For David

Contents

Illustrations

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Preface

I know that my account of Magda Nachman's life will be patchy. There are many gaps in the record. When Czesław Miłosz tells us, "Obviously, all biographies are false," he reminds us that in our choice of what to include and what to leave out, in what is known and what is unknown, in what we choose to emphasize, never mind how we choose to interpret, we fail to achieve the whole truth. Miłosz goes on to say that "the value of biographies, then, is solely that they allow one to re-create the era in which a given life was lived." Solely? That is surely not always the case. The subjects of some biographies tower above their time. However, in the case of Magda Nachman, I cannot but agree all too heartily with Miłosz. A reticent, quiet, sensitive character, she seldom appears in the center of events that were raging about her, and it is precisely that absence from the limelight that makes her a fitting subject around which to re-create the era in which she lived. Evidence of her participation in the fateful developments of her time survives in letters, official documents, and a few paintings. But even those meager surviving traces of her life harbor a vivid testimony, an imprint on her epoch.

The project of writing the life of Magda Nachman came to me by happenstance. It was the gift of my friend and colleague Viktoria Schweitzer, who, while collecting archival material for her book on the great Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, gathered documents from cross-referenced archival folders—just in case, you never know—for some possible future use. Viktoria was among the first scholars engaged in Tsvetaeva's resurrection. And while resurrecting the poet, she resurrected the poet's milieu—her friends, relatives, acquaintances, and chance personages who had been pulled into her orbit. Magda Nachman is one of those personages; she moved on the periphery of Tsvetaeva's world, yet Magda's name is indissolubly linked to that of the great Russian poet by her well-known oil portrait of Tsvetaeva. Magda painted it in 1913 at the Crimean dacha of the poet Maximilian Voloshin, into which—as luck would have it—Magda and her friend the artist Julia Obolenskaya had wandered in search of a place to spend the summer.

Viktoria transcribed a correspondence between Magda and Julia covering the years of the artists' apprenticeship and the beginning of their professional lives. This period, from 1908 to 1921, coincided with World War I, the two Russian Revolutions, and the Russian Civil War. There was no reason to include more than a few excerpts from those letters in the book on Tsvetaeva that Viktoria was writing. That book was published in 1988, and the correspondence was filed away for a future project. In 2010, realizing that she would not have time for the book she had envisioned on the artistic and literary circle of Koktebel, Viktoria suggested that I might be interested in taking it on. She gave me her transcripts and threw in a copy of a talk given in the 1920s by Julia Obolenskaya in memory of her teacher Léon Bakst, who taught both Julia and Magda at the Zvantseva Art Academy, which flourished in St. Petersburg from 1906 until the 1917 revolution.[1]

This book is in part a tribute to the vision and courage of Julia Obolenskaya, Magda's closest friend and chief correspondent, who saved hundreds of letters written to her and also her own letters, many of them returned to her for safekeeping by her correspondents as they were leaving Russia. Through the time of the revolutions and the Russian Civil War, Bakst's students from the Zvantseva Art Academy, scattered all over the country, continued to correspond with one another. These young men and women bore witness in their letters to the historical events that swirled around them. When the dust settled in the late 1920s and the Soviet regime had firmly established itself, many of the letters that Obolenskaya had saved would have been considered incriminating simply because they offered an objective description of recent events. For this reason, personal statements describing those years are rare, for in the 1930s, the consequences of such material being discovered by the secret police—whether under the name GPU, OGPU, GUGB, or NKVD—were severe. Julia exercised a certain degree of self-preservation by blacking out a line here or discarding half a page there, but for the most part, she preserved her correspondence as it had been written. (She likely destroyed all letters arriving from émigrés: in the archival collection there are no letters that she received from her friends abroad, although there is internal evidence that such letters had indeed been received.)

Some of the letters that Julia saved were written by important cultural figures, such as the poets Maximilian Voloshin and Vladislav Khodasevich,

1 Since then, Obolenskaya's talk has been published. See Iuliia Obolenskaia, "V shkole Zvantsovoi pod rukovodstvom L. Baksta i M. Dobuzhinskogo" (edited and with a commentary by Lina Bernstein and Elena Nekludova), *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 37 (2011): 209–242.

while other letters and diary entries provide descriptions of such individuals. But many of Julia's correspondents were simply her school friends, summer acquaintances, and relatives. The preservation of such cultural artifacts in the face of destructive political forces had become for her a moral imperative.

