests an Orthodox Christian reading: on the 3rd, 9th, and 40th day after death special commemorative prayers are offered for the departed.<sup>13</sup> But there is a Judaic interpretation that also comes to mind: "the ninth day" as hinting at the Ninth day of the month of Av, Tisha B'Av, the Jewish Holy Day which falls in July or August and commemorates the destruction of both the first and the second Temples (and also the razing of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the end of the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Romans). The Ninth of Av is a Jewish day of mourning, on which the Book of Lamentations is read. Nabokov's story "Perfection" could therefore be deemed a lamentation in anticipation of loss, and "the corpse" interpreted as the corpse of European Jewry. How many non-Jews would later act like the righteous Ivanov? How many Christians would be capable of Ivanov's self-sacrifice in trying to save the Jews from annihilation?

I now turn to Nabokov's story "Breaking the News" ("Opoveshchenie," March 1934), written in Berlin over a year after the Nazi takeover of Germany (January 1933) and a year and a half prior to the passage of the Nuremberg laws (September 1935). "Breaking the News" offers a stark contrast to both "Perfection" and to what Nabokov would attempt on a larger

scale in *The Gift*.<sup>14</sup>

In a circumspect note to "Breaking the News" in *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (1973), Nabokov wrote: "The milieu and the theme both correspond to those of 'Signs and Symbols,' written ten years later in English. . ."<sup>15</sup> This note throws a foot bridge from Nabokov's post-Shoah years back to his Berlin years, while shedding light on some of the adjustments and changes that were made in the English translation: the context was historicized, details were elucidated at the expense of the original's subtlety, but always to attain greater clarity of meaning and historical precision.<sup>16</sup> The emendations in the Englished text of "Breaking the News" included the following: Evgenia Isakovna's last name, "Mints," was added, and she was now called "an elderly émigré widow" (*Stories* 390). Also added was the last name "Vilner" which belongs to Vladimir Markovich, first husband of Ida, one of Evgenia Isakovna's intimates. In the Russian émigré context and especially in English translation, both names, Mints and Vilner, augment the fact of their bearers' Jewishness. Not only Evgenia Isakovna, the Jewish-Russian widow who loses her twenty-three-year old son (in English he is "not yet thirty"; *Stories* 391), but her entire social circle in the story are marked as Russian Jews.<sup>17</sup>

More importantly, the time of the story's events was specified in the Englished text: March 1935. The Russian original had been finished and published in 1934, but in translation Nabokov post-factually corrected the time in the story (or should we say, *historically* recalibrated the time of the events). Why? I believe Nabokov specified the month and year to make it unequivocally clear that the story was set in Nazi Germany. The choice of the date was particularly significant because in March 1935 Nazi Germany began to pull out of the Treaty of Versailles; on March 10, 1935 Goering announced that Germany was creating a military air force, and on March 16, 1935 Hitler renounced the Treaty. Moreover, although the antisemitic Nuremberg Laws were not announced until September 15, 1935, in the spring of 1935 they were already in the works.

The story is about informing an "ideally deaf" (*Stories* 392) lady that her son had died.<sup>18</sup> We know that he was Evgenia Isakovna's only son, his name was Misha, and he was working for some émigré firm or business based in Paris.<sup>19</sup> We do not know the exact circumstances of his death: "the poor young man had fallen into an elevator shaft from the top floor, and had remained in agony for forty minutes; although unconscious, he kept moaning horribly and uninterruptedly, till the very end" (*Stories* 390). We cannot exclude suicide as a cause of the Jewish young man's death.

