QUEERING THE RUSSIAN DIASPORA

In late summer 1921, a young Russian émigré, Petr Yuritsyn, summed up his thoughts on living in exile in a letter to a friend. He wrote: “It’s so boring here, such melancholia [toska], that even cocaine stopped helping. Pavlik, why did we end up in this idiotic country?”1 The country in question is Bulgaria, and Pavlik is Yuritsyn’s fellow Russian émigré, Pavel Tchelitchew. Their sojourn in Bulgaria was typical of this time: Yuritsyn and Tchelitchew were among the hundreds of thousands of Russian émigrés who fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, traveling via the Black Sea to the Balkans and beyond. However, in addition to the precariousness of being stateless émigrés, Yuritsyn and Tchelitchew happened to be gay. Eventually, they became lovers, and their brief romance alleviated Yuritsyn’s substance abuse problem until Tchelitchew left for Berlin later that fall. Yuritsyn stayed behind in Bulgaria, unable to secure funds to move to Berlin himself. Their correspondence dwindled as Tchelitchew remained indifferent to Yuritsyn’s queries, such as this one: “Do you remember our last kiss by the door when we walked to the landlady’s room? Remember?” He followed up with a litany of self-deprecating speculations: “You are in Berlin now. You see many handsome men and you probably forgot me, my boring and ugly, crooked-nosed and thick-lipped self,” adding, “You know, I’m almost certain you’re no longer mine. You get interested in others so easily. For example, in Belgrade you immediately got interested in some Englishman. And in Berlin there are so many handsome men [muzhschin] (I do not know how to spell this word) …” By drawing attention to his insecurity about spelling “this word,” Yuritsyn emphasizes his struggle to find appropriate

1 Pavel Tchelitchew Collection. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. All Yuritsyn quotations are from this collection. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.
vocabulary to express the confusing and all-consuming desire for men, that also feeds his image of Berlin as a gay haven.

The intimate drama that plays out in this correspondence is at once mundane and extraordinary. Presumably, heartbreak is a universal human experience, regardless of one’s sexuality. One would be hard-pressed to find, however, readily available, non-homophobic Russian narratives of queer relationships in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in spaces of emigration.\(^2\) To be sure, this is not a uniquely Russian phenomenon. Although Weimar-era Berlin is now celebrated as the birthplace of the modern LGBTQ+ emancipation movement, the city was perceived as “Sodom and Gomorrah in a Prussian tempo,” to quote Thomas Mann’s son Klaus Mann.\(^3\) As the drama scholar Mel Gordon has put it in his spectacular *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*, “Moralists across the widest spectrum of political and spiritual beliefs have condemned by rote [Berlin] this chimerical metropolis as a strange city, built on strange soil.”\(^4\)

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\(^4\) Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*, expanded edition (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2006), 1. Christopher Isherwood, who played a major role in mythologizing Weimar Berlin as a sexually liberated metropolis, suggested in his 1976 memoir that Weimar Berlin’s reputation for the risqué was what attracted all manner of tourists to the city: “In the [wealthier] West End there were also dens of pseudo-vice catering to heterosexual tourists. Here screaming boys in drag and monocled, Eton-cropped girls in dinner jackets play-acted the high jinks of Sodom and Gomorrah, horrifying the onlookers and reassuring them that Berlin was still the most decadent city in Europe.” Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind: A Memoir 1929-1939* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015), 29.
But even ostensibly progressive Russian writers chose to comment disapprovingly on Berlin’s “most perverse abominations,” to use Andrey Bely’s phrase. In his travelogue *One of the Mansions of the Kingdom of the Shades*, Bely branded Berlin a “bourgeois Sodom” where “hundreds of homosexual and lesbian cafés operate openly.” Ilya Erenburg observed that in Berlin a regular prostitute “begins to look like a model of virtue,” because “in the cafes where women love women and men love men, she is simply the most ordinary and traditional prostitute.” Erenburg noted additionally that in Berlin one could buy “an academic journal, *Freundschaft*, devoted to homosexuality”—but one had to do so “without blushing.” Viktor Shklovsky hinted at the utility of writing about homosexuality in Berlin in the postscript to his novel *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*: “in the dark public toilets of Berlin, men indulge in mutual onanism. They are suffering from a devalued currency and hunger; their country is perishing.” The homophobic aspects of Shklovsky’s, Erenburg’s, and Bely’s texts serve to underscore the supposed depravity of Europe since all three writers chose to return to Soviet Russia. (One does wonder, however, how they gained such intimate knowledge of Berlin’s queer spaces.)

Meanwhile, the Yuritsyn-Tchelitchew correspondence offers a rare glimpse of the same-sex desire between two Russian men in exile. Most importantly, Yuritsyn’s letters to Tchelitchew—in their content and materiality—bring together ideas about geography, sexuality, and history in cities, provincial (Sofia) and metropolitan (Berlin) alike. They suggest not only the existence of queer émigrés, but also their negotiation of their own spaces and selves in ways that

5 Andrei Belyi, *Odna iz obitelei tsarstva tenei* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1924), 32.
6 Il’ia Erenburg, *Belyi ugol’ ili slezy Vertera* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1928), 128-129. Ironically, Erenburg’s early poetry is quoted in Isherwood’s memoir. The British writer was likely unaware of the Russian author’s less than flattering references to gay men in Berlin. See Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 10.
raise questions about the more traditional accounts of émigré culture: Is it possible to understand exile without an understanding of what it is like to be an exile within exile? How did the queer émigrés navigate normative expectations of sexuality and negotiated belonging in big cosmopolitan cities with large Russian-speaking émigré populations, such as Berlin and Paris? What sorts of configurations of family and community did they imagine and participate in?