Before she was evacuated from Moscow at the beginning of World War II, Julia gathered the most valuable letters, sewed them into a large canvas sack, and deposited them at the Tretyakov Gallery. The remainder—hundreds of letters, several notebooks containing diaries, pictures, and photographs—were left in her room of the communal apartment and were salvaged after her death in 1945 and deposited in the State Literature Museum, where they were stored in a closet for many years, of interest to no one and in danger of being eaten by mice or thrown out with the trash. Their survival is a tribute to Obolenskaya and to the devoted archivists who recognized their value and preserved them. Thanks to the almost miraculous survival of this treasure, we have a small window into how some private lives were affected by momentous events.

When I received Viktoria's transcripts of the Nachman–Obolenskaya correspondence, I understood that sooner or later, I would be traveling to Russian archives to verify all the letters and collect more material. I would also have to visit the places from which the letters were written: St. Petersburg, Julia's and Magda's birthplace; Moscow, where they both lived and worked; villages in the Russian countryside, to which Magda had fled during the civil war; and of course Koktebel, on the Crimean peninsula, which was the center of the literary and artistic circle that Viktoria had been planning to write about.

But before even thinking about traveling, I thought I would see what I could find on the internet from the comfort of home. The search words "Magda Nachman" predictably yielded many web pages related to Marina Tsvetaeva, all of which repeated the same two pieces of information: The first was the association of Magda's name with her portrait of Tsvetaeva. The second, which I will discuss later, was what Magda Nachman wrote to Julia Obolenskaya on the death of Tsvetaeva's daughter Irina, words much quoted and discussed, sometimes with opprobrium against Magda.

But there was more. I learned that in 1933, Magda painted a portrait of Vladimir Nabokov, apparently now lost, a surviving photograph of which appears on the dust jacket of *Glory*, the 1971 translation of Nabokov's novel *Podvig*, published in Paris in 1932. In 1933, the year of the portrait, Nabokov was living in Berlin. Where, when, how did Magda meet Nabokov? Viktoria had heard from someone who had known someone who had heard from someone else that at some point, Magda had left Russia for Berlin. Magda Nachman

was not Viktoria's main research subject, and she did not pursue the snippets of information about Magda coming her way. Nabokov's portrait suggested that by 1933, Magda had left Russia and had arrived—settled?—in Berlin. When did she leave and under what circumstances?

The mountain of questions grew with each new discovery. Another snippet recalled by Viktoria had to do with Magda marrying an Indian national called Acharya who had come to Russia to take part in the Second or Third Congress of the Third Communist International. That Magda had indeed married the prominent Indian nationalist Mandayam Parthasarathi Tirumal (M. P. T.) Acharya I inferred from reading on the internet that Acharya had left Russia in 1922 "with his Russian wife." I read as well that Acharya had died in Bombay. So Berlin or no Berlin, Magda seems to have married Acharya, left Russia, and perhaps at some point emigrated with him to India. Thinking I might be able to find evidence of Magda in India through possible connections with other European refugees in India, I asked an Indian colleague whether she knew of any such refugees during the 1930s and 1940s. She mentioned the renowned Viennese expressionist dancer Hilde Holger, who had fled to Bombay in 1939.

Hilde Holger became a name to conjure with. She would lead me to London and Bombay. I would learn that Hilde had settled in Bombay in 1939 and that Magda Nachman, who had arrived there a few years earlier, had become her close friend and collaborator.

Thus it was that from my internet portal I was hearing tidings of Magda from Russia, Germany, and India. It appeared that she had had the misfortune to occupy a front-row seat at the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the rise of Nazism, and the bloody strife surrounding Indian independence. I was impressed that Magda, driven by fate across the globe, had held fast to her artistic ideals, becoming by the end of her life an admired and respected artist. Yet after her death, she vanished almost without a trace. What a life! Where did it all go? What can be reconstructed? What resurrected?

I knew then that I would be writing not a study of the Koktebel literary circle, but a biography of the artist Magda Nachman. I began contacting archives, museums, and newspaper depositories that might have more information on Magda's origins, whereabouts, and works in Russia and Western Europe. I also decided to look into the India connection. A bit of googling showed me that Magda's husband, Acharya, is a fairly well known figure in Indian history. He even has a Wikipedia page, though it gives a rather meager biographical sketch. I read that little was known about his life after 1922—that would be about when he and Magda left Russia—but that he arrived in Bombay, perhaps in 1935,

perhaps in 1948. Could I trace Magda to India? Acharya ended up in India, but I could not find any mention of Magda in connection with him.

The only other name I had to work with, Hilde Holger, produced plenty of hits: encyclopedia articles, biographies, and an "official website." At the Hilde Holger home page, I opened the menu item "Archive | Art Collection" and typed "Magda Nachman" into the search box. Lo and behold! a drawing materialized labeled "Bombay–Hilde by Magda Nachman" (figure 1).

