

# *The Mad Alphabet, or A Little Trip Down Mnemosyne Lane*

Mehi Loveski

In the beginning was a word. And the word was that there is a book, a story of an elderly gentleman who falls in love with a teenage girl. I was told that over a bottle of cheap port wine we, teens in a hick Siberian town, were drinking to assuage our growing thirst for information. A book – and that’s about it. No name, no anything. The iron curtain was being held in place with an iron fist (if that idiom befits the flabby limbs of aging rulers of the rotting Soviet empire, the listless figures who came and went in mournful succession – Brezhnev, Chernenko, Andropov – the alphabet as twisted as everything else in the dusky reality of the late socialism).

Years later on my request, a pen-friend of mine managed to smuggle the book under her oversized pullover through the customs at *Sheremetyevo* airport, along with a copy of *Doctor Zhivago* and a slim volume of Mandelstam – all *non grata* in “the world’s most well-read country” except in my Siberian

home.

How big was the risk she had taken? I've no idea, though even then the iron fist must have been getting soft. How could I have otherwise got inside the *Moscow* hotel<sup>1</sup> swarming with KGB agents and their underlings? Of the latter the most dreaded was the *dezhurnaya*, the floor attendant who could only be fooled by being asked for a cup of tea, which she went to make in a little cubicle behind her desk. Meanwhile, I slipped unobserved into my darling's room – a hospitable *homo sovieticus* showing an enchanted traveler into the world of tender tyranny. (In my today's Humbert's eyes, I couldn't have been very different from the surly Charlie boy on the way from Onyx to Eryx.)

Where are you now, my English love? Still fussing over homeless cats in suburban London? Doing volunteer work in Nigeria? Teaching English in China? Wherever you are, my gorgeous friend, my pen is still longing for you.

And that was how I'd been initiated into the whole new, inimitable world of Vladimir Nabokov, my magic pass here being an Ardis copy of *Lolita*. It was an entirely new read from what I'd had so far. Needless to say, the book immediately became a hit with my eager friends, who before long were calling their girlfriends “nymphets” and started keeping secret diaries full of shocking revelations about their “deviant propensities.”

Thankfully, we didn't have to wait long for VN's other novels to come. A few years later with *perestroika* taking hold of the country, the forbidden books started being published, and in another few years, the shelves in the previously bare bookstores were filled to capacity. Perhaps, the greatest discovery I made then was that I indeed had a more intimate bond with VN than I'd imagined. In his volume of poetry, I found a line whose imagery reminded me of something I'd

<sup>1</sup> With a fake pass – Mr. James Bond/room 007 in bold letters – a boyish stunt that, no matter how soft the fist might have gotten, could have cost more dearly than any contraband my friend had smuggled.

written in one of my own little amateurish poems.

Years later, as a student of literature reading my first VN book in English, I was mystified by how a person could have mastered a foreign language to such excellence. Not until I had written my first piece in stilted, laborious English did I become “professionally” interested in the phenomenon – without much hope of making sense of it.

The idea was to try to find the English readers VN might have used in the course of his English education. With luck, I could glean enough for a PhD, which, ignominious as it was for my idealistic pursuit, would be better than digging up the good old W. S. Maugham – only to strip the renowned body of yet another “stylistic peculiarity.” (This seems to be the case with some aspiring “researchers” tirelessly churning out their endless “literary studies.”)

