for Karen, Mira, Tatiana—
my guiding stars

Contents

Then Apolek completed the Last Supper and the stoning of Mary of Magdala. One Sunday, he unveiled the frescoed walls. Prominent citizens, whom the priest had invited, recognized Janek, the limping convert, in Paul the Apostle, and the young Jewish woman Elka, the daughter of unknown parents and the mother of many homeless children, in Mary Magdalene. The prominent citizens ordered that the blasphemous images be covered. The priest showered the desecrator of divinity with threats. But Apolek did not cover the frescoed walls.

—Isaac Babel

When I showed her pictures of paintings, she went directly to the figures as people, commenting on their physical characteristics and probable personalities. She saw rabbis in Greco, waiters in Grosz, greaseballs and gangsters and fairies in the groups of the Italian Renaissance.

—Edmund Wilson

Preface: Translingual Adventures

I had completed this book three weeks prior to the start of the war in Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has placed—for the second time since my family's emigration/immigration—a demarcation line between my past and my present. In the spring of 2022, as I was putting the finishing touches to this book, I kept thinking of the bloodshed in Ukraine not only as an attempt by Putin's regime to murder the land where three of my grandparents had been born before the start of World War I, but also as a neocolonial war aimed at the restoration of the Soviet past.

In different ways, I'm rooted in three cultures—Russian, Jewish, and American. Yet a writer's life is about much more than one's sense of roots. It's about floating in spacetime, about the texture, scent, and taste of words. The war in Ukraine has brought into devastatingly sharp focus what I have known for quite some time and tried to practice in my work: writers are not only products of their origins but also creative remakers of their identities.

I first started thinking about the interrelationship of origins and literary language after coming to the West in the summer of 1987. The black sand of a seedy Tyrrhenian public beach in the Italian town of Ladispoli was my open-air

reading and writing room. My parents and I had recently left Moscow for good after eight and a half years of a refusenik limbo. We were spending the summer in Italy while our US refugee visas were being processed. We had brought four suitcases, one of them containing three or four tattered family photo albums, and two manual typewriters, one my father's, the other mine. The typewriters have survived all the peripeties of transit and still function today, although not much besides those typewriters and some Russian books from our old Moscow library remains of the material baggage of our Soviet past. As to the memory of our lives before emigration, it's taken much longer to dispose of the immaterial baggage of exile.

It was a summer of transit, a time of many discoveries. In Italy, still waiting for America, I pored over books by Russian exiles who had faced the predicament of choosing another language of self-expression. First on my list was Vladimir Nabokov, the great Russian-American writer, author of *Lolita* and *Pnin*, who remade himself after coming to America as a refugee in 1940, having rescued his Jewish wife and son. I was also reading the novels and stories of Mark Aldanov, who wrote in Russian and actively published in English and who, in the 1940s and early 1950s, before the *Lolita* explosion, was the most commercially successful living Russian author in America. With me, copied into a small leather-bound notebook, was two-thirds of what would become my first poetry collection, to be published in New York in 1990. Would I ever be able to write in another language? I wondered that summer. What would be the price

of losing—of abnegating—what I thought at the time to be my own Russian voice?

Four months later, on a wet November afternoon of my first American autumn (which was balmy by Moscow standards), I walked across the campus of Brown University and knocked on the office door of John (Jack) Hawkes. Author of *The Passion Artist*, Hawkes was a legendary American postmodernist, the most famous writer on the Brown faculty. He was retiring the following year. A recent immigrant studying literature and literary translation, I desperately wanted to take Hawkes's last fiction-writing seminar. All the twelve slots were taken.

Silver-haired, witty, verbally perverse, Hawkes listened to my rambling account of leaving the USSR, of writing poetry and fiction in Russian, and of coming to the US. He waited, silently, lips twitching, then asked:

"Have you read Nabokov?"

Hawkes pronounced the first "o" in Nabokov's name with an extra roundness, as if caressing the stressed Russian vowel.

"Nabokov?" I asked, in disbelief. "Of course I have."

"He's remarkable," said Hawkes. "I first read him in 1945—in San Marino."

"My grandmother got lost in San Marino last summer," I commented. "She ended up on the local emergency radio broadcast."

Hawkes looked at me with bemusement. In 1965 his novel *Second Skin* competed with Nabokov's *The Defense* and Bashevis Singer's *Short Friday* for the National

Book Award for Fiction. Saul Bellow's *Herzog* took the prize.

Hawkes had no interest in Soviet politics, no ear for Jewish immigrant anxieties. Yet he let me into his fiction seminar as the thirteenth student and even had his own plans for my literary future. Hawkes wanted me to write surrealist, pathological tales set in the Russian countryside. In the spring of 1988, a translingual novice surrounded by other young writers—all of them American-born—I first tried my hand at composing fiction and nonfiction in English. I'm forever grateful to Jack Hawkes, whom I ended up disappointing with what was then my passion for politics-infused narratives.

