



Sergey Nabokov (1918)

From Ellendea Proffer (ed.):
Vladimir Nabokov: A Pictorial Biography
Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1991

What Happened to Sergey Nabokov

© by Dieter E. Zimmer¹

October 10, 2015 / Last revision January 2, 2017

What should people say about you when you are dead?
The truth.
And if the truth is not to be had?
Nothing contradicted by the poor facts that are known.

EVER SINCE Lev Grossman's pioneering essay on "The gay Nabokov,"² published 2000 in the Internet journal *Salon*, quite a bit of attention has been focused on Vladimir Nabokov's (VN) younger brother Sergey. He is special among VN's brothers and sisters. To Grossman, Sergey makes obvious a blemish on VN's

¹ I am indebted to Brian Boyd and Gennady Barabtarlo for thoughtfully "peer-reviewing" this article. Whatever faults or rash conclusions may remain of course are mine alone.

² Lev Grossman: "The gay Nabokov", in *Salon*, San Francisco, CA, 17 May 2000, http://www.salon.com/2000/05/17/nabokov_5/

reputation, a "dirty secret," to wit his "confirmed homophobia."³ A British newspaper article about Grossman's essay even hurriedly proclaimed Sergey the "key to Lolita author."⁴

So how much had Sergey suffered from VN's alleged haughtiness, from his neglect or from his negative attitude towards homosexuality? Are there traces of VN's putative remorse and pity in his works? Is it the key to VN's writing? Sergey's homosexuality, his terrible death and the strained relationship between the two brothers have spurred the imagination and made of Sergey something like a model victim of homophobia. Even a full-size novel has been written about his life and his relationship to VN, inextricably mixing fact and fiction,⁵ plus a sort of well-informed spoof of an imaginary biography.⁶

Still, information on Sergey is scarce, and the little information that can be gleaned from various sources is contradictory even as to the basic facts of his life. If we superimpose the patches of information we have been given, the picture becomes unsettlingly blurred.

This is an example chosen at random, a summary of Sergey's last years from Daniela Rippl's pictorial VN biography: "As early as 1943, Sergey had been

³ In my humble opinion, 'homophobia' even is too crass a word. Confirmed germanophobia, sovietophobia, freudophobia, all right – but homophobia? It is true that VN personally did not like homosexuals and felt uneasy in their presence, but he never manifested anything like fear or hatred. I believe that what matters is what you do, not what you feel. We should not take ourselves to task for our personal feelings about other people but only for discriminative action, and for advocating discrimination. We all have our personal likes and dislikes and will probably stick to them, no matter if they seem ethically or socially or politically desirable to this or that majority or minority. Censuring ourselves for saying "I dislike such-and-such" would infest public speech with bigotry. If one compares VN's frequent mild mockery complemented by his fervent admiration for homosexual writers like Marcel Proust or A.E. Housman with true homophobia as it was practiced in his lifetime and still is in many countries, this "phobia" of his loses its pseudo-psychiatric stain. VN certainly never wanted homosexuals driven into hiding, persecuted and jailed. Sergey and he were so different in many respects besides sexual orientation that their distanced relation might have been much the same if Sergey had not been gay.

⁴ Vanessa Thorpe: "Gay brother 'is key to Lolita author'", *The Guardian*, 21 May 2000.

⁵ Paul Russell: *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 2012.

⁶ *The Real Life of Sergey Nabokov*, Snark 24/7, www.snarke.com/2009/11/real-life-of-sergey-nabokov.html.

arrested in Berlin for being gay. Five months later, the endeavors of a relative led to his release; Sergey went to Prague, working in a Russian office and hiding his contempt for Hitler and the Germans so little that they accused him of being a British spy and arrested him once more. Thereupon he was taken to Neuengamme."⁷ Three sentences, six outright errors, gleaned from various unreliable sources.

So much is certain: Sergey died in 1945 in the concentration camp of Neuengamme. But did he die on January 9 or 10? Or for that matter: was he born on February 28 or on March 12 or 13, 1900? From what did he die? When and where was he arrested? Once or twice? In Paris, Austria, Prague or Berlin? Why? Because he was homosexual or for political reasons or for something else? Where and when was he detained and by whom? Why had he gone to wartime Berlin just when many wanted to get away from it? Where did he work? Was he a Nazi propagandist? Did he try to help an RAF man or a former British friend? When and how did VN hear of his death? Did his brother's fate influence the writing of *Bend Sinister* and some of his subsequent works?

So many questions. This article attempts to answer positively the most fundamental ones. I have searched in the literature, in historical archives, in gazetteers, in published letters and testimonies, in parish offices. To evaluate the evidence, I have found it useful to divide the sources into three categories. One group is made up of primary direct evidence: police records, letters and reports from persons who knew Sergey at the time and witnessed what happened to him. The second group consists of indirect primary evidence: uncontested historical facts about his times and places. The third group I will lump together as secondary evidence. I could also give it simpler name: hearsay or fantasy, no matter how well-meaning. VN himself had no first-hand knowledge of Sergey's Berlin years, and he obviously was told different stories, some true, some untrue. He cannot count as a primary source.

⁷ Daniela Rippl: *Vladimir Nabokov – Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*, Berlin: Alexander Fest, 1998, p. 131.

Sergey was born on February 28, 1900, nine months and 18 days after Vladimir. Unlike his brother, he never changed his birthday from the Old Style (the Julian Calendar used in Russia until 1918) to the New Style (the Gregorian Calendar as used in the rest of Europe since 1582). Some sources insist his birthday was March 12, including the Russian Wikipedia. How can we know which is the right date? As "February 28" is the date given in Sergey's death certificate and in all the police records, it must be the one that was in his ID documents and that he himself used. But nowhere there is a hint as to the calendar style used, and this makes it puzzling. If Sergey had himself converted his O.S. birthday to the N.S., his O.S. birthday would have been twelve days earlier, February 16. If he had not, his N.S. birthday would have been twelve (some maintain thirteen) days later, March 12 or 13.⁸ So we are awkwardly left with four dates to choose from. The puzzle is elegantly solved by a sentence in VN's *Speak, Memory*: "My brother and I were born in St. Petersburg, the capital of Imperial Russia, he in the middle of March, 1900, and I eleven months earlier."⁹ So only two dates remain: February 28 as given by Sergey and "middle of March" as stated by VN. The earlier date must be the O.S. one. Hence this paragraph should have begun: Sergey Nabokov was born on February 28 (O.S.), equal to March 12 (N.S.).¹⁰

Vladimir and Sergey had a joint childhood in Petersburg and on the mother's country estate of Vyra. They never were very close. Unequivocally, Vladimir was and remained his parents' darling, while Sergey was the disadvantaged younger brother who may have had to fight for what attention he could get. "He was not

⁸ To convert O. S. dates into N. S., 12 days are added throughout the 19th century and 13 in the 20th century. But what about the year 1900? Generally it is considered the last year of the 19th century, but some take it to be the first of the 20th. That's why two N. S. birthdays are in the offering, March 12 and 13. March 12 seems to be the preferred form of conversion.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov: *Speak, Memory* (1966), New York: Vintage, 1989, p. 153.

¹⁰ Daniel Sirguyev at the Vladimir Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg directed me to a more unequivocal quote. In the second (Russian) version of VN's memoir, *Drugie berega* (1954), the same sentence in Chapter 8, Section 1 reads: "I was born in St. Petersburg on April 10, 1899 (Old Style), my brother Sergey on February 28 the year after."

the favorite of his family", his sister Elena told Lev Grossman around 1999. In his memoir *Speak, Memory*, VN recounts some of his adventures with Sergey. Particularly memorable were three episodes, curiously all involving flights: how the two little boys in Wiesbaden ran away to board a Rhine steamer, how one winter night in Vyra they ran away with a sledge and a dog into a wilderness of snow, how in 1917 they escaped the revolutionary events in Petrograd on the Simferopol Express via Moscow to the Crimea and how Sergey very aptly defended their train compartment against intruders by mimicking a severe case of typhoid fever.

One serious rift occurred in 1915 when Vladimir by accident (was it an accident? did Sergey want to out himself?) found a page of Sergey's diary on his desk and showed it to their tutor who promptly informed V.D. Nabokov. It confirmed what his parents had suspected: that Sergey had homosexual inclinations. Because of them, he was forced to leave Tenishev School which Vladimir attended to the end and to continue his education at the Third (classical) Gymnasium his father had attended. During the Bolshevik coup d'état, the family fled to the Crimea in 1917 and, via Constantinople, on to London in 1919. Vladimir went to Cambridge, Trinity College, Sergey to Oxford, but after only one semester also changed to Cambridge, Christ College. In 1920, the family moved to Berlin, then the center of the large émigré community in Western Europe. After the assassination of V.D. Nabokov in March 1922 and after Vladimir and Sergey had finished their studies, Vladimir returned to Berlin to be with his widowed mother and because the city had become the undisputed center of émigré literary culture and publishing. But even when in the fall of 1923 his mother with her other children moved to Prague where she was promised a small pension and when after the end of the hyperinflation Berlin became as expensive as other European capitals and its large émigré community began to disperse, shifting the center to Paris, Vladimir stayed on in Berlin, exactly because he did not care for it and knew very little German, for as a budding poet he did not want to spoil his Russian by the intrusion of a foreign every-day language.

Sergey instead went to Paris where he supported himself, like Vladimir in Berlin, by giving English and Russian lessons and writing an occasional concert review (possibly for *Poslednie novosti*, the Russian daily edited by Pavel Milyukov, the man for whose life V.D. Nabokov had given his own).

According to Sergey's cousin Marina Ledkovsky, writes Grossman, "Sergey was deeply kind, 'always a gentleman,' devoted to music but also steeped in Russian, French and English poetry – all languages that, along with German, he spoke fluently. 'He could recite anything by heart, and when he recited poetry, he would not stutter at all.' He was also himself a poet, in her opinion a good one, though none of his work survives. 'He was a very talented, brilliant man,' says Ledkovsky. 'If he were not so timid and shy, if he didn't feel so ... out of place, who knows? He might have been the equal of Vladimir.'"¹¹

Sergey was especially fond of music and ballet, and helped on by his outgoing cousin, the composer Nicolas Nabokov, with whom he had been friends¹² since their days on the Crimea, he may have mingled with some of the avant garde writers, painters and composers Paris was teeming with in the 1920s. But we know very little about what he did between 1923 and 1941 except what art historian Andreas Sternweiler summed up in *Goodbye to Berlin?*, a book on the gay movement: "Since 1923 he lived as a language teacher in Paris, for some time in an apartment shared with [painter and set designer] Pavel Tchelitchew [who on occasion worked for Diaghileff] and [his American partner, pianist] Allen Tanner. Through his articles he had access to theatrical and musical circles."¹³ Actually, says Nicolas Nabokov's biographer Vincent Giroud, Sergey only let Tchelitchew and Tanner stay in his tiny apartment on rue Copernic for a few weeks when they

¹¹ Lev Grossman: *ibid.*

¹² In his *Letters to Véra* (February 6, 1936), VN hinted that Nicolas was gay as in his youth he had a close relationship/ an affair with his long-time friend and sponsor Alexandre Grunelius. Nicolas' biographer Vincent Giroud assures us that he had many gay friends and at times lived a highly promiscuous life but always was "firmly heterosexual" (Vincent Giroud: *Nicolas Nabokov – A Life in Freedom and Music*, New York: Oxford UP, 2015, p. 120).