When Evgenia Ivanovna wishes to ignore someone or something, she disconnects her hearing aid. If Nabokov is indeed warning his Jewish-Russian émigré readers of an impending catastrophe (in translation, the word "uzhas" ["horror"] in Chernobylski's direct speech is rendered as "calamity"; *Stories* 391; cf. *Sobranie* 3: 611), then the deafness of Evgenia Isakovna, and especially her selective use of her hearing (aid), can be regarded as a parable. Jews—including Russian Jews—in Germany are not listening to or not hearing signs of the times. They need to get out while they can. They need to save themselves and their children. Instead, some of them chose to live in denial. Vladimir and Véra Nabokov were still living in Berlin at the time when Nabokov's fictional story took place there, and they stayed in Nazi

Germany with their Jewish son until the spring of 1937. Were they, too, ignoring the agonistic warnings on the walls of history?

Various snippets of information add up to evoke a historically haunting atmosphere. The name of the messenger, Chernobylski, signals something ominous and terrifying. The story was composed long before the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, but only a few years before the Shoah. Nabokov's émigré readers would have been likely to take immediate stock of two things in Chernobylski's name: the location of this town of Chernobyl in the former Pale of Settlement and, more importantly, the idea of *chernaiia byl'*, a darkly embellished (fictionalized) tale.<sup>20</sup>

In closing, I would like to return for a moment to the story's comparison with *The Gift*. In the novel, set in the 1920s in Weimar Berlin, a Jewish-Russian young man by the name of Yasha Chernyshevsky does take his life, but the novel's salvatorium of memory and the radiant literary future of its protagonist Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev give hope of Yasha's (fictional) immortality. In "Breaking the News," both set and written in the historical context of Nazi Germany, Nabokov can no longer shield his artistic world or even protect Jewish-Russian parents from losing their children. He must find a way of being both a merciful fictionist and a messenger of merciless history.

## Notes

This paper was presented at the International Nabokov Conference in Kyoto, Japan, 26 March 2010. A very early version of a section of this paper was read, under the title "Rescuing a Jewish-Russian Boy: Nabokov's Stories in Anticipation of Catastrophe," at the International Nabokov Conference at the Nabokov Museum, St. Petersburg, 25 June 2009. I would like to thank the organizers of both conferences for having given me a chance to participate. I would like to thank Shoko Miura, Akiko Nakata, and Tadashi Wakashima for their superb editorial work.

1 Maxim D. Shroyer/Maksim D. Shraer, "Death, Immortality, and Nabokov's Jewish Theme," *The Nabokovian* 38 (Spring 1997): 17-25; "Souls of the Dead": Reflections on Nabokov's Jewish Theme, *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (ISSEI)* [CDROM], ed. Frank Brinkhuis and Sascha Talmor, Utrecht/Cambridge: University for Humanist Studies/MIT Press, 1998; "Jewish Questions in Nabokov's Art and Life," *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 73-91; "Evreiskie voprosy v zhizni i tvorchestve Nabokova," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 43 (1999): 109-28; "Evreiskie voprosy v zhizni i tvorchestve Nabokova," Maksim D. Shraer, *Nabokov: temy i variatsii*, trans. Vera Polishchuk with the author (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 250-71, 344-46; Iurii [Yuri] Leving, Maxim D. Shroyer, "'V svoikh knigakh vy prodolzhaete okunat'sia v ledianuiu glubinu': Neizvestnoe pis'mo 1936 g S.I. Rozova V.V. Nabokovu," *Solnechnoe spletenie* 16-17 (2001): 199-205; modified version reprinted in *From the Other Shore* 1 (2001): 39-46; "Nabokov, evreiskii vopros i zhurnal 'Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie,'" *Zembla* (September 2001), <http://libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/shranlo.htm>, reprinted as "O nevyiachivaniu piatogo punkta," *Kuritsyn Weekly* (2001), <http://www.guelman.ru/slava/texts/shraer.htm>; "Interlude: Literature Is Love," Maxim D. Shroyer, *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 178-85.