The present chapter is a step towards examining non-normative sexual identities and practices among Russian diasporic queer subjects in the age of modernism. My aim is to identify how Russian queer artists and intellectuals in exile envisioned and practiced alternative lives and to show how they challenge standard assumptions about communal affiliation in the diaspora, and by extension, in the homeland. The British poet Gregory Woods has called this sort of imagined community the Homintern, the “international presence of lesbians and gay men in modern life.”

Although Woods’s analogy to the Communist International, or Comintern, is largely tongue-in-cheek, it is fitting in Berlin, which was, along with Moscow, one of the major centers of the global leftist circuit where the Communist agenda sometimes overlapped with queer activities. For instance, the filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein met with the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld at his Institute for Sexual Science, while the poet Sergey Esenin is said to have explored Berlin’s gay bars with his wife, the American dancer Isadora Duncan. Eisenstein repeatedly returned to images of Berlin’s gay bars and the gender bending he witnessed there in

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9 See Evgenii Bershtein, “Eisenstein’s Letter to Magnus Hirschfeld: Text and Context,” in The Flying Carpet: Studies on Eisenstein and Russian Cinema in Honor of Naum Kleiman, ed. Joan Neuberger and Antonio Somaini (Sesto San Giovanni: Éditions Mimésis, 2017), 75-86. According to Nicolas Nabokov, Esenin insisted that they “go together to a pederast night club” – “I’m told it’s close to here. Men get undressed there and bugger each other on the stage. I want to see it. Come with me and Dunkansha.” Of course, it is difficult to say how truthful this account is, written as it was over fifty years after their meeting took place. See Nabokov, Bagázh: Memoirs of a Russian Cosmopolitan (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 126.
his graphic work later in life (fig. 1). But our knowledge of Russian émigré responses to contemporary German discourses of sexuality is severely limited.10

![Figure 1. Sergey Eisenstein, “Cosy Corner Berlin” (recto verso), ca. 1930
Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow](image)

The search for documentary evidence to tell the stories of queer exiles is impeded by the twin problems of invisibility and erasure: frank depictions of non-normative acts, desires, and expressions, already rare, have often been suppressed. I recover them by retracing the routes of their marginalization in the historical record. That is, my work is informed by archival research that is attuned to absences, omissions, and gaps as much as to the presence of evidence. As Daniel Marshall, Kevin Murphy, and Zeb Tortorici put it in their editors’ introduction to a special issue of *Radical History Review* on queering archives, “Fragments of information float unfixed—historically unraveled—and we form archives when we pull the fragments into the

10 To my knowledge, the first book written in emigration that tackles openly the problem of homosexuality is Nina Berberova’s biography of Tchaikovsky – *Chaikovskii: Istoriia odinokoi zhizni* (Berlin: Petropolis, 1936). Roman Gul’s brochure about Andrei Bely’s writings is a curious, if not entirely successful, early attempt to theorize gender – *Pol v tvorcheste: Razbor proizvedenii Andreiia Belogo* (Berlin: Manfred, 1923).
orbit of efforts to know.”¹¹ For instance, while Yuritsyn’s letters offer a rich insight into queer exile, there is no reliable information about his own biography. Tchelitchew became a prominent painter, leaving Sofia for Berlin before moving to Paris and then to New York, as discussed in Chapter Three. There is no indication that the two of them ever met again. However, Tchelitchew valued the several handwritten pages from his ex-partner enough that he saved them in his personal archive through his many peregrinations around the world. Preserved as if in anticipation of queer historicism, these letters contest the perceived heteronormativity of Russian émigré culture and announce the need to reframe the approaches to its study.

Recalcitrance

As discussed in the opening chapter of this book, the semantic distinction between “exile” and “émigré” is an important one. For Russians forced to live abroad following the 1917 Revolution, self-identifying as émigré (as opposed to “living in exile”) implied a certain ideology and commitment to “preserve the values and traditions of Russian culture and to continue in creative efforts for the benefit and ongoing spiritual progress of the homeland.”¹² Gradually, the term émigré came to mean any Russian living abroad by choice, but the politically conservative connotations of the term never fully dissolved. However, any notion of Russia Abroad as a benevolent Orthodox Slavic patriarchy is undermined by the cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse reality of émigré life.¹³

¹³ See, for instance, the transcripts of the astonishingly candid, and at times troubling, conversations between Iurii Ivask and Georgii Adamovich. Ivask Papers, Amherst Center for Russian Culture.
While mainstream Russian émigré culture preserved the imperial heritage, it also advanced Russian art and literature unburdened by Soviet censorship and became embedded within European and Anglo-American contexts. Russia Abroad produced such influential cultural figures as the composer Igor Stravinsky, the painter Marc Chagall, the writer Vladimir Nabokov, and the choreographer George Balanchine. Equally illustrious are the queer members of the émigré intelligentsia, such as the founder of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev, the dancers Ida Rubinstein, Vaclav Nijinsky, and Serge Lifar, the actress Alla Nazimova, the painters Konstantin Somov and Pavel Tchelitchew, and the poets Marina Tsvetaeva, Georgy Adamovich, and Valery Pereleshin, among many others. Ironically, however, singling out the stories of individual success obscures the larger implications of queer collectivity in exile and queerness itself becomes merely a biographical detail, if it is mentioned at all. The standard narrative thus remains heteronormative, even as recent scholarship has expanded to consider émigré culture’s transnationally networked nature.14

There are challenges to researching queer dimensions of émigré culture in the interwar period because of the relative scarcity and, in some cases, the inaccessibility of archival sources. But sometimes even the known artifacts can surprise one with laconic suggestions of queer potential. Consider the photograph taken in the 1920s in Berlin by Roman Vishniac (fig. 2.)