¹³ Andreas Sternweiler: *Goodbye to Berlin? 100 Jahre Schwulenbewegung*, Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1997, p. 189.

arrived in Paris in August 1923.¹⁴ In the mid-1920s, at lunchtime Nicolas often saw Sergey in the Café Select on Boulevard du Montparnasse ("which particularly attracted gay men"), grading papers or reading English papers and magazines.¹⁵ If it is true that he was grading papers, he will not just have given charitable private language lessons.

There is one strange close-up, though. In the summer of 1926, Sergey wrote a tormented letter to his mother in Prague. We know it because VN promptly copied it out for his wife.¹⁶ The letter explains that and why Sergey had converted to Roman Catholicism, following the lead of "the man I've linked my life with, the man I love more than anything in the world." He tells his mother that the two of them had been living together for some time before his conversion. Wanting "to kill the sin in me," Sergey explains, he will not share a room with him any longer, but they would "not separate in the full sense of the word." The letter sounds strangely enraptured and disturbed. In fact it sounds as if they were in the middle of a break-up and Sergey was seeking solace in a spell of intense religiosity.

Who was the man Sergey loved more than anything else in the world, the man he had linked his life with? I was not the only one to believe it was Sergey's long-time partner Hermann Thieme of Schloss Weissenstein. Why did I? Mainly because Grossman who was the first to identify him by surname ("after a great deal of research") seemed to possess an intimate knowledge of the two lovers that nobody else had, based on personal papers and interviews with relatives. One quote is from a letter Sergey wrote to his mother which, though not the same that VN copied for Véra, is very much similar in tone, minus the religious turmoil of June 1926: "It's all such a strange story, sometimes even I don't understand how it happened ... I'm just suffocating with happiness." It sounds as

¹⁴ Vincent Giroud: op.cit., p. 55.

¹⁵ Vincent Giroud: *ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov: *Letters to Véra*, transl. and ed. by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 76-78 (letter dated June 15, 1926).

if it had been about the same man. Nowhere did Grossman consider the possibility that Thieme had not been Sergey's first and only love.¹⁷

He wasn't. Paul Russell kindly alerted me to the recent research of the American painter Eric Karpeles, author of a book on the paintings in the oeuvre of Marcel Proust and working on a book on the Polish painter and author Józef Czapski [»Appendix 3, page 38]. Karpeles had learned that in 1926 not Hermann Thieme had been Sergey's lover but Czapski. In 1924, Czapski and several of his painter friends had come from Kraków to Paris. In a letter to Paul Russell, Eric Karpeles had written: "In 1924, Czapski met Sergey in Paris, fell in love with him, and the two men lived together over a period of two years in Chatillon, just outside the city limits. Like Nabokov, Czapski was from an aristocratic family, and had lived in St. Petersburg from 1909 until the revolution. Sergey introduced Czapski to his cousin Nicolas and the three men, with barely a sou among them, socialized together frequently. In the 50s, Czapski and Nicolas would work together on the Congress for Cultural Freedom ... He was an aristocrat and a Catholic. In his early nineties, he was interviewed by a Polish scholar who subsequently published a book in which many details of Czapski's personal life were revealed for the first time to a broad reading public.¹⁸ Many Poles were shocked, and dismissive, suggesting that the interviewer had taken advantage of an old man to construct a false portrait. But Czapski was no manipulated, defenseless elder. He was ready to

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the factual basis of Grossman's essay is sparse. He does not say when and where Thieme and Sergey met (except that it was "sometime in the late 20s or early 30s") nor when they retired to Schloss Weissenstein and where and when they were arrested. He obfuscates his sources and leaves the reader to guess that they may be interviews with VN's sister Elena Sikorski, his cousin Marina Ledkovsky and an elderly niece of Hermann's in Milan. He has only the vaguest idea of Sergey's life after his first arrest. He suggests he had access to Sergey's letters "which have never been translated or published." (One can only surmise that he had seen some of Sergey's letters to his mother which may be preserved at the Berg Collection of the New York Library. For the time being, they all are "sealed" and inaccessible.) In short, he writes as if from some unique vantage point but if you look at his essay warily, the picture he paints appears as suggestive as it is blurry, and there is nothing to prove or disprove that Thieme had been the subject of Sergey's anguished letter in 1926.

¹⁸ Józef Czapski/ Piotr Kłoczowski: *Świat w moich oczach* (The World Through My Eyes), Ząbki-Paris: Apostolicum/ Éditions du Dialogue, 2001.

go on the record. Polish Catholics abhor the idea of same sex relationships – much of the vitriol of the conservative right has shifted from anti-semitism (there are very few Jews left in Poland) to gay bashing. Czapski had lovers, both male and female. Sergey was his first affair. Having been himself a prisoner in a Soviet camp, he was well aware of what became of Sergey at Neuengamme."¹⁹

Was it really Czapski? Could Sergey not have separated from Czapski early in 1926 and been deeply involved in a new relationship by the time he told his mother about his spiritual and erotic troubles? Could be. But there is one inconspicuous point which suggests it indeed was Czapski. The German Wikipedia states that he had typhus in 1926 and afterwards went to London to recover. And in July, 1926, three weeks after copying out Sergey's strange letter to his mother, VN casually remarks, "Sergey's friend has typhus."²⁰ The disease gives him away.

Czapski sheds a new light on Sergey's puzzling letter. 1926 seems to have been a time of spiritual turmoil for some of the Russian and Polish artist friends in Paris. At one point a few of them got together in Nicolas Nabokov's apartment to bid farewell to one of them, Polish cartoonist and aristocrat Alexander Rzewuski as he was retiring to a Dominican monastery. Czapski was one of the friends present.²¹ Nicolas' biographer Vincent Giroud does not say if Sergey was involved in the spiritual crisis that seems to have been rife in this group of artists, but the spiritually disturbed letter to his mother proves that he was, and very much so. It seems to have been his love for Czapski that guided Sergey towards the Catholic church: "A moment came when I received a jolt *from without*. ... the man I love more than anything else in the world – had gone back to the church, i. e. he had

¹⁹ Quote endorsed by Eric Karpeles, pers. comm., November 28, 2015.

²⁰ Vladimir Nabokov: *Letters to Véra*, transl. and ed. by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 131 (letter dated July 7, 1926)

²¹ Vincent Giroud: *Nicolas Nabokov – A Life in Freedom and Music*, New York: Oxford UP, 2015, p. 65.

received the same jolt *from without*. Those were terrible days. I am becoming a *Catholic...*"²²

So Hermann Thieme²³ will have come in at a later point, some time between July, 1926 and April, 1932 when Sergey showed his older brother photos of him: "His boyfriend is a thickset, rather plump, forty-year-old man".²⁴ Thieme was the son of a wealthy Munich insurance banker, Carl von Thieme²⁵, co-founder of two of the largest insurance companies of the world, Munich RE and Allianz. In 1921, with his wife Else²⁶, he had bought a dilapidated 12th century castle in an Alpine village and restored it, Schloss Weissenstein, picturesquely sitting on top of a hill above Matrei, now in the Austrian state of East Tyrol.²⁷ Hermann did not bear a nobiliary "von," as his father had been knighted only in 1914 when Hermann was 24. He was ten years Sergey's senior. It seems certain that Hermann and Sergey for at least a decade often saw each other either at Schloss Weissenstein or in Paris. Money probably was not too much of a problem for Hermann, but it was for Sergey who eked out a living by giving language lessons. In November 1932, VN reluctantly met Hermann in Paris: "The husband, I must admit, is very pleasant, *quiet*, absolutely not the pederast type, with an attractive face and manner."²⁸

²² Vladimir Nabokov: *Letters to Véra*, op. cit., p.77.

²³ Hermann Thieme, born April 9, 1890 in Munich, died March 3, 1971 in Matrei, buried in Matrei.

²⁴ Vladimir Nabokov: *Letters to Véra*, transl. and ed. by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 185 (letter dated April 18, 1932).

²⁵ Carl Thieme, from 1914 Carl Ritter von Thieme, born April 13, 1844 in Erfurt, died October 10, 1924 in Munich, bought Schloss Weissenstein in Matrei/ Tyrol in 1921.

²⁶ Else von Thieme *née* von Witzleben, born September 6, 1861 in Daun/ Rhineland-Palatinate, died June 25, 1946 in Matrei, from 1924 to 1946 owner of Schloss Weissenstein.

²⁷ All Thieme family data courtesy of Silvia Trost at the Roman Catholic parish office in Matrei.

²⁸ Vladimir Nabokov: *Letters to Véra*, transl. and ed. by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 208 (letter dated 3 November, 1932).