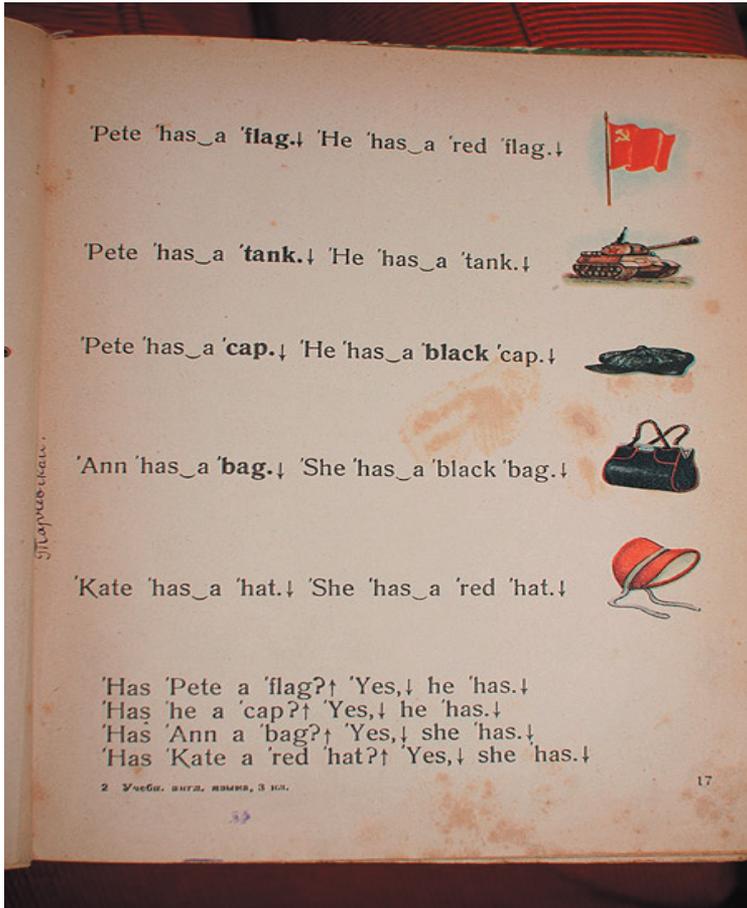
I managed to find quite a few books but none about VN’s first English friends.<sup>2</sup> And though I’m still on look out for the *right* books, I keep asking myself if those “simple souls” were not another of VN’s brilliant inventions. So to keep myself busy until the search yielded results, I thought of the shadowy characters who had helped *me* learn English well enough to be able to read VN.

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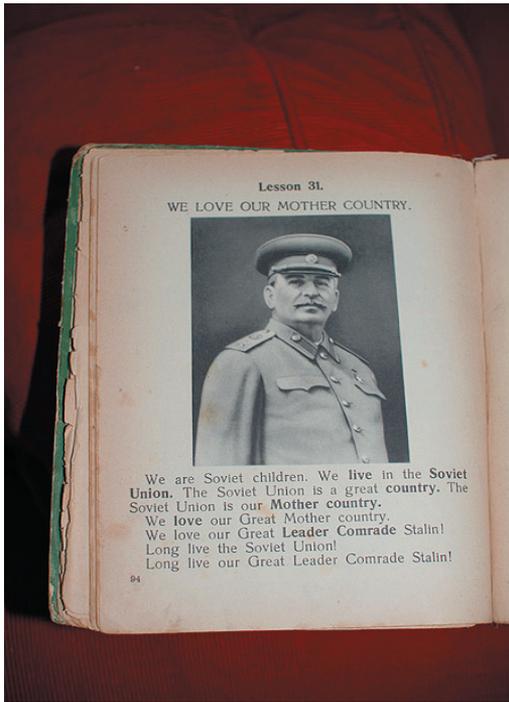
Unlike VN, I learned to read English long after I’d put aside my first Russian book (untitled, as far as I fail to remember). My first English friends were only such as long as what they said, or rather what was said of them, was in English. In a text

<sup>2</sup> “My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar – Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts – “Who is Ben?” “He is Dan,” “Sam is in bed,” and so on....Wan-faced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud in the possession of certain tools (“Ben has an axe”), they now drift with a slow-motioned slouch across the remotest backdrop of memory; and, akin to the mad alphabet of an optician’s chart, the grammar-book lettering looms again before me.” (V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, New York, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1967)

book for third graders (Moscow, 1948) I'd found in the attic of my grandma's home – impatient to learn some English before the fifth grade when it normally began – I made acquaintances with *Pete*, *Ann* and *Kate*. Oh, how I envied Pete – riding in a tank under a red flag with adoring ladies around.



