

Statement

by Mr. Vladimir Petrovsky
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva
at the opening ceremony of the sculpture of Vladimir Nabokov
Montreux, 23 April, 1999

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we are gathered here to pay homage to Vladimir Nabokov and I should like to express my deepest appreciation to the renowned Russian artist, Mr. Aleksander ^{and his son Philipp} Rukavishnikov, ~~the~~ creator of the sculpture, as well as to all those who made this event possible.

Vladimir Nabokov was an exceptional personality - a famed writer, an intellectual - a brilliant, sometimes eccentric, mind, a literary critic and an eloquent lecturer, who combined literary work with serious scientific research.

It is symbolic that the 100th anniversary of Nabokov's birth coincides with the end of this troubled century. La fin de siècle, when Nabokov was born, resembles in many ways our own times. At the end of the nineteenth – beginning of the twentieth century - scientific and technological breakthroughs, such as radio, telegraph, and automobiles completely reshaped the civilized world. Today we are facing a similar situation - development of computers, Internet, genetic engineering and other advances in technology, intensified by

the unprecedented pace of social and economic changes, and that puts into question not only the traditional way of life but the very foundations of human culture. Accordingly, at the end of the century many are trying to find an answer to a very important question: what will be the impact of these changes on our civilization?

The widespread viewpoint that answers should be looked for solely in the domain of technology and rationalistic scientific approach seems not to be enough, exactly, due to the complexity of the problems that *face* humanity *faces*. It seems necessary to rely on a wider range of human achievements and that is where culture comes in. It is evident that in too many cases writers were more far-sighted than politicians, more sensitive to paradigmical change than science itself.

Nabokov's works as well as his life is a source of inspiration in many instances. He shows us how to retain honour and dignity in times of great turbulence, how to stay sane in the most irrational situations and to be tolerant and open-minded.

Nabokov claimed that he was not interested in the ongoing political debates which captivated many of his literary contemporaries. All the "burning" issues of his time, as he stressed, left him "supremely indifferent". He believed that the subject of his literary research was *an* human soul. *individual and his subconscious.*

However *could not be completely removed from*
 In fact Nabokov did follow political developments in the world, including the situation in Russia (at the time the Soviet Union), and

felt deeply troubled by any manifestation of injustice and hypocrisy, tyranny and cruelty.

Born into the family of a ^{known} famous Russian diplomat, Nabokov was ^{and liberal,} privileged to receive a first-hand knowledge of different cultures. He witnessed the Russian revolution and experienced life as an expatriate. The many social calamities he saw during his life did not harden his heart. They did not make him perceive the world as a clash of civilizations, but rather as their coexistence and mutual enrichment. Even his literary style represents a symbiosis of Russian and West European literary traditions, which complemented and reinforced each other. As one literary critic noticed:

“Nabokov, when switching from Russian to English, left his land of familiarity and entered into a new world where he became a pioneer, free to explore the very limits of this new language and ^{adjust} conform its many forms to whatever device pleased him. Indeed his inventiveness with English words and etymology is one of the characteristics of Nabokov's prose. One might even venture that Nabokov was instrumental in forming modern English, or at least 20th century English writing”.

Nabokov was a citizen of the world in the best sense of the word, a man who could understand and appreciate any culture. It is noteworthy that for years bibliographers and literary journalists didn't know whether to group Nabokov's works under “Russian” or “American” headers, ^{was} while the writer himself seemed not to care much

about his ethnic or cultural identity. In an interview in 1966 he said:

“I have always maintained, even as a schoolboy in Russia, that the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance ... The writer's art is his real passport.”

Nabokov's art returned to Russia just 10 years ago when some of his works for the first time was published in a Russian magazine, *which was followed by many others.*

It is symbolic that the celebration of his anniversary coincides with the two hundredth anniversary of the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.

One of the important contributions of Nabokov to the world culture is his translation into English of Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" accompanied by volumes of exclusive commentaries which give interesting introduction to and interpretation of Russian life and traditions. In the English version Nabokov has given Pushkin's verses the glow and sparkle of their Russian original. This bold rendering of the Russian masterpiece, together with detailed and witty commentary, is in itself a work of enduring literary interest.

I would say that Nabokov in a sense is a true heir to the "pride and purity of Pushkin's art". As well as Pushkin he enriched Russian literature by strengthening its links with the Western culture and contributed immensely to making the Russian literature a part of the world cultural heritage.

Both Pushkin and Nabokov's commemorations vividly testify that we can look with optimism to the future if we have the belief in fundamental human values and contribute by words and deeds to the dialogue of civilizations and creation of the culture of peace. And this is exactly the aim of the United Nations.

The World Organization is doing a lot to achieve this goal. For example, the UN General Assembly has proclaimed the year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace. At the recent session of the Assembly the year 2001 was designated as the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. These are not just declarations of good intentions. Each such initiative envisages practical programmes of action including dissemination of information and the results of scientific research aimed at the promotion of the diverse civilizational achievements of ^{human} mankind, crystallizing cultural pluralism and creative human diversity.

I am convinced that the quest of the World Organization to further advance the culture of peace which helps to foster respect for the values inherent in peace and universal coexistence among human beings, such as respect for life, friendship and solidarity between peoples and the dignity and integrity of persons irrespective of their nationality, race, sex, religion or culture, is in perfect harmony with the spirit of Vladimir Nabokov's literary work.

In conclusion, I would like to note that Nabokov, spending the last 16 years of his life in Switzerland, admired this hospitable country.

Switzerland is famous for its cordiality and many famous artists, intellectuals and writers have found here their refuge. Nabokov was charmed by Switzerland's tranquillity and beauty and fascinated by Montreux in particular, with its, to use his own words "fabulous metaphorical sunsets in charming surroundings". He was inspired by the Alps which he used to climb in search of butterflies and by the magnificent view of the snow covered mountains. It is most gratifying that his memory is being honoured in this city which he loved so much.

Thank you for your attention.