Rather than speculate what Sergey's life was like in the 1920s and 30s, I would like to quote two witnesses who knew both Sergey and VN well and saw them regularly. The first one is composer Nicolas Nabokov (1903-1978): "Of my two older cousins, Vladimir and Sergey, in those Berlin years I was closer to Sergey. Sergey loved music and Vladimir did not. Rarely have I seen two brothers as different as Volodya and Seryozha. The older one, the writer and poet, was lean, dark, handsome, a sportsman, with a face resembling his mother's. Seryozha, although as lean in his angular way, and handsome, looked more like Babushka [grandmother Maria Ferdinandovna Nabokov née Korff]. He was not a sportsman. White-blond with a reddish tint to his face, he had an incurable stutter. But he was gay, a bit indolent, and highly sensitive (and therefore an easy butt for teasing sports). Sergey worshipped Wagner, whom at that time I did not care for [...] Fortunately Sergey and I agreed on Verdi, and went together to listen to his operas admirably sung in wretched German translations at the three Berlin opera houses. Sergey also knew a great deal about literature and history, and conversations with him were always interesting and profitable to me. Volodya always did everything with *une superbe sans égal*, and I was a bit scared of his awesome store of information [...]. But this did not keep me from becoming fond of cousin Vladimir soon after we first met in Yalta in the autumn of 1917. We remained friends, and not only because of the cousinage, throughout our migratory life."²⁹

The other witness is to be Elizabeth Lucie Léon Noel (1900-1972), journalist, fashion writer, critic, translator, married to Paul Léon, James Joyce's Paris secretary. VN enjoyed her (linguistic) help when he wanted to publish his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (which Grossman obscurely hints is about himself and Sergey, full of "uncanny references" like the 'S' of his first name that Sebastian shares with Sergey): "No brothers could have been less alike than Volodya and his brother Serge. At that time [the Cambridge-Oxford years], however, they went around together. Volodya was the young *homme du monde* –

²⁹ Nicolas Nabokov: *Bagázh -- Memoirs of a Russian Cosmopolitan*, New York: Atheneum, 1975, pp. 110-111.

handsome, romantic in looks, something of a snob and a gay charmer³⁰ – Serge was the dandy, an aesthete and balletomane. Volodya's conversation was gay and amusing and even when he was serious, there was a kind of lilt of laughter, a soupçon of malice at the back of his voice, as if we were relishing some private joke all his own. Serge was tall and very thin. He was very blond and his tow-colored hair usually fell in a lock over his left eye. He suffered from a serious speech impediment, a terrible stutter. Help would only confuse him, so one had to wait until he could say what was on his mind, and it was usually worth hearing. He was, amongst other things, a connoisseur of poetry, theater, and particularly ballet, and an asset in any salon or gathering. Usually he attended all the Diaghileff premieres wearing a flowing black theater cape and carrying a pommeled cane."³¹

Reading English papers in a café on Montparnasse, Diaghileff ballets, theater cape, pommeled cane, shuttling between Paris and a castle in Austria – all of this ended abruptly with the outbreak of the Second World War. At its outset, Vladimir Nabokov was in Paris. So was Sergey. Occasionally the brothers saw each other, "on quite amiable terms," says VN – "he often dropped in for a chat".³² After finally receiving the indispensable documents, on May 19, 1940, VN and his family hurriedly left France for the United States on one of the last boats available, the S/S Champlain, sailing from St. Nazaire to New York. He did not have the time to say goodbye to Sergey. "It so happened (he had been away for a while) that he learned of our departure only after we had left. My bleakest recollections are associated with Paris, and the relief of leaving it was overwhelming, but I am sorry he had to stutter his astonishment to an indifferent

³⁰ 'Gay' here does not yet mean 'homosexual.'

³¹ Lucie Léon Noel: "Playback," in *TriQuarterly*, 17, Winter 1970, p. 212.

³² Vladimir Nabokov: *Speak, Memory* (1967), New York: Vintage, 1989, p. 258.

concierge,"³³ VN wrote in the revised version of his memoir in what indeed seems to me a rather callous aside.

Sergey stayed behind, and things moved quickly. Two weeks later, on June 5, 1940, German troops invaded France. On June 14, they marched into Paris. On July 10, the Germans had the Vichy puppet regime fully installed. From now on, Sergey and his partner were trapped in the German orbit. Leaving it would now have been infinitely harder than it had been for VN who had found leaving France difficult enough. In Paris he had been Serge; now he was Sergej Nabokoff, stateless.³⁴

Some time afterwards, Sergey and Hermann must have decided they better retire from the uneasy situation in Nazi controlled Paris to quiet Schloss Weissenstein in Matri, owned by Hermann's widowed mother, Else von Thieme. The Nazis had been quick to export



Schloss Weissenstein at Matri/ East Tyrol (2011)

Photographer Gabriela Heimhofer

³³ Vladimir Nabokov, *ibid.*, p. 258.

³⁴ VN disliked the ending -off but used it himself in the 1920s and 30s until he finally rid himself of it in America. It never was the common German ending, though, but the regular French one. In France, Набоков became Nabokoff, in Germany Nabokow, in English speaking countries Nabokov.

their Stapo to what had been Austria. (The Stapo, better known as Gestapo for *Geheime Staatspolizei*, was Nazi Germany's Secret State Police.) On July 26, 1941, both Sergey and Hermann were arrested by the local Stapo and probably taken to the "Burg" of Klagenfurt, not a castle or fortress as the name seems to imply but a former school building that had become a Gestapo headquarter where they conducted hearings.

Somebody in the village of Matriei must have informed on them, writing not to the local police but straight to the Stapo which he or she probably deemed more efficient. This is the point where things for Sergey took a vicious turn that led into catastrophe.

Paul Russell in his novel on Sergey's life has all this take place in Lienz because Matriei was and still is in the district of Lienz. But neither the town nor the district of Lienz ever had a law court and a prison. However, from the *Anschluss* in 1938 to 1947, Lienz district that had been part of Tyrol became part of the state of Kärnten/ Carinthia.³⁵ There was and is only one law court and one prison in Carinthia, both in the capital, Klagenfurt.

Under §129 of the Austrian Penal Code of that time, "counternatural bawdry with persons of the same sex" was punishable by one to five years of 'hard jail.' The paragraph had been introduced in 1852 and was abolished only in 1971. In the 1920s there had been discussions in Germany about abolishing its German equivalent, §175, altogether, and its use was slackened. But beginning in 1935, the Nazis tightened the screw again, §175 was

³⁵ After 1947, the Eastern parts of Tyrol, including Lienz district, were split off to form the separate state of Osttirol/ East Tyrol.



Klagenfurt/ Carinthia (2009): The yellow building on the left is the State Courthouse, the ones around the inner court in the center are the State Prison. From Wikipedia --- Photographer Johann Jaritz

sharpened, and the number of convictions in Germany rose from 1.060 in 1934 to 9.536 in 1938. After the *Anschluss*, Austria followed suit. With the beginning of WWII though, the number of convictions dropped to 4.200.

On July 31, only five days after their arrest, Sergey and Hermann came before the State Court (Landesgericht) in Klagenfurt. The judge sent Hermann off to the Afrikakorps, the German expeditionary force fighting in Africa from 1941 to 1943. It is possible but by no means certain that he was assigned to the ill-reputed Division 999 that was being formed just at that time in Tunisia. "999" was a penal unit especially meant to take in convicted criminals and political prisoners. Hermann survived, after the war returned to Schloss Weissenstein, cared for his invalid sister, says Lev Grossman,³⁶ and died there in 1972. Stateless Sergey was labeled a Russian émigré, and as a Russian he would not have been eligible to waste his life in a German suicide squad. So the judge sentenced him to four months of jail.³⁷ He served his full term in the Polizeigefängnis (today

³⁶ Lev Grossman: "The gay Nabokov", in *Salon*, San Francisco, CA, 17 May 2000. http://www.salon.com/2000/05/17/nabokov_5/.

³⁷ All information concerning Klagenfurt courtesy of Dr. Wilhelm Wadl, director of the Kärntner Landesarchiv, pers. comm, Aug 17, 2015.

Justizanstalt) of Klagenfurt, right in the back of the Landesgericht that had passed judgment on him, on Johann-W.-Dobernig-Strasse in the city center. He seems to have been free again in December 1941. So the last time Sergey saw Hermann Thieme would have been in the Klagenfurt court room. When Sergey was released, Hermann had already been dispatched to Africa.

From January 1942 to March 1944 we can follow Sergey's steps by means of a personal file maintained by the Berlin Kriminalpolizei (the Criminal Investigation Police popularly known as "Kripo"), today preserved at the Landesarchiv Berlin.³⁸

The first item in the folder fittingly is a letter from the Kripo in Klagenfurt, dated February 27, 1942, belatedly informing the Kripo of Munich about the arrival in Bavaria of an ex-prisoner by the name of Sergej Nabokoff. (All this internal police communication lags behind by days or even weeks. They seem to have been overworked.) They wrote: "Sergej Nabokoff, born 28 February 1900 in Petersburg, a Russian émigré working as a professor of languages and staying at the estate of Mrs. von Thieme in Matrei, Lienz district, was sentenced to four months of jail because of homosexual offenses." After his release, the Klagenfurt Kripo continued, Nabokoff was to be "observed informally." But as in the meantime he was free and had allegedly moved from Klagenfurt to Brannenburg in the district of Rosenheim (Bavaria), the Munich Kripo was to take over his observation. On March 12, 1942, the Kripo of Rosenheim passed the ball and informed the Berlin Kripo that Nabokoff had moved to Berlin, address unknown.

Why on earth did Sergey go to Berlin? After his release he seems to have hesitated, for the police files skip roughly a month which he may have spent in Brannenburg, a small town in Bavaria, thinking. Without Hermann, going back to his mother at Schloss Weissenstein was out of the question. He probably knew nobody in Germany well enough so he would shelter an ex-prisoner of the Gestapo and help him to a new start. To return to Paris, he would have needed

³⁸ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), Kriminalpolizeiliche Akten, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-04, Nr. 606.

travel documents, a residency permit and money. He would not have had the nerve to attempt an illegal crossing of the Swiss border, and even if he had tried and succeeded, they would have instantly sent him back. He was trapped in Germany and could only turn to the few relatives who had remained there, his sister Elena in Prague and his cousin Onya in Berlin. He opted for Onya, perhaps because he expected more sympathy from her or because he would have had to go to Berlin anyway to get the papers and permits he now needed. Sophia ("Onya", "Onyechka") Fasolt [»Appendix 1, page 34-35] was living with her daughter Marina in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, in the same area where VN had lived for years. By the end of the year, Sergey must have gone straight to Berlin. The Berlin Kripo reported him present since January 2, 1942. Also, they affirmed that though indeed they were in charge, they had to bring in the Gestapo – why? "Because Nabokoff is a Russian citizen." That is what the Kripo wrote, not even "a Russian émigré." So Sergey was now being scrutinized by the Kripo because of his past conviction as a homosexual *and* by the Gestapo for being a Russian, that is a sort of enemy alien.

From 1942 to 1944, there are several brief quarterly reports on Sergey by the Berlin Kripo, obviously the results of his "informal observation" which seems to have consisted in an agent's occasional visits to his landlords. From these reports we learn that from January 2 to March 1, he stayed at Prinzregentenstrasse 10 c/o "Faseloff (his cousin)." The informant meant Onya Fasolt. Then he moved to Potsdamer Strasse 134, c/o Kleinmann, where he payed 55 RM (reichsmark) a month for his furnished room. The first report also divulges that since January 20, 1942, he had been employed as a translator for the Propaganda Ministry at the Ostraum editorial offices, Berlin, Münzstrasse 12, that his boss was a certain Mr. Eiswald³⁹ and that he was being payed 280 RM a month. "Nothing derogatory could be found out about Nabokoff. The landlord describes him as a quiet tenant who has done nothing wrong in his lodging."