Over thirty-five years have gone by. I've now lived in Boston much longer than in my native Moscow. Many times, over these years, I've asked myself, sometimes happily, sometimes wistfully, what it means to write translingually. I've learned that there's more to translingualism than working not just in one language but in two or more, simultaneously or consecutively. In the not so recent past, translingual writers used to be all alone, artistically homeless, culturally stateless. Think of the loneliness of Rahel, arguably the first modern Hebrew woman poet, who was born in 1890 in Saratov on the Volga and died in Tel Aviv in 1931, leaving for posterity two published collections of Hebrew verse and an unpublished manuscript of Russian poems. Think also of Paul Celan, a multilingual Jew from Northern Bukovina who lost his family during the Shoah, went on to write and publish peerless German-language poetry, and in 1970 killed

himself in Paris. Think, finally, of the less unhappy yet still lonely story of Samuel Beckett, the Irish literary genius who spent much of his adult life in France and translated most of his French works into English. Is a translingual writer who has found a new home no longer writing in a trance, no longer living in transit?

Perhaps literary translingualism means, as the fervently monolingual American poet Robert Frost might put it, "betwixt and between," *both* here and elsewhere. If so, what happens when we discover a literary community of fellow translinguals? What changes when we perceive ourselves—and are perceived—as a trend, a literary movement, a school?

Let me turn, briefly, to the story I know best and sometimes call my own, that of ex-Russians—and ex-Soviets—writing in English. When the Russian diplomat Pavel Svinyin (Svenin) lived and published in Philadelphia in the 1810s, he was in a league of his own. When the Yiddish- and Russian-speaking Abraham Cahan, the legendary editor of the *Forward*, an immigrant from the Russian Empire, was learning to write fiction in English in the 1900s, he, too, did not have many interlocutors. The St. Petersburg–born Vladimir Nabokov had very few artistic colleagues in the truest sense of the word when he arrived in America.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many more writers came to the US and Canada from the USSR, riding the wave of the great Jewish emigration. These new Russian-American writers—Joseph Brodsky most famously—sought to write in English *Russianly*, and not so infrequently this ambition stood in the way of their styles and voices as they forded the Hudson

and the St. Lawrence. It has taken at least a generation for Soviet immigrants to find their literary bearings in the New World, and perhaps even longer to form a translingual neighborhood—a community—both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the American and Canadian cultural mainstream. Some of today's translinguals left the former Soviet Union as children and young people. They—we—have their literary great-uncles and great-aunts on both sides of the Atlantic. Representatives of this new wave of American and Canadian translingualism write in English and do so by hearkening back to such major Jewish-Russian authors as the incomparable short-story writer Isaac Babel and also to Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, who coauthored their popular satirical novels. At the same time, not surprisingly, some of the Russian-American authors also nominate Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Mordecai Richler as their literary ancestors. Today we have translingual literary lovers and partners, editors and publishers, friends and next-door neighbors. A greater sense of shared cultural ancestry and thematic unity makes the circle of today's Anglophone writers from the former USSR something of a Russian family business and also something of a Jewish community affair. Only time will show whether we're bound to lose our Russian-American and Russian-Canadian voices tinged with a Jewish accent.

Over the years of living—and writing—away from Russia, I have gone through periods of writing literary texts only in Russian, of writing no literary texts in Russian, of writing poetry in Russian and literary prose in English, and of writing only literary prose in English. The final year of

the Trump rule and the onset of the COVID pandemic led me to the composition of English-language poetry, some of it in the satirical mode. And throughout these years of living as an émigré and a translingual subject, I have always been involved in one or another form of self-translation. Self-translation has evolved from attempts to give previous Russian texts another life in English (a life they may or may not have deserved)—through creatively revising my English-language fiction and nonfiction—to parallel compositions of texts in both English and Russian, a mode that I presently find most stimulating.

In what language do you think? I'm often asked during readings and literary events. Is it Russian? English? Both? I reply, honestly, that in a sense it does not matter for the creative outcome. Over the years, I have had vivid dreams in which I lectured in French about sophisticated matters of culture and history. When I'm awake, my command of French is limited. In the spring of 1993, when I was living and doing research in Prague, I experienced dreams in which I had extensive debates about politics with the former vintage 1968 Czech dissidents. In reality, my Czech is quite rudimentary. I'm pointing this out because dreams give us deeper access to mechanisms of culture production—mechanisms that probably impact translingual writers most profoundly by revealing the hidden texture of exile.

To return to one's translingual beginnings, my 1987 experience as a Soviet refugee in Italy eventually informed the writing of the literary memoir *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration*, in which discoveries of new worlds—

and words—are measured on the rusty scale of nostalgia. Other books of literary nonfiction and fiction have followed, including *Yom Kippur in Amsterdam*, *A Russian Immigrant: Three Novellas*, and the memoir *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*, first composed in English and subsequently recreated in Russian. Three and a half decades after emigrating from Russia, and now feeling less of a stranger among American writers, I'm still discovering the pleasures of writing in tongues.