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Captioned “Recalcitrance,” the snapshot presents a quotidian scene in the city. Passersby are busily walking in every direction conjuring up a sense of the everyday. The dog refusing to comply with its leash anchors the composition. Standing stubbornly in the middle of the sidewalk, the recalcitrant dog disrupts mindless movement and animates the image’s perspective. The image is shot from the liminal space of a threshold with the camera cautiously yet curiously peeking into the street. On the left, the building partially blocks the view of a sign that reads “inden Bad,” directly above the stubborn dog. The cut-off sign intensifies the effect of spontaneity, but also draws attention to itself and its message, which advertises “Linden Bad,” a Russian bathhouse. The positioning of the sign across from the entrance to the building from which the street is observed suggests that the camera, and the viewer along with it, are on the doorsteps to that bathhouse. And while the bathhouse is a communal space unlike any other in
Russian culture, it can also be an elusive and illicit queer space.\textsuperscript{15} Berlin’s Russian bathhouses served as cruising sites for men long before the émigrés moved to the city en masse.\textsuperscript{16} That is not to say that Vishniac’s photograph necessarily documents a cruising spot. Rather, his image of the bathhouse hidden in plain view and the stubborn dog conveys the tension between historical (and archival) presence and absence, suggesting that what we see is only part of the story, full of unruly subjects hiding in the margins.

As necessary as finding the instances of queer presence is, my study goes beyond simply cataloguing the appearances of gay and lesbian characters in fictional and documentary texts produced in exile. What is far more important than “homo-spotting” is understanding the logics of location and identification that diverge from (or unexpectedly align with) the scripts of normative behavior and aesthetic practices. What, then, makes a queer diasporic subject? Gayatri Gopinath has argued that the work of diasporic queers is marked by “their inhabiting of multiple times and places, and the double vision it affords.”\textsuperscript{17} In the context of Russian emigration, however, the framework of doubled temporality can be and has been applied to all cultural producers who saw themselves as out of sync with history, rendered irrelevant by the uncertainty of their legal status as exiles.\textsuperscript{18} As Leonid Livak has observed, “Russian exiles obtained de jure what European modernists cultivated artificially, namely, the notions of crossed borders, of


breaking with the past, of cultural uprootedness, solitude, and crisis.” Consequently, the alienating experience of exile often entailed adherence to an imaginary set of ideals of wholesome Russianness exacerbated by the condition of displacement. Perhaps one of the most famous articulations of a fantasy of national coherence in exile can be found in Vladimir Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory*:

As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, émigrés, happened to dwell.20

Although exaggerated, Nabokov’s position regarding the “perfectly unimportant strangers” is symptomatic of constructing a normative exilic identity in opposition to the local and the cosmopolitan. Even in carving out a parallel temporality for himself and “thousands of other Russians,” Nabokov envisions the nation in exile within the traditional bonds of relationality based on language and genealogy: despite being immersed in the foreign environment, he claims detachment from the “illusory cities” by rejecting difference and privileging sameness.

Queer exiles, on the other hand, already always excluded from the rituals of reproductive life cycle, practice alliances and sustain solidarities across the demarcation lines of nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language as a means of survival. That is, being an exile within exile presupposes existing within multiple worlds and temporalities as a way of continuously forging hospitable forms of affiliation and collectivity. Given their participation in various, often overlapping, international networks, it is tempting to see queers in exile as “mediating figures

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between the nation and diaspora, home and the state, the local and the global,” as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan have proposed. At the same time, making any claims about queer exile that assume universality of diasporic experiences and practices, queer or otherwise, would be shortsighted. Meg Wesling has cautioned, moreover, against conflating the categories of queerness and diaspora since doing so prevents a context- and site-specific understanding of sexual difference. For example, conditions of possibility for sexuality for Russian émigrés, who lacked the option of returning to Russia, were different from those for the expatriate Americans in Paris (e.g., the salon of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas and that of Natalie Clifford Barney) or the Brits in Berlin (e.g., Christopher Isherwood, W. H. Auden, and Stephen Spender). When their paths intersected—as they did, for example, when Gertrude Stein and Pavel Tchelitchew entered into a tumultuous friendship in 1925—they shared ideas about belonging and kinship, but they hardly constituted a diaspora. Natalie Clifford Barney’s cool reception of Tsvetaeva in her salon in the 1930s is likewise indicative of the limits of queer diasporic solidarity. Moreover, Barney’s indifference to Tsvetaeva’s remarkably (anti)queer essay, Letter to the Amazon, which Tsvetaeva addressed to her, highlights the differences between (wealthy) expatriates and (impoverished) émigrés. Therefore, in discussing queer subjects who found themselves in interwar Europe in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, I prefer to use the terms exile and emigration rather than diaspora to reflect the historical specificity of their predicament.

24 In the context of black transnational culture of the 1920s and 1930s, Brent Edwards has demonstrated that the term diaspora can be used in a way that avoids “the comfort of abstraction, an easy recourse to origins” and does not
The term queer is, of course, itself the queerest of them all, and my use of it in this context is necessarily ahistorical. However, I use this term for the purposes of legibility while being mindful that its analytical capacity in application to the early twentieth-century material is limited, especially when that material is primarily about white cisgender homosexual men. The word gay is similarly problematic, but Russian terminology that circulated at the turn-of-the-century is tied to legal, medical, and theological vocabularies that were not used for self-identification. (These terms included such words as Urning, sodomite [sodomit and muzhelozhets], pederast, the third sex [tretii pol], Sapphist, and the moonlight people [liudi lunnogo sveta].) The issue of language of self-presentation becomes even more slippery on the cross-cultural terrain of exile but, to quote Heike Bauer, “I deploy queer to denote something of the sharedness of experience—however historically, socioculturally, and somatically contingent and emotionally inflected—that comes with living lives that are figured as being against accepted norms.”