³⁹ Eiswald is not on the Vineta payroll of 1943, so he seems not to have lasted long.

A further report notes that Nabokoff had moved to Regensburger Strasse 5a, c/o Hoffrichter, and that his salary had been raised to 500 RM. Still, nothing derogatory had been discovered. (There is a pencil mark on this report: "Don't ask Mr. Hoffrichter any more." Perhaps this landlord had been less than cooperative.) The report for November 1942 only adds that Nabokoff's office is now at Kaiserdamm 77, and that he still had no visitors. The report of June 1, 1943 finds the situation unchanged and betrays so little alarm that the next control visit is scheduled for December 18, half a year away.

But there was not to be another report. There is only a note saying that Sergej Nabokoff was arrested by police officers on December 15 at "Pension von Schultz", Meraner Strasse 6 in Berlin-Schöneberg. (The Berlin directory for that year has no Pension (von) Schultz at this address but a "Fremdenheim L. Stein".) The officers who arrested him were regular police from the nearest police station, no. 179. But they acted not on their



The old Berlin **Polizeipräsidentenamt** on Alexanderplatz (early 20th century) --- The Police Prison ran along the left side of the building. It was destroyed in WWII; today there

is a big shopping mall in its place.

own but explicitly by order of Stapo IV D 3a, that is the Gestapo section committed to the surveillance of suspicious foreigners, especially from the occupied Eastern territories. The Gestapo preferred to delegate arrests to regular policemen in order to be themselves less visible to the populace. The officers took Sergey to the police prison on Alexander-platz, and a few days later the Gestapo transferred him to the "Arbeitserziehungslager (AEL) Wuhlheide," one of the Gestapo's preliminary detention and labor camps (right next to the later East Berlin Zoo). In February or March 1944 he was taken back to the police prison on Alexanderplatz, Station 3 (political prisoners), awaiting the transfer to his final destination which by this time he may not yet have known.

Something had gone on in the meantime. On January 14, 1944, one month after his arrest, the Kripo dutifully noted that "the Stapo had given the order to commit Nabokoff to the Konzentrationslager [KZ] Neuengamme for an indefinite period of time."

On March 21, 1944, the police assured the Gestapo that the translocation would happen within the next few days. Actually, Sergey arrived at the sinister camp of Neuengamme with a mass transport on April 7, 1944⁴⁰. The railroad track on which the freight wagons came went right into the camp, and shouting SS with cudgels and dogs will have driven the prisoners to the crowded wooden barrack huts. From now on Sergey will have had to wear the same "zebra" uniform by day and by night, for work and for sleep, a coarse pyjama-like garment with broad perpendicular white-and-blue stripes. There was his prisoners' number on it, 28631, and above it a badge that signified "KZ prisoner," an inverted triangle of fabric, probably a red one (signifying "political prisoner") and not the pink one for homosexuals.

⁴⁰ Cf. letter dated April 4, 1995 from KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme to Andreas Sternweiler at Schwules Museum, Berlin.

About six weeks before his arrest, Sergey had traveled to what had been Czechoslovakia and now was the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia" to visit his youngest sister Elena Sikorski, then 37, working as a librarian at the National University Library in Prague: "In October 1943 he came here. He dreamed of settling in Prague, since he hated Berlin," she wrote VN after the war.⁴¹ It seems he had spoken much about his emotional state at that time. He was still numbed with grief for Hermann. Probably Elena did not want to make public what she had once written about Sergey's sexual orientation and in her collected letters left out the sentences dealing with his state of mind. For reasons of copyright I cannot quote them verbatim. But here is the gist of what she said: that he sat in prison for about five months; that the reason for his confinement was not any political infringement but solely his friendship with Hermann; that it had been "creepy" to hear what he told her about his love for Hermann; that she found it incomprehensible a feeling like this was possible; that in any case she felt terribly sorry for him. To both her and Marina he seems to have had something ghostlike, feeling out of place, not of this world. Since he wanted very much to get away from Berlin, they found him a job as an English teacher in Prague. He was to settle there around December 8. But for the moment he had to return to Berlin, and the intended move to Prague never materialized. "[In the capital Sergey] worked in a half-Russian office, openly voicing his opinion. He was informed on and on 15 December 1943, he was taken to a concentration camp."⁴²

The Kripo had observed him explicitly because they suspected he might resume his "homosexual offenses," but as this did not happen, they obviously had been willing to slacken their control. The Gestapo, however, suddenly had come up with quite a different reason, and this time it was a "political" one. The Kripo laconically notes that "according to the Stapo, Nabokov's arrest was due to 'remarks hostile to the state' ('staatsfeindliche Äusserungen')." Now these could

⁴¹ Elena Sikorski to VN, October 9, 1945, in Vladimir Nabokov: *Perepiska s sestroi*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985, p. 13.

⁴² Elena Sikorski to VN, October 1 and 9, 1945, in Vladimir Nabokov: *Perepiska s sestroi*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985, pp. 7-13.

have been anything: voicing doubts about the certainty of Germany's final victory ("Endsieg"), mocking a Nazi big shot, failing to say "Heil Hitler" distinctly enough and with the right arm properly raised, hand outstretched. One of the Gestapo's internal papers gave as an example of the kind of subversive remarks they were after, "complaining about the scarcity or quality of food in a shop line." That is, if they wanted to, they could have taken in almost anybody for something he or she had said, and prudent people were very careful of their words in public.

What had Sergey said or done? Zinaida Shakhovskoy and Nicolas Nabokov have suggested that he was a sort of war hero because he had attempted to hide and help an RAF man who had been shot down over Germany. There is not the slightest primary evidence for this most unlikely story. Sergey himself had told a co-prisoner at the Alexanderplatz prison, Dr. J. Nyman, that they had arrested him "on suspicion of connections with the British secret service or some such". Nyman is a primary source, and his testimony has the ring of truth: in Hitler's Germany, in Stalin's U.S.S.R and in Mao's China, the putative enemies of the state used to be charged with being agents of some foreign power. As a language teacher who had been to an English university he would certainly have been questioned about his attitude towards England, so Sergey must have had the impression the Gestapo was looking for some hidden connection to Great Britain. But if they had found any evidence of espionage or of aiding an enemy soldier, they would not have covered it up with a humdrum accusation like "subversive remarks." He would have been executed without any attempt to keep it a secret.

So what exactly did Sergey say? In 1946, VN wrote his sister Elena in Prague what he himself had found out: "I received more information about our poor Seryozha. He uttered judgements—said (in Berlin!) that the Germans would never break the English and the French, and his co-workers (in a translation bureau, in Berlin) informed on him; they arrested him, he conducted himself like a hero to the end."⁴³ Unfortunately, we do not know who VN's sources were, so this cannot

⁴³ VN to Elena Sikorski, 23 December 1946, in *Perepiska s sestroy*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1985, p. 42.

count as primary evidence. Only two of Sergey's relatives were so close to the event that they can be considered primary sources. One was cousin Onya Fasolt, then 44, whom Sergey had stayed with for two months when he came to Berlin in 1942. One rumor has it that her solicitations effected his early release and saved him from being sent to a concentration camp. She may very well have tried, but as there *was* no early release and in the end he *was* sent to a concentration camp, the rumor cannot be true. (The general rule was that it took three convictions because of violations of §175 in Germany and §129 in Austria to end up in a concentration camp.) The other close relative in Berlin was Onya's daughter Marina, then 19, who on 24 November 1943 married Boris Ledkovsky, a Russian composer of liturgic music. Sergey was best man at their wedding.

Marina definitely is a primary source.⁴⁴ This is what she later told a British interviewer: "Within the family we were told that he was finally arrested because he challenged someone at a party who argued that the German culture was the greatest in world history."⁴⁵ When Brian Boyd had interviewed Marina for his VN biography seventeen years earlier, she had told him: "Someone denounced [Sergey] after he said at a party, under the influence of alcohol, something like: [in Russian] I acknowledge only European literature, but not German; or: I respect German culture only as a part of European culture; or: European culture [in general] is higher than German culture – according to what they had heard in the family."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ There is one further version of Sergey's remark, reported in Andreas Sternweiler's *Goodbye to Berlin? – 100 Jahre Schwulenbewegung* (Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1997, p. 189). Sternweiler attributes it to Sophia (Onya) Fasolt, and she would indeed have been the very best witness one could imagine. Also, the quote itself is tempting as it would make Sergey's remark appear as part of an ongoing conversation where everybody had been outraged at the ferocity of British bombings which also frightened Sergey and where he had mildly and gallantly protested: "Still, England is the most civilized country in the world." But as Sternweiler does not have a source for this quote, it is only secondary evidence.

⁴⁵ Vanessa Thorpe: "Gay brother 'is key to Lolita author'", London: *The Observer*, 21 May 2000.

⁴⁶ Brian Boyd, interview notes, pers. comm., 16 July 2015.

So possibly this was what Sergey had done: praising Russian and/or English culture to the detriment of German culture. This clearly would not have been a prudent thing to do in wartime Berlin with almost nightly RAF airraids. These, by the way, frightened Sergey so terribly that he had to go to the toilet each time the sirens sounded, according to Marina Ledkovsky.

Whatever Sergey said, somebody must have informed the Gestapo. Somebody in his office? Marina's testimony ("party," "slightly drunk," many relatives, many listeners) sounds as if that happened at a private party. There were few parties in wartime Berlin. Could it be Marina's own wedding party on November 24? As Marina remembered it, he had offered a toast, "I'm so glad that she married a Russian and hope she will bring up her family amid Russian culture."⁴⁷ How did the family know what Sergey had said? Had he told them? Had somebody heard him say it? Had the family after Sergey's arrest painfully discussed what he actually might have said? Had it all been one of the old Nabokov family squabbles about the relative merits and demerits of Russian, English and German culture, with Sergey, slightly drunk, voicing more or less VN's negative opinions about Germany and praising the British just when the British air strikes were getting more frightening every day? Then there must have been an informer among Marina's (surely predominantly Russian) guests.

For those who don't like this idea, there are other possibilities. Supposing that the wedding party took place in Onya's and Marina's quarters, it cannot have been in her apartment on Prinzregentenstrasse since the building had recently been completely destroyed. They must have been living some place else, perhaps with Boris Ledkovsky on Neue Ansbacher Strasse 11 if his house was still intact, or as subtenants of some strange family, not heeding that "the walls have ears," as the saying among Berliners went. Or they had to rent the backroom of some pub or restaurant; in this case their party would have been considered an assembly, a suspicious one, with a police informer present. Another possibility is that Wednesday, November 24 was two days after the heaviest air strike so far, with

⁴⁷ Brian Boyd, interview notes, pers. comm., 16 July 2015.

