

*Vera Lur'e (Lourie) and Vladimir Nabokov: Neighboring  
Russian Writers in Berlin*

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Between 1921 and 1923 Berlin was an intellectual and artistic center for Russians, with several Russian language daily newspapers, scores of journals and books published in Russian. Andrei Bely, Nina Berberova, Marina Cvetaeva, Ilya Ehrenburg, Sergei Esenin, Maksim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vladislav Khodasevich, Aleksei Remizov, and Aleksei Tolstoi, among others were present at some time before the emigration in Germany fell apart with the return of some to Russia, with others headed for Paris or Prague. Two younger writers were also in that mix: Vera Lourie and Vladimir Nabokov. But what if any interaction did the two have?

Vera Lourie (1901-1998) was born in St. Petersburg and came to Berlin with her family in 1921. In St. Petersburg she had been friends with Nina Berberova, who would herself emigrate in 1922, and close to Nikolai Gumilev under whose tutelage she began publishing her poetry. In the words of Berberova, Vera had also grown close to the twenty year older Andrei Bely, already famous for his poetry and novels. Through the Bely connection Vera became a member of the Berlin House of the Arts, a center for many of Berlin's established Russian literary figures. I have written extensively on Vera, and was instrumental with the aid of Nina Berberova in finding Vera Lourie and then publishing her poetry in the 1980s (1). But she had remained largely unnoticed since the 1920s.

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) was also born in St. Petersburg, but together with his family emigrated after the revolution with his father, a major political figure and publisher residing in Berlin while Vladimir was studying at Cambridge. Nabokov had published several poems in Russia, but was still young and largely unnoticed by the Russian literary community. When his father was assassinated in March of 1922, the younger Nabokov returned to Berlin. As an emerging writer he was a member of the inner circle of the Russian literary elite to which Vera had access through her acquaintance with Bely. Nabokov ultimately moved to

Paris in the 1930s, then later to the United States where he achieved fame for the novel *Lolita* and finally to Switzerland.

Both Vera and Vladimir remained in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s long after the city had lost its place as Russia's Literary Capital in 1923. Both continued to publish, Vladimir more than Vera, but as Nabokov went onto fame and fortune, Vera continued to live with her mother and endured many of the trials, first of Nazi Germany and then of the Russian taking of the city.

Curiously neither appeared to have been much aware of the other, at least in their writings. Vera has no mention of Nabokov whatsoever in the Berlin years. She has commented briefly on seeing Nabokov as a child in St. Petersburg.

Auf der anderen Seite der Morskaja , nicht weit von unserer Wohnung entfernt, wohnte die Familie Nabokov. Wir kannten die Nabokovs nicht näher, ... Oft sah ich seine zwei Söhne, die auf englische Art gekleidet waren, ... Einer der beiden wurde später der Schriftsteller Sirin, der mit seinem umstrittenen Roman *Lolita* Aufsehen erregte (2).

Nabokov mentions Andrei Bely only in passing, although both his prose works and his later comments on poetry show an awareness and implied admiration (if imitation equals admiration). His lack of mention of Vera is made all the stranger by the fact that she and he were close neighbors, both living only a few doors apart on Berlin's Westfälische Straße, Vera at number 36 and Vladimir at number 29 in 1933.

A key document that has recently emerged shows Nabokov's awareness of who Vera was. In a letter to the poet and critic Vladislav Khodasevich dated Berlin, 26 April 1934 Nabokov comments:

"Now and then I encounter on the street — she lives in our neighborhood — the young lady whom you mention: stooped over, with her groceries in a net, she has watery-grey eyes."

The author of the article correctly assumes and references in a note:

"This is in all likelihood Vera Iosifovovna Lur'e (1901-1998)" (3).

There is no mention of any even passing acquaintance, but the fact that Khosdasevich had inquired could have been the result of Nina Berberova's own curiosity. In fact, Vera and Nina Berberova would be re-united if only in letters after I had found her in Berlin in 1984 and arranged for an exchange of letters of these two teenage friends in Petersburg some seventy years later.

Letters continue to reveal secrets to fresh eyes and cause one to remember Bulgakov's truism: "Manuscripts do not burn." Nor do letters, and unlike emails that may or may not be archived and accessible generations from now, the written and recorded word lives on (4).

## References

1. “Vera Lur’e [Ob Andree Belom]. Nabroski vospominanij.” *Smert- Andreja Belogo (180-1934). Sbornik statej i materialov: dokumenty, nekrologi, pias-ma, dnevník, posv-jashchenija, portrety.* Ed. M.I. Spivak, E.V. Nasedkina. Moscow 2013, 692-697.
2. Doris Liebermann. *Vera Lourié Briefe an Dich: Erinnerungen an das russische Berlin.* Frankfurt a. M., 2014, pp. 31-32.
3. Andrej Babikov, Manfred Schrubá. “Pis’ma V. V. Nabokova ...” *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch*, 5, 2017, p. 233.
4. Thomas Beyer is the author and editor of dozens of articles and books about Russian Berlin, Andrei Bely, Vera Lurie, Aleksei Remizov and Marina Cvetaeva. Most are available under his name on academia.edu.