An immigrant's life is always and inevitably a story of unburdening oneself of the past and a history of border crossing. The borders—or boundaries—include those of languages, cultures, and countries, some of them invisible while others still guarded with silences or even barbed wire. And the attempts at border crossing sometimes delight or enchant the transgressor while also auguring disappointment, heartbreak, or even real danger.

Composed in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, this book of translingual adventures is but a partial record of my immigrant discoveries, transgressions, and valedictions.

—M. D. S.
February 2021–March 2022; June 2022
Chestnut Hill-South Chatham, Massachusetts

Immigrant Baggage

Ribs of Eden

> *... Vasili Ivanovich in one radiant second realized that here in this little room with that view, beautiful to the verge of tears, life would at last be what he had always wished it to be.*
>
> —Vladimir Nabokov

As Jewish refuseniks, we learned not to give up hope. This may sound like a useless truism today, and yet the imperative not to give up has served me well over the years. It has also hurt me on a few occasions, for sometimes one needs to accept the finality of fate. And so it had taken me longer than it had my wife and daughters to accept that we wouldn't be going back to the Dolomites any time soon. Until November of 2020, I had stubbornly clung to false hopes: the EU would lift restrictions for American travelers, a vaccine would be speedily developed, and so forth. Hardly a procrastinator, I was holding off the decision to cancel the air travel to Italy until almost Thanksgiving. Now, for the first time in a while, we had no ski or travel plans for winter break, and so I had to resign myself to the fact that this Jewish ski story would have no tangible resolution. Below I've only altered some of the proportions of so-called "real life."

It all started in the winter of 2017. Visualize the sun of Veneto, end of February in Verona, and a happy Russian immigrant who had just arrived in Italy with his family from a wintry Boston. Ahead lay a sabbatical, a few lectures at Italian universities for me and a medical conference for my wife, but mainly a respite from taking call (for my wife) and from students ever ready to chew off their professor's liver (for me). Little compares in its fullness to the pleasure of recognizing the Italian beauty that we had first tasted as twenty-year-olds, Karen as a Henry-Jamesian American girl abroad, I as a Soviet refugee waiting for America. And now we planned to reconnect with all this visual and sensual plenitude, not alone but in the company of our daughters Mira (aged eleven at the time) and Tatiana (who was ten). It took us a day and a half to pose on Juliet's balcony, see a performance of *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* at the local opera

house, stand on the arched bridge over the Adige (from which one observes the ruins of a Roman theater and the winged kayaks venturing to rise against the vernal waters), and perform a slow reading of the menu cards at Verona's trattorias. On the evening of our second day, amid the *dolce far niente* we never practice back in Boston, I gave a talk at the local university. I spoke about the (mixed) marriage of V & V—Véra Slonim and Vladimir Nabokov, and my host was Count Stefano Aloe in a great black beret, friend of poets, philosophers, and itinerant musicians. On the morning of 21 February 2017, my wife, daughters, and I squeezed into a red Fiat and drove up to the Dolomites, where ahead of us lay eight days of skiing.

I won't get into the journey from Verona to the former South Tyrol (for which Himmler had special plans) and the brief stop in Bolzano, where my daughters saw famous Ötzi the Iceman, who is almost five thousand years old. If you've been there, my description won't surprise you, and if you haven't—take my word. Just the archeological museum alone justifies a visit to Bolzano. The museum and also a glass of the local Lagrein, in which one hears the guttural notes of the Ladin language laced with an echo of millennia. Why the Ladin language? Because our route took us to the heart of Ladin history and culture. In German this autonomous region of Italy—something of a bridge between central and southern Europe—is called Südtirol, and in Italian it bears a longer name, Trentino-Alto Adige. Lover of minorities and autonomous districts that I am, I was especially drawn to the ancient tribe of Ladins, proud descendants

of the Raeti, whom the Romans colonized at the start of the common era. As I planned the trip to the Dolomites, I purposefully chose the village of Badia, the northernmost and farthest in the Alta Badia chain of ski resorts. I so wanted to immerse myself in the life of this Ladin village, to hear the ancient language and observe the ways of this small European people, which numbers about 30,000 altogether.

At the sunset hour, we had left behind the villages of Colfosco, Corvara, and La Val and entered the village of Badia, located in the foothills of Santa Croce. When translated from the Italian, our hotel bears the name Mountain Melody or Melody of the Mountains, and in the original this name didn't scald our ears with banality but instead offered a promise of harmony. The front of the hotel faced the ski slopes; its back, the snow-covered hills, overgrown with pines and studded with dairy farms. From afar, our hotel resembled an early flying machine. Each room had a balcony, each offered a special view or vista.

"The Magic Mountain," I said to my wife as we stepped onto our balcony for the first time.

Karen had read Thomas Mann a long time ago and forgotten who in the novel recovers and who becomes ill. Whereas I could never forget …

For many years the hotel had been in the same Ladin family, and its matriarch, a nonagenarian *signora*, served the afternoon *glühwein* and home-baked cakes. Most of the hotel employees were local villagers, the majority of them Ladin. And only the tall bartender hailed from a town near Trieste. Dinner at the hotel was elevated to a four-act culinary