670 RAF planes droning over Berlin in several pitches.⁴⁸ Fires were still burning in the ruins, there was the nauseating smell of smoke, limestone and phosphorus in the air. And at a quarter to nine in the evening, in the middle of the wedding party, the sirens sounded again. No matter where in Berlin the celebration was held, everybody had to grab his emergency bag and in the darkness grope his way down to the cellars that served as airraid shelters. This time no bombs fell, after about an hour there was the all-clear signal and everybody was allowed to trudge up to his quarters unscathed. But if some neighbor or stranger in the shelter or on the staircase had overheard Sergey praising the superiority of British culture, he might have been shocked by such unheard-of words and reported him to the police ...

The last paragraph at the core of an article that purports to present nothing but positive facts is of a speculative nature. I readily concede that even a social drink at the office might be termed a party and that the family may have discussed Sergey's exact words even if none of them had heard them uttered. It all could have happened at his office which admittedly was larded with Gestapo informers.⁴⁹

Further witnesses are not likely to appear, so this is all we may ever know about the proximate reasons for Sergey's arrest.⁵⁰ Possibly speculations like these may be way too far-fetched. In catastrophic times, things do not have to proceed on an orderly rational basis. Perhaps Sergey had not publicly voiced any provocative opinion, perhaps nobody had reported on him—perhaps the Gestapo had simply decided it was time to whisk this suspicious and unwanted Russian off to a

⁴⁸ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), A Rep. 001-02 Nr. 701, Berichte der Hauptschutzluftstelle 1943.

⁴⁹ Bundesarchiv (BArch) R55 1296 Dienststelle "Vineta", Fiche 2.

⁵⁰ There is a very slight chance that some details of what happened to Sergey in his Berlin years could be found in the letters E.K. Hofeld and Onya Nabokov wrote VN after WWII. There are some preserved at the Berg Collection but they are currently inaccessible, as are Sergey's letter to his mother which probably would shed more light on his life with Hermann Thieme.

concentration camp, without the trial the old-fashioned Kripo was still looking forward to.

There is one facet to Sergey's move to Berlin that aggravated his situation there. We have no positive evidence that things happened this way, but it is a definite possibility.

Since 1922, there had been a kind of Russian welfare agency that took on some of the tasks of the former Imperial Russian consulate, taking care of the consular needs of hundreds of thousands of Russian émigrés who had flocked to Germany after the revolution (and who mostly dispersed again after the hyperinflation was over in 1924 and the cost of living became as high in Berlin as in other European capitals). This was the Vertrauensstelle für russische Flüchtlinge in Deutschland (in brief Russische Vertrauensstelle, Russian Trust Bureau) headed by Sergey D. Botkin. To the likes of VN, it had sometimes been helpful and never much of a nuisance. Then, in May 1936, the Gestapo suddenly dissolved it and in June set up a new Russian Trust Bureau on Bleibtreustrasse 27 in Berlin-Charlottenburg, with monarchist General Vasily Biskupsky as its head. Biskupsky (1878-1945) claimed to be a friend of Hitler and to act in the name of Grand Duke Kirill Romanov, one of the pretenders to the throne, hoping to win over Germany to reinstall a Great Russian Empire under the Romanovs, an idea that did not at all accord with the plans Hitler and his chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg had for Russia. However, given his connections within the dwindling émigré community, the Nazi leaders obviously decided they could make him a useful tool. That's why they appointed him director of the revamped Russian Trust Bureau.⁵¹ Its more or less sole purpose was to register all Russian émigrés and to pass on all information pertaining to any of them to the Gestapo. From 1938 on they also were to report all the Jews in the émigré community. The 'trust' of its old name,

⁵¹ Robert C. Williams: *Culture in Exile*. Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1972, p. 85.– Bettina Dodenhoeft: "Vasilij von Biskupskij", in *Russische Emigration in Deutschland 1918 bis 1941*, ed. Karl Schlögel, Berlin: Akademie, 1995, p.224-225.

'Vertrauensstelle,' covered up the fact that it actually was little more than a Gestapo subsidiary.⁵²

Now Biskupsky's closest assistants at the new Trust Bureau were none other than the two assassins who had murdered VN's and Sergey's father, Sergey Taboritsky and Pyotr Shabelsky-Bork [»Appendix 2, page 36-37]. During a Russian gathering at the Chamber Music Hall of the Berlin Philharmonie on 28 March 1922, Pavel Milyukov, the exiled head of the Kadet party, now residing in Paris, was to speak on "America and the Reconstruction of Russia." Shabelsky-Bork rose from the audience and fired a pistol at him but missed his target. V.D. Nabokov, the leader of the party's Berlin section and Milyukov's host, tackled the assassin and threw him to the ground. Now Taboritsky stepped up from behind and killed him with three shots at close range. Germany generally did not care to get involved in inner Russian quarrels but there was so much public indignation that both were tried early in July 1922 before a Berlin court, the Landgericht I.⁵³ Shabelsky-Bork was sentenced to twelve years of jail, Taboritsky to fourteen years, charged not with murder, which could have meant the death sentence, but with causing "bodily injury with lethal consequence." Both were pardoned and free again in April 1927.⁵⁴

⁵² There are two "situation reports" (Lageberichte) on "Communist-Bolshevist subversive activities" by Himmler's Reich Main Security Agency (Reichssicherheitshauptamt, RSHA) of which the Gestapo had become a part, dating from 1939 and clearly stating the function of the Nazified Russian Trust Bureau. Watch the wording: "The 'Russische Vertrauensstelle' recognized by the German ministries at the suggestion of the Gestapo in June 1936 has developed in a remarkable way. The formerly Russian citizens living in Germany have been registered in their entirety and furnished with special identity papers. Thus it is possible to ask the Russian Trust Bureau at any time for whatever may be of interest concerning any Russian émigré. On top of that, the Russian Trust Bureau has successfully promoted peace among the immigrants." That is, they had quenched the quarrels between the different factions of émigrés, mostly by making rivaling associations close down. (Source: Bundesarchiv (BArch) Berlin R58 3046 Reichssicherheitshauptamt, Fiche 3, p. 92, and Fiche 4, pp. 58-59.)

⁵³ The documents of the court hearing are at the (Preussisches) Geheimes Staatsarchiv in Berlin-Dahlem.

⁵⁴ Cf. Johannes Baur: *Die russische Kolonie in München 1900-1945 – Deutsch-russische Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998, pp. 196-197.

The installation of the Nazi Trust Bureau with these two convicted criminals at the top – Taboritsky as Biskupsky's deputy, Shabelsky-Bork as secretary – had finally precipitated VN's resolve to leave Germany. When he had made it to Paris and wanted to fetch Véra and his son from Czechoslovakia in May 1937, he wrote her that by no means would he go the regular way, via Berlin. Instead he went via Switzerland and Austria. "It's impossible for me to travel otherwise – for reasons I'll explain to you later."⁵⁵ I believe I know why – and why he could not even say so in a letter that might have been intercepted by the German authorities. He had problems with his delapidated and expiring Nansen passport and the visas he would need for the trips to come. If he had gone via Berlin, he would have had to go to the Russian Trust Bureau to have himself registered, and there he might have had to face his father's assassin. According to his own code of honor, he probably would have had to shoot him.

Now going to the Trust Bureau was the first thing Sergey had to do when he arrived in Berlin in the dawn of 1942. He needed the Bureau's affidavit for all his further steps: finding a place to live, going to the Housing Office (*Wohnungsamt*) to get their approval or to have a room assigned to him, going to the local police station (*Polizeirevier*) to have his address registered, going to the Employment Office (*Arbeitsamt*) to get a job, going to the District Office (*Bezirksamt*) that gave out the ration coupons without which there would have been no food. We don't know if he actually saw Taboritsky or Shabelsky-Bork in person. It is likely he did. Shabelsky-Bork was active at the Trust Bureau at least until 1943, Taboritsky until it disintegrated in 1945⁵⁶. The main task of the Nazified office had been the registration of all Russian émigrés in Germany and of the Jews among them. That had been completed before the war, and there will not have been much actual work left until in 1944 the Trust Bureau had to help funnelling émigrés into the Vlassov Army. So there probably were not many other employees around at the Bureau. In any case Sergey must have expected he would have to face his father's

⁵⁵ Vladimir Nabokov: *Letters to Véra*, transl. and ed. by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 380 (letter dated May 19, 1937).

⁵⁶ Igor Petrov, pers. comm., Nov 19, 2015.

assassin and place himself at his mercy. If it was somebody else who took care of his registration, Taboritsky would surely have been told he had been there, and he would have been puzzled to have one of his victim's sons suddenly turn up in wartime Berlin, wondering what his intentions might be. Doubtlessly the Russian Trust Bureau alerted the Gestapo to Sergey's unexpected presence even before the slow Kripo did. Perhaps, realizing how useful his language skills might be, they even recruited him for "Vineta" right away. "Vineta" offered the additional advantage that there he would be under close observation by the Gestapo all the time.

In wartime Germany, every able-bodied man who was not away at some front had to work. Without a job, there were no food-coupons. So the first thing Sergey had to do when he arrived in Berlin in January 1942, after getting his Russian affidavit, was to go to the local Employment Office. He had to tell them what work he had done up to now (and what they might have read in the Kripo reports on him): that he had taught languages, was a "Sprachlehrer" (which the Austrian Kripo had quaintly interpreted as "Sprachenprofessor") and that his languages were Russian, English, French and German. There would not have been many jobs in Berlin for this kind of qualification, and he would not have been given much choice, if any. They assigned him as a translator to "Vineta," if the Trust Bureau had not already done so. (His colleagues at "Vineta" who had been sacked were sent straight to some war factory.) For Sergey, it was the first regular job of his life, with fixed working hours: Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. with a lunch break of half an hour, Saturday from 8 a.m. to 15 p.m., making over 54 hours a week. There were no holidays except on strictly medical grounds. (In 1922, VN's expectant father-in law had tried to get them both a regular job at a Berlin bank. VN had lasted three hours, Sergey quit after a week. If you felt like joking, you could say Sergey was eighteen times more resilient than his elder brother.)