Scholars and critics who have written about Jewish themes and/or questions in Nabokov include: Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., *The Annotated Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov (1970; New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 372, 435-36, 448; L. Kosman, "Vladimir Nabokov i evreistvo," *New American/Novyi amerikanets* 1.12 (1988): 47-48; Leona Toker, "'Signs and Symbols' in and out of Contexts," *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction*, eds. Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993), 167-80; Douglas Anderson, "Nabokov's Genocidal and Nuclear Holocausts in *Lolita*," *Mosaic*

29.2 (1996): 73-90; Yuri Leving, "Phantom in Jerusalem, or the History of an Unrealized Visit," *The Nabokovian* 37 (Fall 1996): 30-44 [as Yuri Zavyalov-Leving]; "Nabokov v Ierualime (Istoriia nesostoia-vshegosia vizita)" *Jews and Slavs*, eds. Wolf Moskovich et al., vol. 6 (Jerusalem-Ljubljana, 1999), 373-388; "Samuel Izrailevich: Pnin's Character, Nabokov's Friend," *The Nabokovian* 39 (Fall 1997): 13-17 [as Yuri Zavyalov-Leving]; "Tenishevtsy Vladimir Nabokov, Osip Mandel'shtam, Samuil Rozov: peresecheniia," *Russkoe evreistvo v zarubezh'e*, ed. M. Parkhomovskii, vol. 1 (VI), 142-62; "Nabokov, kotoryi riadom (Pis'ma k S. I. Rozovu: 1945-1976)," *Ierusalimskii zhurnal* 2 (1999): 142-60; (1996; 1997; 1999); Galya Diment, *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeffel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Svetlana Malysheva, "Praded Nabokova, pochetnyi chlen kazanskogo universiteta," *Ekho vekov [Kazan']* 1/2 (1997): 31-134; Tomas Urban, *Nabokov v Berline*, trans. S. V. Rozhnovskii (Moscow: Agraf, 2004; this is a translation of Thomas Urban, *Vladimir Nabokov—Blaue Abende in Berlin*, 1999); Savely Senderovich and Elena Shvarts, "Starichok iz evreev," *Russian Literature* 3.43 (1998): 297-328; Senderovich and Shvarts, "Nabokovskii paradoks o evree," *Paradoksy russkoi literatury: sbornik statei* 3 (St. Petersburg: Inapress, 2001): 299-317; Anna Brodsky, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and the Post-War Émigré Consciousness," *Kul'tura russkoi diaspori: Vladmir Nabokov—100*, eds. Irina Belobrov'tseva et al. (Tallinn: TPÜ Kirjastus, 2000), 371-90; Brodsky, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and the Postwar Émigré Consciousness," *Realms of Exile: Nomadism, Diasporas, and Eastern European Voices*, ed. Domnica Radulescu (Lenham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 49-66; Adrian Curtin and Maxim D. Shryer, "Netting the Butterfly Man: The Significance of Vladimir Nabokov in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*," *Religion and the Arts*, 9.3-4 (2005): 258-83; Tim Conley, "History and Denial in Nabokov's 'Conversation Piece, 1945,'" *Journal of the Short Story in English* 45 (Autumn 2005): 113-21 (2005); Shalom Goldman, "'Nabokov's Minyan': A Study in Philo-Semitism," *Modern Judaism* 25.1 (2005): 1-22 [judging by this article, Goldman is not sufficiently familiar with Nabokov scholarship—M.D.S.]; Leland de la Durantaye, "Eichmann, Empathy, and *Lolita*," *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006): 311-28.

In his two-volume biography, Brian Boyd supplies many facts illuminating the subject of Nabokov's Jewish interests and intersections. See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). In her biography of Véra Nabokov (née Slonim), Stacy Schiff provides useful factual information about the Jewish background of Nabokov's wife. See Schiff, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

On several occasions, Nabokov's Jewish characters and motifs and Nabokov's treatment of antisemitism have been the subject of discussion by the participants of NABOKV-L, the electronic Vladimir Nabokov Forum. I acknowledge the contributions by Earl Samson, Galya Diment, Dmitri Nabokov, Rodney Welch, Charles Nicol, Ryan Asmussen, Joshua Roberts, Christine Cavitt, Silvia Weiser Wendel (all in March-April 1997); Anthony Stadlen, Alexander Dolinin, and Yuri Leving (all in December 2004); Andrea Pitzer (June 2009). Examples of secondary or episodic Jewish characters—and of Jewish and Judaic allusions—in Nabokov's fiction and non-fiction are striking and numerous, and it will require a separate forum to catalogue all of them.