When it comes to the representation of the lives that unsettle accepted norms in exile, the most visible record of queerness produced in emigration is to be found in the oeuvre of Vladimir promise “foolproof anti-essentialism.” See his The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 13.


Nabokov. For someone who professed aversion to the “sorrows of homosexuals,” Nabokov could not stay away from the topic.28 Gay characters are present in his entire body of work, invariably pathetic, laughable, inept, or evil – from the gay ballet dancers in his first Russian novel *Mary*, the quirky English Russophile Archibald Moon in *Glory*, the despicable gay imposter in *Laughter in the Dark*, and the tragic young student Yasha Chernyshevsky in his last completed Russian novel *The Gift* to the ruthless dictator in *Bend Sinister*, the inverted double of Humber Humbert, Gaston Godin in *Lolita*, the sad art teacher Lake in *Pnin*, and the deranged poet Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*.29 Outside of his fiction, Nabokov had a number of gay relatives—his uncles Ruka (Vasilii Rukavishnikov) and Konstantin Nabokov, as well as his brother Sergey—about all of whom he writes with varying degrees of acerbic charm in *Speak, Memory*.

Furthermore, Nabokov’s father, the prominent jurist Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, was among the unlikely pioneers of gay liberation in late-imperial Russia: although he maintained that homosexuality was socially undesirable, unnatural, and unhealthy, he nevertheless argued that that was insufficient reason to punish it by law.30 He pointed out that if gay men—women were never subject to this law—were to be persecuted on moral grounds to prevent damage to the institution of marriage and procreative family, then bachelorhood should be outlawed as

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29 The case of Kinbote/Botkin in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is one of the more complex instances of Nabokov’s engagement with the theme. Furthermore, as Stephen Blackwell has determined, Nabokov began his imaginings of *Pale Fire* by thinking about the life of a gay college professor in “a puritanical country, where a handshake would be the only possible erotic contact.” See Blackwell’s *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov’s Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 234.

30 Versions of the law criminalizing sexual relations between men were part of the Russian criminal code since the early eighteenth century. See Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).
well. The elder Nabokov was committed to the cause of decriminalization of homosexuality to such a degree that he translated his article on the topic into German and published it in the 1903 volume of the *Yearbook of Intermediate Sexual Types (Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen).* This unique annual journal was Hirschfeld’s project initiated in 1899, before the Institute for Sexual Science was established in 1919. In supporting Hirschfeld’s efforts from Russia, Vladimir D. Nabokov indirectly contributed to making Berlin into interwar Europe’s queerest city. It is in this city that the Nabokov family settled once in exile. Arguably, the urban environment of Berlin shaped much of Nabokov’s fiction and especially his conception of gay characters. But his openly gay younger brother Sergey, who moved from Berlin to Paris as soon as he could, helps us conceptualize queer exile unmediated by Nabokov’s fiction. The relationship between the two Nabokov brothers—one based in Berlin and the other in Paris—is paradigmatic for our understanding of exile and being queer in exile.

**A Tale of Two Brothers**

Russian émigré culture is unfathomable without Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov. His brother Sergey, nine months younger than him, is a ghost-like shadow of Vladimir. Both of them were brought up in the world of aristocratic privilege of pre-revolutionary Saint Petersburg. They both spent their adult lives in exile. Before moving to Berlin, each completed his undergraduate education at Cambridge (though Sergey started at Oxford, transferring to Christ College during

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his first year). After university, their paths diverge: under the penname Sirin, Vladimir quickly established himself as one of the most promising writers of the Russian emigration. In contrast, Sergey never wrote or published anything of note, although he reportedly was a prolific translator of Russian into English, German, and French. While Vladimir plays a main role in Russian émigré cultural history, Sergey is merely a footnote to that history: a famous writer’s gay brother.34

Their unequal relationship stretches back to their childhood. In Speak, Memory, Vladimir wrote, “For various reasons, I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother <…> He is a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections. I was the coddled one; he, the witness of coddling.”35 In the same passage, Vladimir also wrote surprisingly honestly about “certain oddities of behavior” on Sergey’s part, about him outing Sergey “in stupid wonder” after reading Sergey’s diary, and about his mixed feelings about it all.36 Vladimir never fully accepted Sergey’s sexuality and, if anything, was profoundly conflicted and anxious about same-sex desire. While he famously mythologized his childhood, the specter of his queer brother was always an uneasy presence.

Vladimir’s struggle to write about Sergey with any degree of familial affection and affirmation manifests itself in a variety of ways, some of which spill outside the conventional narrative proper. Consider, for example, the caption to the family photograph of the Nabokov siblings reproduced in Speak, Memory: in it, Nabokov identified all his siblings, and in