"Vineta" was a half clandestine institution of the Third Reich. Its full name was "Dienststelle 'Vineta' – Propagandadienst Ostraum e.V." The address was

Münzstrasse 12, Berlin-Mitte.⁵⁷ Unequivocally it was a subdivision of the Goebbels Ministry of Propaganda (full name Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, RMVP), Abteilung Ost (Department East). There was a nominal director present at Münzstrasse, but the real director was the head of the Abteilung Ost, Eberhard Taubert, who worked at the pompous Ministry itself, on Mauerstrasse. Vineta had been set up in a hurry by one Willi Krämer in June 1941, just when Germany was launching its attack on Soviet Russia. The "Ostraum" in its name meant the territories east of the German border, from the Baltic states to the Ukraine, the conquest of which was Hitler's foremost purpose. Vineta, called after a rich but evil flooded mythical city near the mouth of the Oder river, was an "editorial office," a kind of workshop for the production of propaganda media in the conquered territories in the East: posters, flyers, brochures, books and radio broadcasts in sixteen, at times eighteen languages. It also sent groups of dancers and singers to tour the "Ostraum." At first, the thrust of the propaganda was the glad news that the German armies had come to free the occupied countries from the yoke of Bolshevism. As the people in these countries saw for themselves what the Germans had come for, that thrust of Vineta's propaganda became obsolete. When after Stalingrad the "Ostraum" began to dwindle, Vineta began to dwindle too, until in 1944 Hitler ordered them to support the Vlassov army by their propaganda.

Vineta was an "eingetragener Verein (e.V.)," that is a registered private association or club, and its main office was nowhere near the Ministry of Propaganda but in an ordinary residential and office building near Alexanderplatz where it occupied 48 rooms. On the ground floor there was the branch office of a small local bank, on another floor the

⁵⁷ All information concerning "Vineta" from Ministry of Propaganda documents preserved at the Bundesarchiv Berlin, BArch R55 1296 Dienststelle "Vineta," 8 Fiches.



Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 290 Nr. 0354830 -- Photographer Wolfgang Albrecht

The corner building on **Münzstrasse 12** and Dragonerstrasse (today Max-Beer-Strasse), Berlin-Mitte, where Sergey worked as a translator for "Vineta" in 1942. The photo is from 1993 when war damages had been fairly repaired.

revenue department had an office dealing with foreign currencies. This was not because Vineta wanted to appear innocuous to their target customers in Eastern Europe. As a confidential internal memorandum dated November 11, 1943 explained, "We have chosen the form of a registered association because our employees from eighteen nationalities ought not to call themselves members of a German government authority. It's a sort of camouflage."⁵⁸ The ruse hardly fooled anybody. Even Sergey seems to have told the police that he was employed at the Propaganda Ministry.

The truth was that the RMVP's "East" department deeply distrusted their foreign employees, without which they could not do. They complained that only 25 percent of their employees were German. "The employment of members of the Eastern populations presents considerable dangers from a security point of view," a memorandum said. They were individually checked by the Gestapo at their recruitment, their phones were tapped, the information they received about the occupied territories was filtered, the Gestapo had placed ("eingebaut")

⁵⁸ BArch R55 1296 Dienststelle "Vineta," Fiche 2.

anonymous informers all over and was in daily contact with Vineta, there were SS officers by the name of Fuhrmann and later Ebeling as chief Gestapo supervisors.⁵⁹

In 1942, when Vineta was still growing, there were 407 employees on Münzstrasse and its twelve Berlin suboffices spread all over the inner city. In 1943, there were a hundred more. Because the offices were so far apart, they had to employ an inordinate number of messengers, presumably on foot or by bicycle for Vineta had been allotted just one car for its director. As Berlin's buildings were bombed to ruins, finding quarters for Vineta's activities became more and more difficult.

On Münzstrasse, there were only the director's offices, the ample administration and one workgroup busy on radio broadcasts in Russian and Ukrainian which they deemed the most important part of their mission. From the documents it appears that on his arrival in January 1942, Sergey was assigned as a translator to this group. But there was a frequent reshuffling of the personnel, and as new workgroups were formed later in the year, Sergey found himself in Group XI, the "Translator Staff (Slavic and Eastish Languages)" whose director was one Eugen Eiswald, later replaced by one Dr. Rumpf. Its workplace was on Kaiserdamm 77 where Vineta had 25 rooms, far away from the head office. Group XI bundled just a few of Vineta's translators. The Russian translators within Group XI counted 21 persons. But as this number included typists, correctors and radio speakers, there were only 11 actual translators around on Kaiserdamm. In June 1943, Sergey was listed as deputy chairman of this group⁶⁰. One complete alphabetical payroll numbering c. 407 persons has survived. It is probably from November 1942 as its most recent hires are from October of that year.⁶¹ Under no. 91, there he is:

⁵⁹ BArch R55 1296 Dienststelle "Vineta", Fiche 1 and 2.

⁶⁰ BArch R55 1296 Dienststelle "Vineta", Fiche 6. Igor Petrov published a full staff list in Cyrillic characters on his blog <http://labas.livejournal.com/927268.html>, stemming from the same microfiche in the Bundesarchiv. It is differently grouped, probably slightly earlier than the alphabetical payroll and has somewhat less information.

⁶¹ BArch R55 1296 Dienststelle "Vineta", Fiche 4.

"Nabokoff Sergej | translator | born 28-2-1900 | unmarried, no children | arrived 20-1-42 | salary 450 reichsmark | supplement 70 RM | Group XI". Vineta's employees, foreigners and Germans alike, were paid according to the pay scale of the national radio system. 520 RM was not a bad salary, given there was so little to buy.

That's where Sergej worked for almost two years, from January 20, 1942 to December 15, 1943. He will have had to "heil-hitler" when he came and went, as everybody had to do in public. The offices were deliberately drab, furnished with second-hand desks and chairs. However, Vineta was privileged in having a canteen of its own so as long as he worked in its proximity he may not have wasted so much time queuing for food; actually, working hours left no time for queuing at all. He did not write Nazi propaganda; for that Vineta had plenty of writers and editors, more than twice as many as it had translators. He will have had a hard time translating crude Nazi hate-speech into his poetry-based old-fashioned Russian.

Between 1938 and 1945, there were 106,000 prisoners at Neuengamme. Nearly half of them perished because of poor and scarce food, atrocious sanitary conditions and hard labor. Sergej's number was 28631. It is not known whether he had to work in their brickworks or in the factory of Walther pistols or in any of their more than 86 outposts, for instance clearing away the rubble after RAF bombings of Hamburg. He died in the camp's sick bay only four months before Neuengamme was liberated by British forces.

Idg. Nr.	Name	Geburts-Dat.	Todes Tag	Stun de	Todesursache
58738	Mlymarz, Jan	26. 1. 95	9. 1. 45	8 20	Lungenichwindsucht
52683	Bonczarszajn, Aaron	29. 12. 04	"	"	" Block 21
87190	Paczkowski, Jules	13. 1. 92	"	8 30	Enterokolitis Block 10
39253	Jegade, Noel	24. 12. 12	"	8 45	Enterokolitis
85444	de Temmenman, Valentin	2. 5. 05	"	9 20	Herzmuskelschwäche Block 10
31948	Fried, Teofil	18. 4. 89	"	9 20	Arteriosclerose Block 13
28631	Nabokoff, Sergej	28. 2. 00	10. 1. 45	2 45	Enterokolitis
64209	Buckons, Tenzis	8. 9. 15	"	9 20	Herzschlag 18
85636	De Loge, Jan	31. 5. 95	"	8 40	Lungenichwindsucht
56944	van Loosenoord, Hendrik	22. 1. 95	"	8 20	Pneumonie
45284	Bonhomme, Nicolas	21. 6. 93	"	8 00	Bronchopneumonie

Excerpt from the Neuengamme "Totenbuch"

The Neuengamme "Totenbuch," the official Book of the Dead, where 25,000 of their 50,000 dead were registered, says it was on January 10, 1945 at 2:45. Some sources have January 9. That however was due to a misreading of the Totenbuch entry by the staff of the Neuengamme Memorial Site where some biographical information on Sergey is on display in their "Open Archive" and online⁶². (The mistake has since been corrected.) It is not clear whether "2:45" meant a.m. or p.m. or was just some ad hoc fabrication. But as Sergey's entry is the first of that day, it is likely to mean a.m. As cause of his death various secondary sources gave dysentery, exhaustion, malnutrition, starvation or untreated food poisoning. The Totenbuch which is the only primary source in this matter says "Enterokolitis," a general term for an inflammatory infection of the digestive tract



The roll-call area at the **KZ Neuengamme**, as drawn from memory in 1960 by Danish ex-prisoner Jens Martin Sørensen. The green barrack huts on the right were the infirmary wards in one of which Sergey Nabokov died on January 10, 1945

involving nausea, abdominal pain, fever. According to historian Reimer Möller of the Neuengamme Memorial Site, the causes of death given in the Totenbuch

⁶² At http://media.offenes-archiv.de/ha2_2_7_2_bio_1629.pdf and <http://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/de/geschichte/totenbuch/totenbuch-liste/nabokov/>

should not be taken too literally. Emil Zuleger, the infirmary clerk responsible for keeping the Totenbuch up to date and a prisoner himself, has testified during the court proceedings against some of the camp's SS that they had a small number of "causes" to choose from at random. Most alleged diseases meant only thing: starved to death.⁶³

Sergey's body was cremated in the camp's own crematorium. The ashes were piled up outside, in case a family member should want a sample, and then spread out over the ground elsewhere. The SS-Kommandantur sent a notice of death to the relative whose address they found on the form sheet they kept for each prisoner. The SS destroyed these files like most of the camp's paperwork before they hurriedly left at the beginning of May 1945. They forgot that they had given a copy of their notices of death to the civil registry of Hamburg-Bergedorf which after the war was in the position to issue regular certificates of death.

Prisoners in Neuengamme were allowed to write home, one strictly censored card or letter every two weeks, and they received mail and parcels from home. Elena later wrote VN: "Together with E.K. [Hofeld] and Onyechka [Fasolt], I tried to send him everything we could, but we didn't have anything ourselves."⁶⁴ Anyway, Sergey remained in contact with his Berlin cousin and his Prague sister. Then, in February or March 1945, Onya Fasolt would have received the notice of death from the Kommandantur of Neuengamme. Why must it have been she and not Elena? Because it was she and not the Neuengamme Kommandantur who informed Elena that Sergey had died in a prison near Hamburg.⁶⁵

⁶³ Dr. Reimer Möller, KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, pers. comm., September 2, 2015.

⁶⁴ Elena Sikorski to VN, October 9, 1945, in Vladimir Nabokov: *Perepiska s sestroi*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985, p. 13.

⁶⁵ This is what she wrote: "In March this year Onyechka wrote me that she had been able to find out that our poor Seryozha died on January 10, 1945 in a Hamburg prison (in Neuengamme)." Elena Sikorski to VN, October 9, 1945, in Vladimir Nabokov: *Perepiska s sestroi*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985, p. 13.

