My Life in America

By Serge Hollerbach

My life in America began in the small New England town of Wilton, Connecticut, where I arrived on November 5, 1949 after nine days of crossing the choppy Atlantic Ocean, a day's train ride from Boston to South Norwalk, where my sponsor met me and brought me to Wilton. An army transport ship *General Ballou* took us so-called "displaced persons" from the German port city of Bremerhaven to the shores of America. For some reason *General Ballou* could not dock in New York. Instead of a majestic Statue of Liberty, we were greeted by a rather prosaic view of Boston Harbor with its huge cranes and storage buildings. We didn't mind. It was the beginning of realizing a life-long dream: a new life in a new country: America.

Not many younger Americans know who these displaced persons were. Foreign workers, forcibly brought to Germany; refugees, fleeing the advancing Red Army; and survivors of Nazi concentration camps. We were fortunate to be liberated by the American army. Housed in refugee camps, we were yearning to emigrate, leaving behind years of suffering and hardships. Several countries agreed to take immigrants -- Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Morocco, Canada and the United States, our dream destination. However, there were obstacles.

To come to America under a special displaced persons bill, passed by Congress with the help of a great American lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, we needed a sponsor, who would give us an affidavit and guarantee work with a place to stay for several years. It could be an individual or an organization. There were also

ethnic quotas, giving preference to people of European origin, which created some difficulties for parents with children born outside of Europe. A Russian couple I knew fled Russia in 1918 and settled in Istanbul, Turkey, where their first son was born. Later they moved to Yugoslavia and had two more children, both sons. When Yugoslavia became a communist country after World War II, they fled to West Germany and, having friends in America, applied for affidavits and visas. To their great astonishment, they received only four visas. The oldest son was excluded. "He is a Turk," immigration officials told them "and the Turkish quota is full."

"But our son is Russian-Slavic-Christian," pleaded the parents, it took some time to settle the matter.

I had two sponsors, one a retired teacher in Connecticut. The other a charitable organization called Tolstoy Foundation, established by the youngest daughter of Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy. She came to the United States in 1928 and devoted her life to helping Russian refugees. How did I locate these sponsors? It is a long story, and I have to go back to the last two weeks before the end of World War II. A laborer in Germany from 1942 to 1945; in April, 1945, I was in a refugee camp -- a schoolhouse in Saxony, in the town of Klingenthal. There were people of all nationalities: Russians, Baltic people, Czechoslovaks, German women and children.

The School principal, a man by the name Herr Sandner, was camp director. We were fed a watery brew with bits of dried vegetables and a slice of bread. In the school corridor a portrait of Hitler hung

prominently. But the Third Reich was collapsing and Americans were near.

Somebody found a small radio and one day an Estonian lady and I were trying to find Radio Luxembourg, an Allied station broadcasting the advances of the American army. We found the station, but at that moment Herr Sandner entered the room. He understood immediately what we were doing and started to yell at us. "Schweinehunde (this German insult combines words swine and dog) you should be shot for doing this." We tried to explain in broken German that we happened on this station accidentally, but he flew into a rage and stormed out of the room. Needless to say, we got very scared and tried to avoid him. Two days later American tanks rolled into Klingenthal. It was a strange sight -- a tank with a white star on its side -- no red star, no swastika. First slowly, then faster and faster a wonderful feeling took hold of me -- the war is over, no more bombs, no more sirens, no more running for your life! But there was also a feeling of disbelief: is it really true?

I saw Herr Sandner taking down the portrait of Hitler. When he noticed me, he grinned and said "Guten Tag". Since he didn't shoot me, I felt no need to report his threats. Meanwhile, Americans camped on a hill not far from the schoolhouse and one by one German girls and young women began visiting American troops; the women returned, smiling, with cartons filled with chocolate bars, bread and cigarettes. Obviously, they offered the GI’s something in return for the goodies. Old women Sighed and shook their heads, but ate the food with pleasure. Who could blame them -- young and old alike -- we all were starving. The sense of smell is perhaps the most vital to all living creatures; one can almost say that

we recognize good and evil, life and death by it. For me, Americans smelled so good -- aromatic cigarette smoke -- the smell of good food, the smell of wellbeing. We on the other hand smelled of unwashed clothing, of poverty, of hunger.

It occurred to me, that I could avail myself of some of these good things by using my ability to draw. At age 17 -- just before war broke out -- I enrolled in the High School of Art in Leningrad and studied there from January till June 1941. We drew heads there, and I thought I could make portrait sketches of GI's in exchange for food. There was some drawing paper and pencils in school; I sketched one of the refugees to have a sample. One morning I went up the hill to the American camp. My English consisted of few words -- "sketch portrait", "today", "tomorrow" and "to eat". That was bad enough, but the worst part was my feeling of shame -- I felt like a beggar, a panhandler, trying to soften the hearts of affluent people.

To my relief the first American soldier I encountered understood immediately what I wanted, sat down, let me sketch him and, looking at my work, smiled and said something that sounded like "purry gut". He gave me a cigarette, which I took, although I was a nonsmoker. After inhaling deeply, I started to cough. The soldier smiled understandingly, gave me some chocolate and then called his friends.