Later I came to believe that Pete was, in fact, an alias for a Soviet agent coming home from conquered Europe with booty for his girlfriends, their Anglicized names a tribute to the other victorious nations in the war. The true identity of those false friends becomes quite obvious as one reads on:



I've never loved Comrade Stalin, though I had only the vaguest idea of who that mustachioed gentleman had been. Sometime later, I stole a photograph of the Great Leader from the cabinet where my dad had kept it and solemnly burned it over the kitchen stove. What could I have known about the man's appalling deeds in the country where the topic was still a taboo? Or did I owe this to something else, hidden deep inside my unconsciousness, equally beyond my grasp at the time? (Time spent with Herr Doktor is never wasted, to paraphrase the famous shrink's popular saying.)

And, à propos, what happened to Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned with their innocent identity puzzles and ludicrous tools? An axe didn't stand a chance against a tank, did it? Were they forced to leave the country long before Pete came roaring in his tank or, like Ned (aka Ivan, the gardener's mate), did

they develop a talent for mimicry and teach Pete, the agent, whatever English they'd managed to remember?

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At school my English textbooks were inhabited by an entirely different set of characters. Could that bunch of depressingly PC young dimwits be descendants of my first English friends? If so, the descent must have been pretty steep. Even the names those simple, if somewhat false, souls bore were depressingly familiar. No more fancy monikers of yore – just plain Petya, Anya, Katya and the like. The final touch were the adults, teachers and chaperones, whose names alone – elephantine verbal monstrosities like *Olga Ivanovna*, *Nadezhda Petrovna*, *Ivan Nikolayevich*, *Oleg Gennadievich*, etc. – could discourage a tender young soul from going any further down into the dungeon of linguistic totalitarianism.

In a particularly remarkable book – still used by some today – part one is a veritable dollhouse sanatorium where cardboard figures of docile “pupils” with artless English names come awkwardly alive, dutifully learn to carry out orders, or are subjected to all manner of incongruous but phonetically precise interrogation:

'Tom is a \schoolboy. 'This 'girl is his \sister. She's a 'school-girl, \too. Her 'name's \Kate.

'Please 'take your 'book out of your \bag, Kate. 'Don't 'give \me your book. 'Open it at 'page \two} and 'read 'Text \One. \Thank you. 'Sit \down, please'. Your 'mark is '\good'. 'Don't 'copy 'out 'this 'text \now. 'Do it at \home, please".

"'What's \this?" "It's an \exercise-book."

"'What \colour is it?" "It's \white".

"'What's \Kate?" "She's a \schoolgirl."

"'What's 'Kate \doing now?" "She's \reading."

"'Are you 'reading, \too?" "\No, I'm \not."

In part two, however, the sanatorium graduates abandon their useless English names and, having assumed new identities – those of comrades Ivanov, Petrov and Sidorov<sup>3</sup> – the burlesque musketeers along with their faithful lady friends enthusiastically join in building the paradise farm which, having been prophesied by Khrushchev somewhere along with cheap corn, was obviously easier said and done in a book. Small wonder they never managed to build anything but another cheerless dollhouse Gulag, which eventually collapsed along with the rest of the cardboard empire – the poor dimwits’ idea of serving Motherland being to *bonk*<sup>4</sup> young readers with politically correct fatuities without bothering to risk their lives retrieving her jewelry.



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There were other books, though. First published in 1963, *English for Little Ones* by V. Skulte<sup>5</sup> was a welcome relief from the drab reality of “developed” socialism for generations of English learners in the USSR. For all I know, the characters in that

<sup>3</sup>Traditionally the most common surnames in Russia

<sup>4</sup> *Bonk* incidentally being the name of the author of the textbook: Н. А. Бонк, Учебник английского языка, Москва-Рыбинск, 1997

<sup>5</sup>A name common in Latvia. Is the book different because people there were not so indoctrinated as the rest of the Soviet citizens?

little book – young British citizens Sam(!), Jimmy, Lily and Polly, along with their puppy dogs – might have been direct descendants of VN's English friends who apparently had found their way back through the rear door (via Riga?). Even some of their bummers ring a familiar bell.