34 The fullest-to-date account of Sergey’s biography in exile is offered in Dieter Zimmer’s unpublished article “What Happened to Sergey Nabokov” (2017) http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/PDF/SergeyN.pdf
36 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, 257-258. According to Vladimir’s diary, the last conversation he had with his father, the night before his assassination, they talked about Sergey: “We chatted through the open door, talked of Sergey, of his strange, abnormal inclinations.” See Brian Boyd, Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 192.
describing Sergey he added that Sergey is “unfortunately disfigured by flaws in the picture” (fig. 3). The earlier drafts of the manuscript show that before settling on this phrasing, he tried “She [Elena] and Sergey are disfigured by flaws in the picture” and then “Flaws in the picture disfigure Sergey,” choosing to focus only on Sergey in accounting for slight paper discoloration and the photographer’s botched retouching of the printed image. Yet the semantic impact of the word “disfigure,” coupled with the grammatical passive voice of the caption, mark Sergey’s image as an aberration of the norm. Moreover, this disfigurement is at once an intrinsic quality of the photograph and the evidence of tampering with the original. Vladimir’s acknowledgment that the damage is unfortunate nevertheless suggests that Sergey’s flawed image compromises the integrity of the whole. As a result, Sergey’s incompleteness haunts the entire picture. In turn, this haunting makes Sergey a muted social figure that is not allowed to speak for itself, but is inevitably spoken through, about, and for. Such a refusal of agency and marginalization tells us more about Vladimir than Sergey, of course. Nevertheless, untangling the ways in which the record of Sergey’s queer life was managed helps uncover the complexity of power relations that characterize the processes of remembering and forgetting in exile. Sergey may not have left a literary legacy himself, but the ephemeral archive of his life can tell us much émigré culture, as well as about the forms of kinship forged in exile.

37 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 214.
39 Avery Gordon has argued that haunting is “one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us.” She investigates palpable absences of something or someone in the form of ghost-like traces, shadows, and rhetorical residues. In the case of the Nabokov brothers, we are presented with an inverted version of this process: Sergey is not a haunted absence but a haunted presence. See her *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.
Whatever shame, disgust, and contempt Vladimir might have felt about Sergey, they were never estranged and saw each other regularly until the outbreak of World War Two. Vladimir left Europe with his wife and son via Paris in 1940 without being able to say goodbye to his brother in person: “It so happened that he [Sergey] learned of our departure only after we had left. My bleakest recollections are associated with Paris, and the relief of leaving it was overwhelming, but I am sorry he had to stutter his astonishment to an indifferent concierge.”

As fate would have it, Sergey would never again stutter anything to Vladimir. Three facts of Sergey’s biography are remembered and usually invoked whenever his name is mentioned: he was gay, he had a bad stammer, and he died in 1945 in a Nazi concentration camp. Vladimir would find out about Sergey’s gruesome end only after the war. In a letter to an American critic and writer Edmund Wilson he wrote:

[My brother] was placed by the Germans in one of the worst concentration camps (near Hamburg) and perished there. This news gave me a horrible shock because Sergey was

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40 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 258.
the last person I could imagine being arrested: he was a harmless, indolent, pathetic person who spent his life vaguely shuttling between the Quartier Latin and a castle in Austria he shared with a friend.41

The friend was Sergey’s longtime partner, Hermann Thieme, to whom Vladimir variously refers to as Sergey’s friend, boyfriend, and husband in his letters to his wife Vera Nabokov. In one of them he provides some additional details: “I had lunch today near the Luxembourg garden with Sergey and his husband. The husband, I must admit, is very pleasant, quiet, absolutely not the pederast type, with an attractive face and manner. But I felt somewhat awkward, especially when one of their acquaintances, a red-lipped and curly-headed man, approached us for a minute.”42 Note that Vladimir feels fine so long as his masculinity is not threatened by the presence of a fabulous queer, even for a minute.

There are other direct references to Sergey’s sexuality in Vladimir’s private correspondence. After visiting his mother and youngest brother Kirill in Prague, Vladimir reported to Vera that “Kirill is strikingly handsome and refined, reads a lot, is relatively well educated and very high-spirited. He tells me that my brother Sergey (who arrived stout, with a fat neck, looking like Shalyapin) asked where there was a café where men met and strongly advised him to sniff cocaine. Fortunately, Kirill is absolutely normal.”43 Sergey is clearly not normal in Vladimir’s eyes on many counts. He is oddly shaped, he has a drug problem, he stutters, and, above all, he is interested in men (and knows that any big city has a café where men meet). But what about Sergey’s perspective?

43 Letters to Véra, 159.
Recovering Sergey’s voice is a challenging task because almost none of his own writings survive. Most of what is known about him comes from Vladimir’s *Speak, Memory*, his letters, and a few other memoirs. Vladimir and Sergey’s cousin, the composer Nicolas Nabokov, provided the following description of the two brothers in his *Bagázh: Memoirs of a Russian Cosmopolitan*:

Of my two elder cousins, Vladimir and Sergey, in those Berlin years I was closer to Sergey. Sergey loved music and Vladimir did not. Rarely have I seen two brothers as different as Volodya and Seryozha. The older one, the writer and poet, was lean, dark, handsome, with a face resembling his mother’s. Seryozha, although as lean in his angular way, and handsome, looked more like Babushka. He was not a sportsman. White-blond with a reddish tint to his face, he had an incurable stutter. But he was gay, a bit highly sensitive (and therefore an easy butt for teasing sports) <…> Sergey also knew a great deal about literature and history, and conversations with him were always interesting and profitable to me.  

