

By Lauren Leighton

In 1966 I was privileged to meet members of the second generation of Young Leningraders (Molodye leningradtsy). In 1969 they and others were rounded up by the KGB, two were sent to prison, others to remote places or to military service. Later, Kostya Azadovsky was sent to the Kolyma and Misha Meilakh to a camp in the Urals. Some emigrated in the 1970s and 1980s--Dima Bobyshev, Efim Slavinsky, Sasha Nakhimovsky, Slava, Lora, and Irina Paperno. A few remained in Leningrad-Petersburg--Tonya Slavinskaya, Albin Nekonechny, Misha Meilakh, Kostya Azadovsky, Yura and Ira Kleiner. Boris Vakhtin and Sergei Dovlatov died. I used to keep all these and other names secret--I would rather have cut my tongue out than compromise these friends. Now that Russia has joined the normal world and Russians get to eat a bale of hay with the rest of us, it no longer matters. A fictional essay (vymyshlennyi ocherk) on that literary underground of long ago can be found in the journal *Descant*, circa '69-'70.

Naturally, many of the Young Leningraders were Nabokov fans. Misha Meilakh went to the Urals for possessing Nabokov novels; Slava Paperno once had the largest collection of Nabokoviana in Russia (see the article he wrote with the late John Hagopian ["Official and Unofficial Responses to Nabokov in the Soviet Union" in

The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov, ed. George Gibian & Stephen Jan Parker. Ithaca, 1984]), and also the fictional essay "Slava Snabokovu" by Larry Gregg in *A Book of Things about Nabokov*, ed. Carl Proffer, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974). Some of us at a kitchen table once put together a fictional letter to Nabokov. Later, in the United States, I actually wrote a letter to Nabokov which was a response to his stated conviction (not merely hope) that he would someday be read freely by Russians and be a part of a free Russian literature and an attempt to let him know that some Russians who were fortunate enough to read him agreed that he would be freely read in Russian someday. I don't know how strongly we believed him in those dark, hopeless days, but, of course, his conviction has proved true.

I did not venture to take my correspondence with Vera Nabokov to Russia, but I conveyed it verbally to as many friends as I could, and it meant a great deal to them. They were especially touched by her and Nabokov's concern that we take care about the dangers of Soviet power. It meant much to them, also, that the Nabokovs appreciated hearing that someone in Russia knew and cared about them.

Actually, the advice to take care was beside the point. On the one hand, we did take care; and "Soviet paranoia" probably

made us more anxious than we had reason to be. On the other hand, it was hardly a difficult matter for the KGB to know who associated too freely with foreigners; in 1969 the Young Leningraders paid dearly for that normal behavior, and they did later, too.

From the Nabokovs' point of view, probably, we were young and dumb, which we probably were. Sometimes it's hard to believe what it was like in those days, and my students, who now associate freely with anyone they please in Russia, think I'm talking about some distant planet. That's to the good, of course. It's better to live in a world where to read Nabokov is a perfectly normal thing, rather than one so dark that such behavior is exceptional.

*The author of the note below, Lauren Leighton, a well-known Slavist, offers an account of his experiences with a group of young Leningrad literati in the late 60s and early 70s. Professor Leighton wrote to Nabokov about his experiences. Nabokov's replies may be found in his *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew Bruccoli, pp. 431-32 (March 14, 1968) and p. 490. July 12, 1972. Many of the young Russians mentioned are now well-known writers and scholars.*

Donald Barton Johnson

“Vladimir Nabokov Forum”

Subject: Leighton: Soviet Underground VN

Date: Fri, 14 Jul 1995