2 I am most grateful to Andrei Babikov for having reminded me that the motif of saving Jewish-Russian émigrés appears in the opening of Nabokov's wartime *Paris Poem (Parizhskaia poema, 1943)*, where the poet speaks of offering a "wing to Nikanor/ Abraham, Vladimir, Lev, Seraphim."

3 Unless noted otherwise, I quote Nabokov's Russian texts from: Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochine-nii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 5 vols. ed. Aleksandr Dolinin (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 1999-2001); hereafter *Sobranie*. The texts of Nabokov's English short stories are quoted from: Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Vintage International, 1997); hereafter *Stories*. Where the source of English translation is not given, it is my own literal translation.

4 Echoing Vladislav Khodasevich, Andrew Field pointed out that "if 'Castle, Cloud, Lake' is an afterword to *Invitation*, 'Perfection' is probably its foreword." See Andrew Field, *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 150. In their intriguing study of what they termed "nabokovskii paradoks o evree" (sic., "Nabokov's paradox about the Jew"), Senderovich and Shvarts speculated in 2001 that in "Perfection" Nabokov engages theories of both Viacheslav Ivanov and Nikolai Evreinov in playing out ("razygrana") the "collision" of young David and his tutor Ivanov.

5 See Field, *VN*, 150.

6 Quoted in *Stories*, 648. Gavriel Shapiro has suggested that "the mention of 'the Paradisian Orient' (*Stories* 338) in the description of medieval maps in the story 'Perfection' can be seen as a subtle manifes-

tation of the authorial presence." See Shapiro, "Setting His Myriad Faces in the Text: Nabokov's Authorial Presence Revisited," Connolly, ed. *Nabokov and His Fiction*, 21. Note that Nabokov chooses a most deliberately "common" Russian last name for his idealized protagonist. The stress is traditionally placed on the final syllable, "Ivanóv," when nothing distinguishes its bearer, and to stress on the second syllabus, "Ivánov," when the bearer of the last name has noble origins or possesses historical or cultural significance.

7 Mikhail Gorlin (1909-1943), poet, literary scholar, husband of the poet Raisa Blokh (1899-1943). Blokh's junior by ten years, Gorlin emigrated from St. Petersburg with his family in 1918. In 1933 Gorlin defended a dissertation, "Gogol and E.T.A. Hoffmann," under the distinguished Slavist Max Vasmer. Gorlin published original German poetry, which exhibited Jewish themes. The poetry of Blokh and Gorlin, who were known as "a pair of doves" in emigration, exhibited signs of cross-fertilization. Reviewing Blokh's collection *Moi gorod (My City)*, 1928) in Berlin's daily *Rul' (The Rudder)*, Nabokov wrote: "Thus in the end all this [poetry]—golden, lite, and slightly permeated with [Anna] Akhmatova's cold perfume (something almost unavoidable in women's poetry)—may give the indiscriminating reader the impression of something pleasant, simple, birdlike" (*Rul'*, 7 March 1928; *Sobranie*, vol. 2:653. For details of Nabokov's reviews of émigré women authors, see Shraer, "Byl li Nabokov literaturnym zhenonenavistnikom?" trans. Vera Polishchuk, *Revue des Études Slaves* 72.3-4 [2000]: 531-40). The Gorlins left Germany in 1933, settling in Paris, and were married in 1935. Blokh's second collection, *Tishina: stikhi, 1928-1934 (Quietude: Poems, 1928-1934)*, 1935), was well received. In 1939 Blokh's poems appeared in the volume *Zavety: stikhotvoreniia (Testaments: Poems)* along with poems by the medievalist Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882-1957). Following the occupation, Gorlin was arrested by the Nazis in May 1941; he was subsequently transferred to Silesian salt mines and died there in 1943. The Gorlins' six-year-old daughter, Dora, died in 1942. Living under an assumed name, Blokh attempted to cross the Swiss border in November 1943 but was returned by the Swiss border guards to the Nazis. Blokh was sent to the Drancy concentration camp and deported to a camp in Germany in 1943. The exact circumstances of Blokh's death are unknown. Nabokov, who had known both Blokh and Gorlin in Berlin, later apparently regretted the harshness of his review. I have suggested elsewhere that Nabokov's remorse might have led him to the discovery of the character of Mira Belochkin, possibly a composite image of Raisa Blokh and Myrrha Lot-Borodine in the novel *Pnin* (1957), where Mira's death in Buchenwald gives the novel's non-Jewish protagonist, Timofey Pnin, reasons to live and remember. See Shraer, *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry, 1801-2001*, vol. 1 (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 462-63.