Figure 1. Magda Nachman. *Hilde Holger* (*Hilde Holger Archive © 2001 Primavera Boman-Behram*).

I gazed on the image with wild surmise. Then I wrote to the "contact" address on the website, and received a reply from the keeper of the archive, who turned out to be none other than Hilde Holger's daughter, Primavera Boman-Behram. Prim, as I was soon calling her, lived in London, whither her mother had immigrated in 1948 with her husband, the well-known homeopathic physician Ardeshir Kavasji Boman-Behram, whom she had married in 1940. Prim's archive, which resides in her London townhouse, richly documents her mother's professional life, including her Indian years. Prim sent me scans of numerous documents pertaining to that period, and Magda's name appeared frequently. I now knew for certain that Magda had emigrated from Berlin to Bombay, and I could see that I would sooner or later be going to India in search of her.

Magda's flight from Berlin to India was also confirmed somewhat later by her great-niece, Sophie Seifalian, who also lives in London. She found me on the internet in the course of genealogical research on her family, for I had given some talks and published some articles connected with Magda, and our names had begun to appear in tandem. When Sophie's letter appeared in my "inbox," my first impulse was to hop on the next plane for London. On more sober reflection, I telephoned. I was soon treated to a cache of family photographs, oral history, documents—including obituaries of Magda from Indian newspapers—and an invitation to visit.

Sophie's cousin Theo, who had been the family historian, had collected quite a number of Indian publications on Magda. He sent me copies of a portion of his collection of letters and photographs, hastily duplicated. Tragically, Theo died that summer, and I now unfortunately have no access to his family archive. Nonetheless, from Prim and from other relatives of Magda's I had learned much. I could now map Magda Nachman's life and thereby my book devoted to it. I would retrace Magda's path of exile from Russia to Germany and from there to India. I now knew that sometime in the 1930s, Magda had followed her husband to Bombay. And I followed her there.

CHAPTER 1

The Great Little Lady of the Bombay Art World

Magda Nachman died on February 12, 1951, at the age of sixty-one, in Bombay. Here is a portion of an obituary that appeared in a Bombay newspaper two days later:

> Fate struck a cruel blow to the art world on Monday last. The large gathering of artists and art-lovers, who had thronged the hall of the Institute of Foreign Languages to witness the opening of the exhibition of the paintings of the versatile artist Magda Nachman, were in for a melancholy surprise. Magda Nachman, it was announced, had passed away a few hours before the opening of the exhibition.[1]

From this obituary, published in the Bombay *Free Press Bulletin*, and others carried by many Indian newspapers, one may infer that Magda Nachman had achieved considerable acclaim, respect, and love from Bombay artists, the museum-going public, and many friends in whose reminiscences she comes alive as a warm, modest, and sensitive person. One of the obituaries called her "the great little lady of the Bombay art world." The journal *Aesthetics* devoted half of its January–March 1951 issue to articles on Magda solicited from several Indians and Europeans living in Bombay. The writers included the editor of the journal, R. C. Gupta; the dancer Hilde Holger; the lama Anagarika Govinda; the artist Li Gotami; a correspondent of the *Jewish Advocate*, Miss H. Kohn; the Czech writer in India Vilem Haas; the art critic Hermann Goetz; the British cultural affairs officer Wayne M. Hartwell; Major C. E. Dust; Mrs. Gertrude Murray Correa; and the writer Irene Pohrille.[2] In a private letter to Hilde

1 *Free Press Bulletin*, February 14, 1951.

2 *Aesthetics* 5, no. 1 (1951): 2–18. This journal, published by the Bombay Youths' Art and Culture Circle, promoted modern Indian artists and published illustrated essays on the newest developments in world art. Within the same covers one could find pictures by M. F. Hussain,

Holger, Charles Petras, an expatriate Austro-Hungarian journalist and founder of the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) in Bombay, a meeting place for the cultures of India and the West,[3] informed his friend of Magda's death:

> Please read now the other side of this letter and don't be shocked. … On 12.2.51 Magda Nachman died two hours before the opening of her exhibition at the IFL in Bombay, so that Oscar Brown[4] had to open it as a Memorial Exhibition. Over 500 people came & within an hour they sold paintings for 6000.—The newspapers were carrying headlines about her & it. It is said that Bombay had never seen as brilliant a gathering as the one that night. Yes, a bit late … isn't it?

A bit late indeed. Magda had spent all her adult artistic life on the run, facing hunger, poverty, and obscurity. In India, her last refuge, she became a successful artist and a mentor to a group of young modern painters.