Nicholas’s son, Ivan Nabokov, recently shared that his mother always claimed that Sergey was “the nicest of all the Nabokovs, a sweet, funny man, much nicer, much more dependable and funnier that all the rest of them.” Dieter Zimmer has found another portrait of Sergey and Vladimir provided by their émigré friend, the fashion critic Lucie Leon Noel, who moved to Paris from Moscow in the early 1920s:

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44 Dieter Zimmer has suggested that it is possible there is important correspondence concerning Sergey among Vladimir’s currently restricted papers in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. To counter the lack of archival materials, the novelist Paul Russell wrote a speculative biography, *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* (2011). The title alludes to Vladimir’s first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1939) in which the narrator searches for his elusive half-brother.  
45 Nabokov, *Bagázh*, 110. Their babushka is Maria Ferdinandovna Nabokov, née von Korff.  
No brothers could have been less alike than Volodya and Serge. At that time (Cambridge-Oxford), however, they went around together. Volodya was the young *homme du monde*—handsome, romantic in looks, something of a snob and a gay charmer—Serge was the dandy, an aesthete and balletomane. Volodya’s conversation was gay and amusing and even when he was serious, there was a kind of lilt of laughter, a soupçon of malice at the back of his voice, as if we were relishing some private joke all his own. Serge was tall and very thin. He was blond and his tow-colored hair usually fell in a lock over his left eye. He suffered from a serious speech impediment, a terrible stutter. Help would only confuse him, so one had to wait until he could say what was on his mind, and it was usually worth hearing. He was, among other things, a connoisseur of poetry, theater, and particularly ballet, and an asset in any salon or gathering. Usually he attended all the Diaghileff premiers wearing a flowing black theatre cape and carrying a pommeled cane.47

In contrast to Vladimir’s compulsive documentation of Sergey’s deficiencies, from the accounts of Nicolas Nabokov and Lucie Leon Noel Sergey emerges as a refined young man, taking full advantage of interwar Europe’s cultural offerings. Unlike Vladimir, who maintained throughout his life a narrative of blissful isolation in exile, Sergey was keen on opening himself up to his new urban environments. Yet both brothers shared a profound dislike of Berlin, where they moved after finishing their studies in England. Their father’s assassination in Berlin in the spring of 1922 added more reasons to want to leave the city. Much as Vladimir disparaged

47 Lucie Léon Noel, “Playback,” *TriQuarterly* 17 (Winter 1970): 212. Cited in Zimmer, “What Happened to Sergey Nabokov,” 11-12. Vladimir Nabokov contested some of the details of Leon Noel’s account, but not those concerning his brother or their relationship. See his *Strong Opinions*, 292-293. A pommeled cane makes a memorable appearance in *Speak, Memory*, 243: In the description of Vladimir and Sergey’s escape to Crimea by train, the pommeled cane functions as a provocatively phallic object, “The cane I carried, a collector’s item that had belonged to my uncle Ruka, was of a light-colored, beautifully freckled wood, and the knob was a smooth pink globe of coral cupped in a gold coronet.”
Berlin, he left only in 1937 when the Nazis appointed one of his father’s assassins the deputy
director of Russian émigré affairs. Later in life he claimed that he stayed in Berlin for nearly
fifteen years to preserve the purity of his Russian; as he was fluent in French, his “precious layer
of Russian” would have been lost in Paris. Sergey had no such reservations.

I recently discovered a small cache of Sergey’s letters to a young Russian émigré
aristocrat like himself, Prince Dmitry Shakhovskoy. These letters provide some much-needed
details about Sergey’s position regarding exile and sexuality. About living in Berlin, Sergey
wrote to Shakhovskoy in 1922, “I work in a repugnant city, in a repugnant bank, wherefrom I
write to you about my dreams. Any contact with those around me strains my heart with such
depressing disgust, like when you touch something very sticky with your hands.” A few months
later he ended another letter with a favor:

Dmitry dear, I have a big favor to ask of you. You are more or less a resident of Paris,
you know the conditions of life there, etc. So, could you write to me approximately how
much would a day of modest living cost? What is it like to rent a room, somewhere in
Montmartre? Aside from that, it would be good to know whether one can find some kind
of work there. You know that I graduated first in my class, bachelor in letters with
honors. I was even asked to stay and continue my studies in the department of French
literature.

Although Shakhovskoy’s response was not terribly encouraging, informing him that “our
émigré values are not rated all that highly,” Sergey moved to Paris in 1923. What Sergei

49 Dmitry Shakhovskoy is more commonly known as the Archbishop John of San Francisco (1902-1989).
50 The Shakhovskoy Family Papers, Amherst Center for Russian Culture. All further quotations are from this
collection.
51 Shakhovskoy wrote: “I’m answering your question about Paris, thought I don’t know to what degree my ‘more or
less’ Parisianness entitles me to do so. You can find a room in Quartier Latin for 3 francs a day, but that is, of
course, a room in quotation marks. A modest and decent room should be considered for no less than 150-180 francs
neglects to mention in his letters is that despite Weimar Berlin’s growing reputation as a hub for pleasure that offered its visitors a “masquerade of perversions,” homosexuality was still a criminal offense in Germany, whereas in France all such laws were struck down during the French Revolution. Nevertheless, Sergey corresponded with Shakhovskoy not only about poetry, theatre, and music, but also about his sexuality as he was trying to come to terms with it. In fact, in one of the letters, Sergey came out to Shakhovskoy in an elaborate and highly metaphoric style, writing:

It’s such a pity that during your visit here, I was doing mad things and picked from the tree of life its rotten fruit. Like a stone, thrown into the water, I reached the bottom, collided with it, but now find myself on the surface again with an “experienced” revulsion to the “bottom” and with cleared eyes, with the eyes ready and eager to take in any manifestation of beauty. And I think that only one hand, the hand of my beloved there, in Cambridge, could once again throw me like a stone to the “bottom.” This is, of course, all rhetoric, since how can he and his love leave? – Well then: I accidentally opened to you the gates to my soul. You may enter. If you’d like.