6. The boy in the glass seemed to be quite as ready to fight as Andrew was. He doubled up his fists, and made his face ugly with anger.

7. Andrew was on the point of hitting the glass with his fist, when his aunt entered the room, and asked what he meant by his loud words. He could only point at the mirror.

8. When his aunt learned what the matter was, she smiled, and, leading Andrew up to the mirror, showed him that all his rage had been spent on his own image.

<sup>6</sup> From E. Sargent, *The Standard Second Reader*, Boston, 1857. This book is a typical period piece, though hardly the most likely candidate for VN's first English readers.



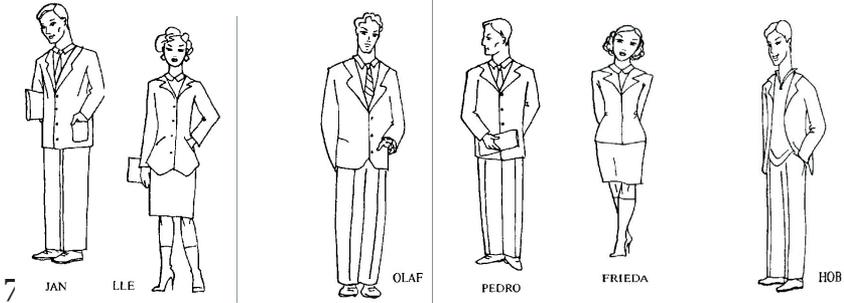
Jimmy never looks into the little window.

Jimmy thinks to himself: "I must look into that little window!" So he takes a chair, pulls it up to the wall and gets on it.

Oh, how funny! A little boy looks back at Jimmy from the little window. The boy has red hair, red cheeks, red ears and a funny red nose as small as a button.

Jimmy looks straight into the boy's eyes. He smiles at him. The red-headed boy smiles too.

Another book worth mentioning was a native of the British Isles. Though first published at home in the 1950s, it made its way here at about the time VN's books started appearing. For some it was a curiosity rather than a working tool, though, to be fair, it did serve its purpose for many learners. Perhaps *Essential English for Foreign Students* by C. E. Eckersley was so welcome in the post-perestroika, privatization-frenzied country because it introduced the reader into the post-war milieu of growing multiculturalism inhabited by refined young gentlemen and damsels from all over Europe, including such exotic locations as *Ruritania* – the author's geographic invention. Despite their old-fashioned attire and speech style, the newcomers seemed quite posh in a country set on being westernized. Interestingly, when later an attempt was made to change the characters into more conventional clothes, the copies of the book remained unsold.



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Now, and what about a book alive with babies of my own – all those reckless, wisecracking *baldies*, *fatties*, *gingers*, *four-eyes* and the rest, whose ghastly presence still lurks in some crazy dialogues I wrote but never gathered in a book with a working title *English for Tough Little Ones*? Given a not inconsiderable demand for the “tough” stuff in the country where the criminal breed had gotten the upper hand, such a reader might have made a killing. But I betrayed my harmless virtual thugs, had abandoned them before they were technically born.

And so, having come this far, I find myself at the crossroads – whither now? I plunged into all this headlong, without a clear purpose in mind and with just a handful of ideas – a despicable amateur in academic matters. Now I’m reaping the fruits of the indiscipline I sowed. Should I write anything worthwhile, the topic might well be something like “*The degree of indoctrination in children’s English readers in the twentieth century*” (help yourself, dear reader, and good luck with your PhD). But the melancholy fact is that my days of cerebral masturbation are long over.

I pick one of the readers lying before me and turn to the

<sup>7</sup> Though clad in “modern” clothes, the “unsold souls” don’t look particularly stylish in what look like suits borrowed from a surplus store selling off the 70s “collections.”

last page. The letters are a blur – no sign of the promised land that might have lain in store for me long ago. I catch only fleeting glimpses of some impossible, crazy alphabet akin to that in a news-crawl gone irrevocably glitch. Soon I will have to see an optician. My ultimate triumph, I assume, has to wait – until further notice.

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