8 See Yuri Leving's commentary on "Perfection" in Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 801. See also Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 242-43; 254; 262.

9 Both "Perfection" and "Breaking the News," along with the vast majority of Nabokov's Russian short stories, were Englished by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with his father.

10 I touched on the subject of Nabokov and New Historicism in the preface to my *Nabokov: Temy i variatsii*; see "Predislovie avtora," 11-15.

11 In sketching a portrait of a not-so-stereotypical Jewish-Russian boy living in Weimar Berlin, Nabokov chose the name David adroitly. In terms of biblical mythopoetics, one thinks of the future King David performing before the melancholy King Saul; an athletic and naïve lad, the future king is yet innocent of his anointed path and his great Jewish mission. Note also that the name David travels with Nabokov across the Atlantic to find itself in his first American novel *Bend Sinister*, where Adam Krug's son is called "David."

12 I have discussed the significance of Nabokov's use of mapping in representing Ivanov's heart pain and emotional condition; see Shraer, *The World of Nabokov's Stories* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 81-86.

13 There are various patristic explanations of the meaning and significance of these dates. According to an Eastern theologian, "At the third day, it [the soul] begins its ascent through these aerial tollhouses, being tested by the various legions of demonic spirits. This is what Saint John of Damascus refers to when he speaks of the 'princes of the air' and the 'frightful testing'. Until the ninth day, the soul is given a glimpse of the beauty of Paradise prepared for those who loved and served the Lord. At the ninth day, the Orthodox Church holds a special commemoration for the soul, as it is from this time forth until the fortieth day that the soul sees the torments of Hell, this is the 'eternal condemnation' to which Saint John of Damascus refers. At the fortieth day, the judgment is complete, the soul has either a foretaste of

Heaven (its fulfillment in the Second Coming of Christ) or a foretaste of Hell." See Hieromonk Dionysios, "State of the Soul after Death according to the Teachings of Saint John Damascene," <http://stmichaelacademy.org/theo/stjd.htm>, accessed 20 September 2009.

14 Interestingly, Nabokov indicates some genetic or thematic or historical connection between "Breaking the News" and *Invitation to a Beheading*. In the story "Cloud, Castle, Lake," the title of the novel, "priglasenie na kazn'" ("invitation to a beheading") is present directly in the text. In "Breaking the News," the word "kazn'" also appears as Evgenia Isakovna's friends enter her room to break the news of her son's death: "Seichas nachnetsia kazn'" ("Now the execution would start"; *Sobranie* vol. 3, 614; *Stories* 394).

