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# His Father's Best Translator

By LILA AZAM ZANGANEH

Dmitri Nabokov, the only child of the novelist Vladimir Nabokov, died in Switzerland in the first hours of Thursday, Feb. 23. Like his father, Dmitri went — in the words of one of his attendants — “light as a butterfly.” Like his father 35 years ago, and at 77, almost the same age (they were both buried at 78), he succumbed to a pulmonary infection. He had been a professional opera singer, and a racer of fast boats and faster cars. But according to his own father, whom he often referred to as “Nabokov,” he had also been — perhaps above all else in the end — his “best translator,” devoting the last two decades of his life to translating his father’s earlier work from Russian to English and Italian.

Our friendship had begun 10 years earlier, when I interviewed him for a literary review. I was stunned, the first time he opened the door to his home at the Résidence Rossillon in Montreux, by the resemblance between father and son. This was the only time I ever saw Dmitri standing. Several months later, he could no longer leave his wheelchair, and though, with an optimism to match his father’s, he insisted he might walk again, he never did.

His apartment — which had also been the residence of his mother, Véra, until her death in 1991 — presented an odd combination of multigenerational Nabokoviana: sepia shots of the family hung on a wall next to a model of Beep-Beep, Dmitri’s powerboat, displayed in a glass case by the dining room table. Hundreds of editions of Nabokov’s books were collected and arranged, alphabetically and by language, around the living room, while in the hallway a model train equipped with a special engine occupied an entire shelf. A photo of Dmitri in Army uniform (about 20 years old, dashing features, arrogant gaze) stood next to Vladimir’s gigantic butterfly net. But what was most evocative — most Nabokovian, in a way — about this apartment was its striking view of Lake Geneva, its watery shimmer glorious at noontime, fading after sunset to a liquid night.

Dmitri was always diffident at first. He resented strangers coming to visit, at day’s end no more than his father’s ghost. And, perhaps as a result, he had built a forbidding reputation in the literary world as a fierce attacker of many an aspiring Nabokovian. (“Genius-envy never dies,” he once explained.) Though in a wheelchair, Dmitri long cut an impressive figure. He was 6 foot 5, weighed well over 200 pounds and had a stentorian voice cultivated by his career

as a basso profundo. From 2003 onward, I visited him about twice a year, both for interviews related to my research on his father and in order to read the ensuing work to him. I read aloud: he edited fervently and often brilliantly. We had our rituals. I stayed at a hotel in Montreux, facing the lake, and went up the hills to the Rossillon for lunch and early dinners. True to reputation, he did now and then display bouts of moodiness, even occasional bursts of anger. But over all, he proved to be quite a different person from what I had envisioned. He was tender and kind, curious and enthusiastic about things great and small. He would exult in a good turn of phrase or in a healing wound on his own hand. Above all, I was humbled by his patience, his hopefulness and his combative spirit as he dealt with great physical pain.

As an adolescent in Paris in the 1990s, I had listened as my mother, an Iranian exile, read English excerpts from “Speak, Memory,” Vladimir Nabokov’s memoir of his early years in Russia and his life after the Bolshevik Revolution, in Crimea, Germany and France. Dmitri appears in “Speak, Memory,” both as an infant in Berlin, his tiny hand placed “starfish-wise” on his father’s, and as a 6-year-old at the port of St. Nazaire, on the last page, about to catch sight of the enormous yellow funnel of the Champlain, the ship the Nabokovs would embark on to seek refuge in America. When my mother read this passage to me for the first time, I recall clinging to its final image: “something in a scrambled picture — Find What the Sailor Has Hidden — that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen.” A secret trapdoor had suddenly opened. Reading was a matter of capturing a detail in a scrambled picture, which, once perceived, unveiled a new story, often richer and stranger than the one first imagined.

This, in my eyes, would prove to be true of Dmitri himself. Véra Nabokov was Jewish, which was why the family had been compelled to flee Europe in 1940 aboard the Champlain. This would be a second exile for the Nabokovs — in a space of two decades, they had escaped both the Bolsheviks and the Nazis, each time by a matter of hours. Thus, Dmitri was the child of a revolution and a war. In Massachusetts, where Nabokov taught Russian at Wellesley College, the family began the slow adjustment to the American way of life (Dmitri’s father would pitch to him every afternoon, so he might grow up like any American child). Dmitri graduated from Harvard in 1955, studied voice at the Longy School of Music and worked as a translator of Russian literature. He moved to Europe and began his opera career in a 1961 production of “La Bohème” that also featured a young Pavarotti. Dmitri sang all over the world, though his career, which lasted until 1982, was inconsistent. He was torn by his various interests and his compulsion to dabble in many things at once.

Dmitri was also a womanizer, once known in the Italian press as “Lolito,” seducer extraordinaire. His life — mountaineering in Wyoming and British Columbia, singing in

Medellín and Milan, racing cars and boats along the Mediterranean, carousing with handsome girls — was something out of a James Bond film. When I asked him why he had never married, he told me life had slipped away too quickly. Sensing he was being disingenuous, I later ventured to ask again. This time, quietly, almost in a whisper, he said his parents had been “twin souls,” and he knew it would “always remain impossible to match what they had had.”

Yet the more I saw him and spoke with him over the last nine or so years, the more I realized something altogether surprising. It was connected neither to his father’s fame nor to his own glittering life-reel. It was, in fact, what had first caught my attention, so many years ago, in that final page of “Speak, Memory”: “something in a scrambled picture . . . that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen.” It was, quite simply, the moment of departure. Anyone who’s ever been an exile as a child knows the anguish of parents as they wonder if papers will be accepted, if immigration and customs officers can be appeased, if the borders will be thrown open. The arc of the Nabokovs’ lives had been drawn by loss. First, the loss of a beloved homeland, then of closest kin murdered or left behind enemy lines, and finally the loss of an “untrammelled, rich” Russian tongue. As the three Nabokovs boarded the Champlain in May 1940, they were leaving behind Europe; Nabokov’s gay brother, who would perish of hunger and exhaustion in a Nazi concentration camp; numerous Jewish friends; homes, memories, manuscripts. This was the history that, quite unwittingly, the young Dmitri carried with him as he left for America, holding each of his parents by the hand as they walked toward that yellow funnel deftly concealed in the landscape.

What became apparent in Dmitri in later years was the remnant of that lost world. It came with a sense of compassion and dignity, of patience and nobility, despite his foibles, his occasional childlike demands, his *folie des grandeurs*. As he neared the age of his father’s death, it remained just as impossible for Dmitri to accept that “Father” was no more. Often, when he evoked his parents, Dmitri’s ice-blue eyes would begin to drift out of focus. I caught him at his desk one afternoon watching a YouTube montage called “Nabokov and the Moment of Truth,” which juxtaposes film clips and stills of his parents and himself. He was in his wheelchair, leaning deeply into the computer screen, silently crying.

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