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52 The phrase “masquerade of perversions” belongs to Isherwood, who wrote in his memoir, “Wasn’t Berlin’s famous ‘decadence’ largely a commercial ‘line,’ which was the Berliners had instinctively developed in their competition with Paris? Paris had long since cornered the straight-girl market, so what was left for Berlin to offer its visitors but a masquerade of perversions?” See Christopher and His Kind, 29. On the intersection of sexual politics, art, and activism in Weimar Berlin, see James Steakley, “Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders als die Andern,” Film History 11: 2 (1999): 181-203.
There are only rough, and often inscrutable, drafts of Shakhovskoy’s responses to Sergey’s letters. But from what I have been able to understand, it seems as though Shakhovskoy was far from sympathetic to Sergey’s emotional travails and did not rush to walk through the gates to his soul. He reprimanded Sergey for his weakness and recommended that he become simpler (uprostit’sia). Having found a confidant in him, however, Sergey continued to seek Shakhovskoy’s advice. On one occasion, he disclosed having thoughts of committing suicide and that the only thing that prevented him from taking his life was his fierce faith. On another occasion, he wrote about his search for a “guiding hand” and that his psychotherapist diagnosed him with neurasthenia. With uncompromising firmness, Shakhovskoy informed him that “there are many hands in this world, Sergey. Psychiatrist – the right hand; cocaine – the left.” Then, in an attempt to lend a divine hand, Shakhovskoy, who was on the verge of entering the Orthodox priesthood, enclosed a copy of an Orthodox prayer. None of this deterred Sergey from confiding in Shakhovskoy; he likely suspected that Shakhovskoii was a kindred queer spirit who would eventually come out to him. But there is no indication that Shakhovskoy ever did. In 1926 he was ordained an Orthodox priest and at around the same time Sergey converted to Catholicism.

Until then, Shakhovskoy wrote poetry and apparently valued Sergey’s opinion about it. Indeed, the bulk of their correspondence is about literature. Sergey gave detailed comments on Shakhovskoy’s creative pursuits, but also used literary topics to convey certain details about himself, sometimes by invoking the names of his favorite writers. Explaining his sexual difference by crossing the boundaries between the aesthetic and the everyday, he wrote, “At times it seems to me that I was born under the same star as the great recluses of the heart: Flaubert, Gautier, Suarès, Huysmans.” His imagined affinity with these influential French writers was based on his perception of their rejection of conventional family values. In the same letter,
he reported that one of his favorite books was *À rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans and urged Shakhovskoy to read the novel:

> If you haven’t read it [*À rebours*] yet, do read it. It was misunderstood and undervalued. It went unnoticed after being declared immoral and shaky. It’s amazing how people love justifying the absence of aesthetic taste by labeling books moral or immoral. The same fate befell *Madame Bovary* and—not many people know this—*Les Fleurs du Mal*!!!

Meanwhile, Zola was read over and over again, and no one saw that he was as a god of the petty bourgeois heaven, and at times just a bad writer.

Sergey’s rant against bourgeois moral values seems to target not so much the conservative public as the very logic of judging something—or someone—by the measure of arbitrary morality. His appeal to the ultimate universal success of Flaubert’s prose and Baudelaire’s poetry underscores his belief in contingency of moral standards and their irrelevance in the historical perspective. He invoked French literary precedent to overcome normative pressures of his day. Contemporary French literature offered him further models for self-identification. When two years later in 1925 Shakhovskoy asked Sergey to contribute some writing for a new literary journal he had established, Sergey responded:

> Would critical articles do? About the French, for example, Valéry, Gide, or Cocteau? In character, these articles would be not “informational” but rather “experiential” [*zhiznenny*], connected to the collapse of the pre-revolutionary and pre-war sense of the world <…> I have an acute live love for thought and the likes of Valéry and Gide reveal entire worlds to me and prompt sweet visions. Since it’s easier for you as the editor to decide whether such “visions” are of interest, I would only say that they extend beyond
the line of criticism of, say, Valéry as Valéry. He represents, so to speak, a stimulant, a “conduit” for thought.

The proposed article never materialized, but Sergey’s description of it reveals a lot: asked to write a literary piece, presumably on any contemporary topic, he chose to pitch an essay on experimental and queer French authors, underscoring that his writing would reflect his personal beliefs and experiences. As Shakhovskoy’s response did not survive, it is unclear what happened next. Perhaps he declined the offer of Sergey’s “sweet visions”; perhaps Sergey did not manage to write his article. Regardless, in comparison to his earlier angst-riddled notes, here Sergey appears to be content with living in exile and attuned to the latest developments in the arts.

Yet the most extraordinary aspect of this letter, which is also the last letter from Sergey in Shakhovskoy’s archive, is that it was severely censored. A section of one of the pages was cut off and a substantial part of the remaining text was blotted out and crossed out in red ink (fig. 4). The censored text, most of which I was able to restore, conceals a description of Sergey’s happy news:

I work and I live. I don’t languish. My entire day is busy: lessons, translations, reading. I consider the visits to the superfluous “bohemian” café to be idle and tedious. I look differently at young men, because my heart is full with one (he is a big friend of the Merezhkovskiis, a Pole, Count Czapski). So, my dear, the little feather in my cap is an entire panache. I gathered these plumes there, in the depths, in the quiet, because I found that for which I searched for ten years. You must understand me and not smile, and not think that it’s one of my old tricks <…> My life has become simpler and deeper.