15 Quoted in *Stories* 650.

16 These emendations are consistent with the kinds of changes Nabokov made in his Berlin stories as he began to English them in the 1940s. On Nabokov's collaboration with Peter A. Pertzoff and his revisions in the course of Englishing his stories, see Shroyer, "After Rapture and Recapture: Transformations in the Drafts of Nabokov's Stories," *The Russian Review*, 58 (October 1999): 548-64; Shroyer, "Nabokov: Letters to the American Translator," *Agni* 50 (October 1999): 128-45. In his 2010 Kyoto conference presentation, "Nabokov's 'Natural Idiom': From 'First-rate' Russian to 'Second-rate' English," Shun'ichiro Akikusa touched on the Englishing of "Breaking the News."

17 "Ida Samoilovna" and her sister; "the Shufs"; "Lipshteyn with his mother"; "the Orshanskis"; "Madame Tomkin"; and the bearer of the news himself, "Boris Lvovich Chernobylski." Yet members of this Jewish-Russian émigré "milieu" (Nabokov's own term from the postwar American years) are nowhere identified directly as Jews in the story. In the original Russian text this would have been odd and superfluous; in the translation Nabokov and his translator resorted to additional markings of Jewish last names, but not to a transparent clarification of the characters' origins.

18 In his commentary, Yuri Leving proposes that the breaking of the news corresponds with the notification Nabokov received from his father's friend Iosif Gessen following V. D. Nabokov's murder in 1922. Then "Breaking the News" might reverse—as previously in the case of the story "Rozhdestvo" ("Christmas")—the son's drama of losing a parent.

19 Is it a real business or an engagement with the story's creator, along the lines of the authorial firm employing Vassily Ivanovich in "Cloud, Castle, Lake" (1937)?

20 This would not be Nabokov without a compulsion to engage in verbal games even under seemingly inappropriate thematic circumstances. Why is it that Nabokov is verbally signaling "Ides of March" (March 15th, a Roman festive day) in the story? We find partial anagrams and puns of *martovskie idy*: "Ida Samoilovna" and her first husband, "Vladimir Markovich Vilner"; "Ida" Samoilovna and her sister are coming over to see Evgenia Isakovna. Also, if one deliberately looks for these things, one finds the racial antisemitic slur *zhid* ("Yid"; "Kike") in "zhidkikh sedykh volosakh" ("sparse gray hair"; *Sobranie* vol 3, 611; *Stories*, 391) of Chernobylski's wife, or in *parsh* (related to *parkh*, as in *parkhatyi*, another commonly used Russian antisemitic sobriquet—cf. *zhid parkhatyi*) in "parshivyi Parizh" ("lousy Paris"; *Sobranie* vol 3, 611; *Stories*, 391), as Chernobylski refers to the city where the young man's life ends. I suspect that these verbal traces of anti-Jewish prejudice serve to underline, on a subterranean level, that Nabokov's émigré Russian Jews could not help but live out the legacy of Russian antisemitism. Are Nabokov's pages strewn—or littered—with what in *The Gift* Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev calls "rot" (antisemitic expressions or innuendos of Zina's stepfather) so as to suggest to the reader that Jewish characters literally trod on signs of prejudice? This working hypothesis finds some common ground with Eric Naiman's exploration of Nabokov's use of erotic and sexual wordplay in *Pnin* (see Naiman, "Perversion in *Pnin* (Reading Nabokov Preposterously)," *Nabokov Studies* 7 (2002/2003): 89-117. The last name Chernobylsky might also point to M. Cherbobylsky, who was implicated as one of the possible accomplices of the defendant, M.-M. Beilis, at the infamous Beilis Trial of 1913. I am grateful to Yuri Leving for having drawn my attention to the fact that Nabokov's father V. D. Nabokov, a prominent jurist and politician and a major advocate for Jewish equality in czarist Russia, mentioned Chernobylsky in his comparative article "Dva obvinitel'nykh akta" ("Two Bills of Indictment") published in the Russian law review *Pravo* 47 (1913).

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Edited by  
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Tadashi Wakashima

The Nabokov Society of Japan

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