She had been hospitalized a month before the opening of the exhibition, which had been organized by her friends to raise money for her medical care. St. George's Hospital, where she died, was a public hospital for the poor, with overcrowded rooms, dirt, and stench. Still, Magda likely received better treatment than other inmates because she was "white," a decided advantage in 1951, when the British had only recently left.

India! What an unlikely place for a girl from St. Petersburg to end up. It is easy to imagine Russian émigrés after the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War fleeing to Constantinople, Prague, Riga, Berlin, and Paris; or European Jews escaping to Palestine, South America, or the United States. But India was an uncommon destination for those pushed around by the events of that time. Fearing professional competition and social burden, the British were notoriously stingy with their visas, and the few that they issued went generally to the young and capable. British policy restricted entry into India even by persons

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Jamini Roy, and K. H. Ara, and works by Picasso, Braque, and Matisse as well as works by Chinese and Japanese artists.

3 In 1946, Petras opened an international center, called the Institute of Foreign Languages, in Bombay, which he later expanded to New Delhi (1950). He arranged performances, cultural radio programs, and exhibitions, which included Magda's solo shows, two of which were posthumous: one in Bombay in 1951 (mentioned above), and one in Delhi the following year. Petras promoted Indian modern art and exhibited many contemporary up-and-coming Indian artists (for example, S. H. Raza).

4 Oscar Brown was the chief presidency magistrate of Bombay.

who were not found politically undesirable and whose friends or relatives already in India were ready to render support. The numbers are chilling: from January 1938 to February 1939, the government of India, having decided that not more than 150 foreigners would be allowed to compete for employment in India, issued 269 entry visas to Jewish refugees, among them 128 women and sixteen children.[5] Petras, Holger, and Nachman were among the lucky few. Others included the Czech editor, screenwriter, and avant-garde film critic Willy Haas and his friend the composer and musicologist Walter Kaufmann, like Haas also from Bohemia, who in 1936 created the signature tune for All-India Radio. Several Austrian artists and art collectors made it to Bombay and subsequently became a major force in promoting and supporting Indian modern art.

I flew to Mumbai at the end of January 2014, arriving late at night. A driver from the Kings International Hotel, a smallish man, strong and assured in his movements, met me at the airport. Carrying my suitcase, he walked ahead of me toward the car, turning his head every few seconds to keep an eye on me, repeating "Come, come"—a mantra that soon became familiar to me as the standard call of a guide to his charge as he leads you through a crowd, or when you are crossing a road together, or when he is just taking you somewhere: "Come, come."

I wanted to see Mumbai as the Bombay it was in Magda's time, 1936 to 1951. The city's population explosion came later. In the mid 1930s, a building boom turned the city into a huge construction site that saw the erection of modern Art Deco buildings on land reclaimed from the Arabian Sea. And because there were few zoning regulations, the city became a hodgepodge of the spacious and elegant alongside congestion, filth, and squalor.

Poverty, but not destitution, must have been familiar to Magda. Bazaars, workers' quarters, and the city streets on which tradesmen hawked their wares offered her the models for the city's poor who populate her works. In her time, the city must have been a much friendlier place than it appeared to me in 2014, without the incessant honking and enveloping pollution from the endlessly congested traffic. There were instead light horse-drawn carriages, private and for hire, along with omnibuses and rattling trams. And there was interesting

5 See Joachim Oesterheld, "British Policy towards German-Speaking Emigrants in India, 1939–1945," in *Jewish Exile in India, 1933–1945*, ed. Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voigt (New Delhi: MANOHAR in association with Max Mueller Bhavan, 1999), 26.

architecture: earlier colonial Gothic Revival and newly erected Art Deco apartment and office buildings, and palatial movie theaters, all enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

I had come here to walk by Magda's side, and those walks began on my first morning in Mumbai.

That first night, as we pulled into the courtyard of the Kings International Hotel, I did not know that the ocean was near. I did not see it, nor did I smell it. But when I looked out my window in the morning, I saw the ocean sprawled before me in all its gray glory. I went out, and as I was crossing the sand, I met two small children, who bravely came up to me, said, "Good morning," and shook hands, their chaperone, apparently a proud father, encouraging them to speak English. He told me that the beach was called Juhu. The name pierced my heart, for I had learned from Primavera that Hilde Holger had danced here, on this very spot, in the 1940s, in a dress designed by Magda. And it was here that Hilde took her dance students, here that magnificent pictures of her choreography had been taken (figures 2 and 3).

The beach lay in front of me, beautiful and relatively clean, a light mist hovering above the water. Just a few people were strolling or jogging along the

Figure 2. Students of Hilde Holger on Juhu beach (*Hilde Holger Archive © 2001 Primavera Boman-Behram*).