53 In his travel writings from Berlin, Erenburg quipped that the young French writers “those snobs, vacillate between academic Catholicism and compulsory pederasty.” Erenburg, Belyi ugol’, 167.
It is unclear who attempted to erase this part of Sergey’s message or why. It is clear, however, that someone found it compromising.\textsuperscript{54} Perhaps Sergey’s tone seemed so friendly, it implied Shakhovskoy’s approval of his lifestyle. Perhaps the mention of Sergey’s lover Josef Czapski by name was too damning for the émigré community. Czapski was born into the Polish nobility of the Russian Empire and educated in pre-revolutionary Saint Petersburg. When the Bolsheviks came to power, his family lost their fortune. Once Poland gained independence, he moved to Paris to become a painter. During World War Two he was captured by the Soviets but survived the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn in 1940 and was sent to Central Asia, where he met the poet Anna Akhmatova. After the war, Czapski spent the rest of his life in emigration in Paris, unwilling to return to Poland, now under Soviet control.\textsuperscript{55} The presence of a romantic affair with Sergey in Czapski’s biography makes it all the more extraordinary, but it also reveals the rarely acknowledged richness, complexity, and interconnectedness of the narratives of culture in exile—and perhaps that is precisely why Sergey’s candid letter was censored. The manipulation of this letter demonstrates the forces of systemic oblivion at work and, in doing so, it raises the stakes of interrogating received historiographies.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{sergey_letter.png}
\caption{Sergey’s censored letter to Dmitry Shakhovskoy (recto verso)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{54} Considering that the letter was preserved, I am inclined to think that Shakhovskoy himself had nothing to do with censoring it. His papers were prepared for archiving by his sister, the émigré writer Zinaida Shakhovskaya, the author of a biography \textit{In Search of Nabokov}, which is based in large part on her correspondence with Vladimir. See her \textit{V poiskakh Nabokova} (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1979).

\textsuperscript{55} See Karpeles, \textit{Almost Nothing}. 
For his part, Sergey attempted to be as open about his sexuality as he could. He repeatedly came out to his friends and family, looking for someone who would listen and take him seriously. When he and Czapski broke up in 1926, he experienced a profound crisis and considered transforming himself by becoming more religious, following Czapski’s example. He wrote to his mother, “the man I’ve linked my life with, the man I love more than anything else in the world—had gone back to church <…> Those were terrible days. I am becoming Catholic in full awareness of the inescapability of this step and with absolute belief in its necessity” adding, “This is not easy for me, it’s very hard. I cannot cut off a huge part of my self with one blow. This part must change, and make way for something new and not sinful.”

His mother forwarded this letter to Vladimir, who copied it for Vera, inserting its contents between reports of doing gymnastics and having veal cutlet for lunch. Amused more than anything else, Vladimir commented, “I think, overall, this is good for Sergey. It is true—Catholicism is a feminine, arrow-arched faith—the sweetness of painted glass, the suffering tenderness of young Sebastians…”

Sergey’s religious fervor subsided within a couple of years, and by 1932 he appears to have fully embraced his sexual difference, as another letter Vladimir wrote to Vera during a visit to Paris suggests: “[Sergey] said that he wanted to talk about the essential, to find out, apparently, my attitude to his life, and for that he’ll call on me tomorrow, on Wednesday, at 3 p.m.” Sergey’s sustained insistence on transparency, if not on acceptance, is remarkable. Life in exile seems to have been precarious enough to add the pressure of secrecy to it. By the time

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56 Letters to Vera, 77-78.
57 Letters to Vera, 78.
58 Letters to Vera, 196.
Sergey asked Vladimir for a meeting, he had already met Hermann Thieme, the man who would become his life-long partner and whom Sergey introduced to all his relatives.\textsuperscript{59}

The remaining narrative of Sergey’s life is fragmented into bits of more and less reliable information leading to his return to Berlin in 1942, imprisonment in the concentration camp in 1944, and death in 1945.\textsuperscript{60} To Sergey’s last (censored) letter, Shakhovskoy appended the following explanatory note:

The author of this letter is Sergei Vladimirovich Nabokov, the son of Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov and the brother of the writer Vladimir Nabokov. He ended his days martyr-like in a Berlin prison during the war. The last time I saw him was at the steps of my church in Berlin. He was arrested soon thereafter. \ldots Sergey was a translator and a man of refined European culture. Like his brother, he knew the main European languages to perfection.

As this note suggests, Sergey makes it into the archive because of his prominent brother and father. Even in posterity he is situated in Vladimir’s shadow. In fact, my own research on Sergey was conducted in the context of Vladimir’s life. Vladimir himself ended his autobiographical vignette on Sergey by concluding that “It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem.”\textsuperscript{61} However, this convenient and familiar narrative of doomed existence is countered by the record of Sergey’s life, who insisted on equality and recognition, not tolerance and pity. In spite of normative hierarchies and

\textsuperscript{59} See Sergey’s letter in the Nicolas Nabokov Papers, Beinecke Library.
\textsuperscript{60} As Dieter Zimmer has established, Sergey was imprisoned on political grounds, not as a homosexual.
\textsuperscript{61} Nabokov, \textit{Speak, Memory}, 258.
structures of exclusion, through his letters Sergey achieved a form of self-archiving that now helps us chart the origins of modern sexual identities that emerged in the time and place of exile.

[I would like to add here a concluding section organized around the notion of “historical citizenship” proposed by the historian Anna Hájková in her article manuscript “Toward a Queer History of the Holocaust” (forthcoming in “Women’s History Review”). Hájková explains that the essence of “historical citizenship” is the “possibility to tell one’s own story, to testify” and thus “become visible as a citizen of history” and be part of a historical narrative. Although this concept has been developed in the context of the Holocaust studies, I think it can be both applicable to and productive in a discussion of queer exiles in interwar Europe. Framing the biographies of such individuals as Sergey Nabokov in terms of historical citizenship would hopefully demonstrate the richness of Russian émigré culture that remains inaccessible through a heteronormative lens. Perhaps such a framing is inappropriate; or perhaps it belongs earlier in the chapter. I am still working on this text and would appreciate all your feedback for improving it.

Thank you,

Roman]