When and how did VN learn of his brother's death? Nowadays such a question seems trivial. In those years it was of vital concern. Towards the end of the war, there was chaos everywhere. Most public services including mail had practically come to a standstill. Millions were dead. Many of the forty million displaced persons World War II had produced were on the road all across Europe, wanting to get home. Millions did not have a home any more nor did they know if their relatives had, if they had survived. Tracing services like that of the Red Cross were operating at full stretch. Some street trees were littered with paper slips about missing persons or telling returnees where to direct themselves in search of their relatives. VN's relatives in Europe did not know if he was safe in the United States and where, nor did he know who of his family had survived and where they would be.

In September 1941, mail service from the U.S. to Occupied France was officially suspended by order of the German authorities. There still was some difficult and circuitous postal communication with neutral European countries including Vichy France, mostly by way of Marseille. This ended when Germany occupied Vichy France in November 1942. The use of one of the uncertain routes via neutral countries between the summer of 1940 and the end of 1942 presupposed some prior arrangement between the correspondents as to which addresses to use. After the war, the first air mail letters across the Atlantic arrived in June 1945. Postal service was fully restored only in August 1945. By way of experiment, VN must have immediately written a letter to the old Nabokov address in Prague soon after postal service had been resumed. It would have reached his sister Elena and his dead mother's companion, Evgeniya Konstantinovna Hofeld. Otherwise these two would not have known his address in America and could not have written back to him, which they did in early October. The first letter to reach him was from Hofeld. At about the same time, there came a letter from his brother Kirill in Belgium or Germany who had traced him through the *New Yorker*, in which, at the end of June, he had read his story *Conversation Piece, 1945*. VN's answer to Kirill, undated, began: "I was very happy to get news from you and learn that you are safe. Almost simultaneously a letter came from Evg. Konst.

[Hofeld] (do get in touch with her) telling me that Sergey perished in the Neuengamme concentration camp. This is very dreadful."⁶⁶

These sentences generally have been interpreted to mean that VN was informed of Sergey's death simultaneously by Kirill and Hofeld. On close reading, however, this interpretation seems mistaken. The first information reaching VN came from Hofeld, and it was VN who informed Kirill, suggesting he write to Hofeld for further details. When he answered Kirill's letter, he obviously had not yet heard from his sister Elena in Prague. Her first letter must have arrived shortly after, repeating what Hofeld had written. It bears the date October 1. Reckoning that an airmail letter would have taken one to two weeks, those three letters may have reached VN between October 8 and 15, 1945.

At about the same time, VN wrote to Edmund Wilson: "Of my two European brothers the youngest has turned out to be interpreter with the American forces in Germany; he traced me through my story in the *New Yorker*. My other brother was placed by the Germans in one of the worst concentration camps (near Hamburg) and perished there. This news gave me a horrible shock because Sergey was the last person I could imagine being arrested (for 'Anglo-Saxon sympathies'): he was a harmless, indolent, pathetic person who spent his life vaguely shuttling between the Quartier Latin and a castle in Austria he shared with a friend."⁶⁷ (This letter was dated September 27, but as Brian Boyd pointed out to its editor, Simon Karlinsky, it was actually written later.)

On October 9, Elena supplemented her first letter to VN, telling how numbed with grief for Hermann Sergey had been when in October 1943 he came to see her in Prague. She herself had been informed of Sergey's death by Onya Fasolt in March 1945.⁶⁸ At that time the war was still raging, Prague was still under German

⁶⁶ Vladimir Nabokov: *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989, pp. 63-64.

⁶⁷ *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya – The Nabokov Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, Revised and Expanded Edition, ed. Simon Karlinsky, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, p. 173.

⁶⁸ Elena Sikorski to VN, October 9, 1945, in Vladimir Nabokov: *Perepiska s sestroi*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985, p. 13.

occupation, so Onya could not write freely and only said he had died in a prison near Hamburg.

So has VN written his novel *Bend Sinister* in reaction to Sergey's fate? This is Lev Grossman's argument: "When he learned of Sergey's death in 1945, Nabokov was in the middle of writing 'Bend Sinister,' his most political novel. Like Sergey, the hero of 'Bend Sinister' speaks out against a brutally repressive regime,⁶⁹ and like Sergey, he would pay for his courage with his life."⁷⁰ Now *Bend Sinister* is indeed a fierce attack on an imaginary totalitarian state that mixes Nazi and Soviet elements. But there are no camps, no brothers, and its only homosexual is the monstrous dictator himself, the very opposite of Sergey. If the reader wants to take it on a personal level at all, he first of all will discover the hero's (and perhaps author's) concern for the life of his little son that makes him susceptible to blackmail. More important, the novel was conceived of in 1941 and finished in May 1946. In June 1944, VN wrote his wife that he would finish it within a few weeks.⁷¹ So in the summer of 1944, the novel was finished in his mind, more than a year before he first heard of Sergey's fate. When the news finally reached him, much of *Bend Sinister* was actually written.

But thoughts of Sergey certainly did go into that purple passage in *Pnin* (1953-57) where Timofey reflects on his youthful love affair with Mira Belochkin and her end in the camp of Buchenwald: "Only in the detachment of an incurable complaint, in the sanity of near death, could one cope with this for a moment. In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin – not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind ..., but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness,

⁶⁹ Actually Krug does not "speak out" at all against Paduk's regime. He tries to ignore it and refuses to endorse it, realizing too late that he has ignored it too long.

⁷⁰ Lev Grossman: "The gay Nabokov", in *Salon*, San Francisco, CA, 17 May 2000, http://www.salon.com/2000/05/17/nabokov_5/.

⁷¹ Vladimir Nabokov: *Letters to Véra*, transl. and ed. by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 486 (letter dated 5 June 1944).

could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. 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 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."⁷² One may read this as VN's obituary for his brother Sergey, too.

By accident we have two last glimpses of Sergey, one at the police prison in Berlin, the other in Neuengamme.

On July 8, 1947, a Dr. J. Nyman wrote VN a letter which Brian Boyd has seen. When Nyman read the *Time* review of *Bend Sinister*, published in June 1947, it occurred to him that he might have known the author's brother. So he asked the publisher, Henry Holt, for VN's address and wrote VN that he too had been a prisoner of the Gestapo in 1944 and knew Sergey from his time in the police prison. Sergey, he wrote, "was arrested by the Gestapo in Berlin in 1944 and was in the Polizeigefängnis on Alexanderplatz, in the political division, the so-called Station 3. (...) [This "Station 3" is important because it proves that Sergey, shortly before his transfer to Neuengamme, was still being detained as a political prisoner and not as a homosexual.] He told me they arrested him on suspicion of connections with the British secret service or some such. They took me then to a labour camp, so I don't myself know anything more about the final fate of your brother (...) He is a person of exceptional culture, knows a great deal, and what's

⁷² Vladimir Nabokov: *Prin*, New York: Vintage, 1989, pp. 134-135.

especially precious in our harsh century, was always unusually responsive to people, was always ready to help others."⁷³

In his memoir *Bagázh* (1975), VN's and Sergey's cousin Nicolas Nabokov has a lot to say about both of them. In the simultaneous German translation of the book, there is one paragraph inexplicably left out in the English version. It reads: "In the middle of the 1950s, I happened to have to change planes at some Southeast Asian airport. At customs I heard my name being called. A French airline employee had seen my name on the passenger list and wanted to talk to me. He had been in the same concentration camp as Sergey. We talked for more than an hour, or rather it was he who talked to me and I listened. Sergey had become very religious. As long as he had been able to, he had walked around the camp, talked to his fellow inmates and tried to comfort them as best he could. Everybody in the camp had admired his quiet courage, his unselfishness and kindness. In the agony of his last days he found that peace of which he had found so little during all his lifetime. He died as the one he had always been: a man with an innocent heart, kind, gentle and morally incorruptible."⁷⁴ As Nicolas Nabokov is not the most trustworthy of sources, I asked Reimer Möller, a historian at the Neuengamme Memorial Site, whether this would have been possible. His answer was: definitely yes. When the SS guards had retired in the evening, prisoners were free to walk from block to block and to talk to each other.

Lev Grossman wrote that Sergey's sexual orientation "ultimately [was] the cause of his horrifying and untimely death."⁷⁵ Andrea Pitzer argued that after his release from prison, "he began to denounce the Nazis, and still managed to stand as the

⁷³ Brian Boyd, pers. comm., 16 July 2015.

⁷⁴ Nicolas Nabokov: *Zwei rechte Schuhe im Gepäck*. München: Piper, 1975, pp. 141-142. Brian Boyd is suspicious of this anecdote, believing that Nicolas Nabokov was "a compulsive fabricator." (Pers. comm., 23 Sep 2015.)

⁷⁵ Lev Grossman: "The gay Nabokov", in *Salon*, San Francisco, CA, 17 May 2000, http://www.salon.com/2000/05/17/nabokov_5/.

best man for his second cousin's wedding,"⁷⁶ echoing Grossman's "[he] spent his time denouncing the Nazi regime." Quite as if Sergey's main activity in Berlin had been to make anti-Nazi propaganda, leaving him little time to attend a cousin's wedding ceremony. But the timeline of what really happened leads to the conclusion that Sergey did not die for being gay nor for committing some sustained act of resistance.⁷⁷ To my mind, it would be as naive and even foolish to say that Sergey had been a propagandist of the Nazi state as to suggest that he died as a martyr of the homosexual cause or as an unflinching hero of the resistance.

There is no need for heroization beyond the known facts. He died because the Gestapo had taken over his surveillance the moment he arrived in Berlin and finally had disposed of him by sending him to a concentration camp. It had done so not because he was gay but because he was a Russian whom they distrusted on principle and who moreover had become a sort of enemy alien; also, because they had perhaps overheard him making some imprudent "political" remark.

Sergey was a gifted, shy, kind and emotionally and spiritually tormented man who had found some years of respite and happiness with his partner Hermann Thieme. Shortly before his second arrest he had attempted to escape to Prague but had to return to his job in Berlin. There he was swallowed up by the maelstrom of history and suffered a terrible fate, apparently shouldering it with remarkable fortitude.

⁷⁶ Andrea Pitzer: *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov*, New York: Pegasus, 2013, p. 187.

⁷⁷ The trouble with some younger critics like Grossman or Pitzer who have never lived in a totalitarian state is that they seem utterly unable to comprehend what life in an efficient dictatorship is like, for instance that it just is not possible to spend days, months or years going around and "speaking out" against any such regime. The first time you did, you would be taken off the streets. That's what possibly happened to Sergey.

Appendix 1 — Onya Fasolt

Onya's given Russian name was Sofiya (in German Sophie), and the familiar form of Sofiya is Sonya (in German Sonja). Her brother Nicolas explains that she probably lost the S of Sonya due to a tooth gap during her mixed dentition stage. In Germany, her name was Sophie or Onja Fasolt.

There is next to nothing in the Nabokov literature about Onya, except for two remarks in Brian Boyd's *VNRY* saying she was a pretty child and VN as a little boy had a crush on her. I cannot even find one single mention of her married name anywhere.

Sofiya Dmitrievna Nabokova was VN's coeval, born on May 5, 1899 in St. Petersburg. Her brother Nicolas describes her as a talented and ardent musician. In 1920, she married a German cavalry officer whom she had met during a St. Hubertus hunt at her mother's estate Preobrazhenka/ Eastern Ukraine when the German army briefly occupied that area in 1918.⁷⁸ Fasolt came from a family of chinaware manufacturers in Thuringia. There is a big wedding photo taken in the noble Kaisersaal of Berlin's Hotel Esplanade on Potsdamer Platz. Besides the bride and the bridegroom, it shows 45 guests, among them Onya's mother Lydia von Peucker, VN's mother Elena Nabokov and his paternal grandmother Maria Ferdinandovna Korff, VN, his brother Sergey and his cousin Nicolas (see <http://www.dezimmer.net/NabokovFamilyWeb/Abb/weddingphoto1920.htm>).

Like VN himself, Victor and Sophie Fasolt stayed in Berlin where they had two children, Nikolaus (born 1921) and Marina (born 1924). In 1937, she auctioned much of her furniture⁷⁹ and moved to Prinzregentenstrasse 10 in Berlin-Wilmersdorf where she accomodated Sergey in 1942 after his release from the Klagenfurt prison. On July 22, 1941 she was divorced⁸⁰ from Victor Fasolt (who married again and died in 1944 in Brühl). Her son Nikolaus was away in the war. So in 1942, she will have been alone in her apartment with her daughter Marina. When the police came to check on Sergey early in 1942, her name was still Fasolt, but obviously aware of her Russian background, the police by mistake changed it to "Faseloff." She was grieving Sergey's principal support during his two Berlin years.

In the nights of March 1 and November 22, 1943, RAF bombs practically razed her whole quarter, and one of these airraids completely destroyed her apartment building. On November 24, 1943, Marina married Boris Ledkovsky, a conductor and composer of liturgic music who had earned his living in Nazi Germany as director of a choir of Black Sea Cossacks. We don't know where the wedding party for the couple took place; in any case it will not have been on Prinzregentenstrasse.

⁷⁸ Cf. Vincent Giroud: *Nicolas Nabokov: A Life in Freedom and Music*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015, p. 38.

⁷⁹ Cf. auction lists at Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁸⁰ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), B Rep. 021 Historische Einwohnermeldekartei (EMK)

After her apartment was gone, she must have found some new lodging. She ended up in the northeastern section of the city that in May 1945 came under Soviet control. When her brother Nicolas came to Berlin with the US army in mid-August 1945, he urgently tried, successfully, to get her and her family out of the Eastern Sector⁸¹ of the city. Nicolas knew and had witnessed himself that the Soviet occupation forces had begun to round up Russian refugees for forced "repatriation" to the Soviet Union; and that repatriation often meant perdition. Nicolas stayed in Berlin (in a villa on Bitterstrasse 16 in Dahlem) from mid-August 1945 to the end of 1946, mostly as a colonel with the Information Control Division (ICD) of the Military Government (OMGUS), helping to revive and reorganize Berlin's musical scene. Owing to his perfect Russian, he was often entrusted with liaison missions in the Eastern sector and tried, in vain, to stop the Americans from condoning the Soviet repatriation measures.

In 1951, Marina and Boris moved to New York; so did Onya, dying there on October 31, 1982.

Her son **Nikolaus**, born 1921, was drafted into the German army in 1938 and served until 1945. In postwar Germany, he wrote a thesis on Alexander Blok criticism, made an industrial career, became CEO of a tile manufacturing company and briefly succeeded H.M. Schleyer, killed by Red Army Faction terrorists, as president of the BDI (the Federal Association of German Industry).

Her daughter **Marina**, born 1924, later became a highly respected professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Barnard College/ Columbia University in New York and was the author of a book on Turgenev (1973) and of a *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* (1994). She died 2014 in New York State. When she spoke to Brian Boyd, Lev Grossman and Vanessa Thorpe about the events that led to Sergey's arrest in 1943, they lay 40 and 57 years behind her.

⁸¹ Cf. Vincent Giroud: *ibid.*, p. 187.

Appendix 2 — Sergey Taboritsky

Sergey Vladimirovich Taboritsky was born in St. Petersburg on August 15, 1895, served as an officer in the Imperial Russian army and fled to Germany where he became an extreme right-wing and anti-Semite activist. Together with Shabelsky-Bork he lived in a Munich pension. One rumour has it that he hid Hitler after the failed Kapp-Putsch in 1920. On March 28, 1922 he shot V.D. Nabokov in the Berlin Kleine Philharmonie. On July 7, 1922 the Landgericht I in Berlin sentenced him to 14 years in jail because of "causing bodily injury with lethal consequence". On April 20, 1927 he was pardoned thanks to the amnesty at Hindenburg's 80th anniversary and released. Afterwards he became a German citizen, calling himself Sergius von Taboritzki, and married a Baltic German, Elisabeth v. Knorre (born 1907) with whom he had a son and two daughters. In the summer of 1936 he was made deputy director of General Biskupsky's Gestapo-run Russian Trust Bureau. In 1940 he lived in Berlin-Wilmersdorf (Rankestrasse 24) and applied for membership in the Nazi party (NSDAP), explaining that he had "made a political attempt against the leader of Jewish democracy and Freemasonry." The NSDAP asked one of their lawyers for an expert opinion – and did not believe a word of his ghastly spin but made him a member nonetheless.

After that his footprints disappear. There were some who believed he had quietly made his way to South America like his accomplice Shabelsky-Bork. Actually he stayed on in the Russian Trust Bureau until it disintegrated early in 1945. (Biskupsky was sacked and briefly arrested and died three weeks after his one-time pal Adolf Hitler.) Probably before the Soviet Army marched into Berlin, Taboritsky slipped to what was to become West Germany, living in Marburg under his real name, becoming pious, going to church and staying away from émigré politics. His only public appearance was as the author of an obituary for his accomplice Shabelsky-Bork in the obscure Brazilian newsletter *Vladimirsk Vestnik*, signed "Germany, August 29, 1952"⁸²). On October 16, 1980, Sergius von Taboritzki died in a West German town at the age of 85. One of his children burnt all personal papers he had left in an attic.

This sequel, including the date of death, was unknown until, around 2013, the subject of Taboritsky came up during a Russian-German workshop on the Second Wave of Emigration, organized by the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa (FSO) at the University of Bremen. Thereupon Maria Klassen, archivist at the FSO, managed to contact a relative by phone and was told the death date but not much more. Later, journalist Igor Petrov who had been present at the workshop contacted another descendant and tried to gather more information but got so little that he gave up his plan to write a biographical sketch. However, there now is an article on Taboritsky in the Russian language Wikipedia.⁸³

⁸² Facsimile under <http://labas.livejournal.com/997467.html>.

⁸³ The present information is from material at the Landesarchiv Berlin (B Rep. 004 Nr. 800), from Robert C. Williams' *Culture in Exile*, from Maria Klassen at the FSO Bremen and from Igor Petrov (pers. comm., November 19, 2015).

Pyotr **Shabelsky-Bork** (real name Popov, born 1893 in Kislovodsk) was another Tsarist ex-officer, as an émigré to Germany became a mysticist and a die-hard anti-Semite and Nazi, was secretary at Biskupsky's Gestapo-run Russian Trust Bureau from 1936 to 1943 or later, right after WWII escaped to Argentina and in 1952 died in Buenos Aires of tuberculosis.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ I am indebted to Gennady Barabtarlo for the leads to both Internet sources and for Shabelsky-Bork's place of death.

Appendix 3 — Józef Czapski

Painter, essayist, officer and investigator Józef Czapski (full name Józef Marian Franciszek Count Hutten-Czapski) was born 1896 in Prague and died 1993 in Maisons-Lafitte near Paris. He grew up in the family manor near Minsk. From 1909 to 1915, he attended a gymnasium in St. Petersburg, went on to study law at the university of St. Petersburg and from 1918 continued his studies at the Academies of Fine Arts in Warsaw and Kraków, determined to become a painter.

An officer of the Polish army and a pacifist, he was not sent into action in WWI. But after the war and its Russian aftermaths, he was sent to St. Petersburg to investigate the fate of his Polish fellow officers who during the Civil War had disappeared in action. He found they had been executed by the Bolsheviks.

In 1924, he went from Kraków to Paris with a group of fellow artists (the "Capists") to have a closer look at French painting; his special interest was in Cézanne. They planned to stay for six weeks and stayed for six years. From 1924 to the summer of 1926, he had a love affair with Sergey Nabokov. Through Sergey, Czapski met Nicolas Nabokov. Much later, these two cooperated in the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

After a stay in London and Spain, he returned to Poland in 1931. At the beginning of WWII on September 1, 1939, he was drafted into the Polish army and stationed in Lwów (now Lviv in the Ukraine). Four weeks later, on September 27, 1939 he was taken prisoner not by the Germans but by the Russians. That was a consequence of the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact, concluded in August, which allowed Soviet Russia to appropriate the eastern parts of Poland just as Germany occupied the western parts. Czapski was one of the few who escaped the fate of 20,000 Polish officers and intellectuals who were massacred at Katyn and other places. He spent two years in Russian prisons and camps and was released on September 3, 1941 into the Polish army under General Władysław Anders that fought against Germany alongside the Red Army. Because of frictions with the Soviets, the Anders Army, by way of Tashkent, Baghdad and Palestine, was moved to Italy to join the Western allies in the battle of Montecassino. From Italy Czapski eventually returned to liberated Paris. There he painted and was active in elucidating the fate of Polish NKVD captives. In the Russian camp of Gryasovets he had been allowed to give lectures. Those on Proust were later collected in a book and translated into several languages. He also wrote a book on his years in Soviet prisons and camps (*Na nieludzkiej ziemi/ Terre inhumaine/ Inhuman Land, 1949 et seq.*).⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Information from several Wikipedias and Małgorzata Kitowska-Lysiak: "Józef Czapski" in culture.pl, December 2001, <http://culture.pl/en/artist/jozef-czapski>.