On that day I made four or five sketches and went back to the schoolhouse with packs of cigarettes, chocolate and bread -- white and very soft -- the kind I had never seen before. There was even a soldier's

ration pack. When opened, it contained canned meat, bread, chocolate bar, six cigarettes, toilet paper and something that looked like chewing gum, but turned out to be a condom. I was impressed.

For a week and a half I made daily visits to the American camp, but rumors started to circulate -- American troops were going to leave, and the Russians, take over. By that time I made up my mind not to return to Russia. I was finally free and wanted to live in the West, not under communist dictatorship. In other words, I had to flee again. But where? One evening Herr Sandner came to me and said: "The Russians are coming in the morning. If you want to stay -- stay, but if you want to leave -- a truck is going to northern Bavaria early in the morning."

I thanked him and relayed the message to some people who, I knew, also wanted to leave. In the wee hours of the morning, a group of some five-six men and seven-eight women gathered at a given place. Tension was high. The truck was late. Finally, it arrived. We paid the driver a carton of American cigarettes and took off. I thought I heard Russian tanks roaring in, but most likely it was my imagination. After an 11/2-hour drive, we reached the Bavarian border. Our driver had proper papers, but an American patrol wouldn't let us pass. We were ordered off the truck; the men had to strip to the waist and raise their arms. Since no guns were pointed at us, we didn't think we would be shot, but still it was an unnerving experience. The American patrol was looking at our arms, especially near the armpits. I later learned that the SS had their blood type tattooed under the left armpit. There were no SS-men among us; nevertheless, we were ordered to go back. Women started to cry, all of us -- in broken

English and in our native tongue -- tried to explain that we were foreign workers, not Germans. We wanted to go south.

The arguments, cries and tears lasted several minutes. Finally, a big black soldier with "MP" on his helmet motioned to us to climb back into the truck. We crossed the border. We were in Bavaria, which was definitely the American zone of occupation. Looking back at these days, I realize that two men, one, a German school principal who obviously was a Nazi and a black MP, saved my life. Stalin considered everyone who worked in Germany, even if it were forced labor, a traitor, and I would spend at least ten years somewhere in Siberia -- shoveling dirt or carrying bricks.

My dream was to become an artist; I knew that Munich was one of the centers of the arts, second only to Paris, But Paris was far away. Trains and trucks traveled to Munich regularly and, using American cigarettes, I paid my way to Munich.

Again, a refugee camp and again a large school house. Someone told me that American military government has an employment office, offering temporary jobs to refugees, willing to work, I went there, not knowing what I would find. Since my English was still extremely limited, I needed a Russian interpreter. He happened to be a very fine gentleman, obviously an old emigrant -- Isvolsky by name.

"What can you do, young man?" he asked. I explained to him that my only skills, other than manual labor was the ability to sketch portraits, and that I have already done some of American GI's in Saxony.

"This is very good," he said. "I am going to give you a letter of recommendation to an American Red Cross Club, they may need a sketch artist." The club was housed in a former brewery called Bürgerbräukeller. It consisted of an office building and a huge beer hall where, as I learned later, the first attempt to assassinate Hitler occurred. It was turned into a gym, and army-boxing championships were held there. I attended some of them and became interested in boxing, most likely because I was neither athletic nor pugnacious and envied strong men. At age 80 I still watch boxing on TV.

The office building had a big lounge with a reception desk, where English-speaking German girls gave GI's directions for sightseeing, provided tickets for theaters and announced trips to picturesque places outside Munich. There was a piano in the lounge and a Hungarian pianist played American and German tunes. In one of the corners, under a sign which read "Get your portrait sketched FREE" sat I, employed by the club: The American Red Cross GI Canteen. I was paid in script, worth very little, but I had the right to eat. There was no kitchen, only coffee and doughnuts. I ate at least two dozen doughnuts a day and innumerable cups of coffee -- real coffee, not a bitter brew of acorns and who knows what that we drank during the war. I still believe that nothing tastes better than a hot doughnut just pulled out of boiling fat. Of course, I never knew such wonderful food existed. As for coffee, I acquired an immunity; I can sleep well after a strong espresso before going to bed!

My hours at the club were flexible, but usually I would stay until evening. I would return to my refugee camp in the northern suburb of Milbertshofen, where foreign workers employed by the American army

lived. The barracks had electricity, but all other conveniences were outside. As in Klingenthal, American soldiers appreciated my sketches, but I hope none survive. I was still very much an amateur. I executed 8-10 sketches a day and even got commissions to do a portrait from a photograph.

I soon accumulated a small fortune in cigarettes, which were valued more than anything. They enabled me to buy some clothing on the black market -- my wartime clothing was awful. I was soon dressed in a green jacket, Bavarians called joppe, matching slacks, American army boots and a green hunter's hat that no longer sported the traditional feather on the left side.

As fall approached, I wore a winter coat. It was made by a Bulgarian tailor, according to the latest fashion -- wide shoulders, deep side pockets and a belt. It was a thing of beauty, but, unfortunately, it had a short life: we had bedbugs in our barracks and in his zeal, the exterminator managed to burn down our barracks. He used burning sulfur to kill the bugs. Fortunately, the American Red Cross started to give us donated second hand clothing from the United States. I received some very good clothes, perhaps even a Brooks Brothers jacket; but, of course, I didn't know the labels.

In 1946, after passing several exams, the Munich Academy of Fine Arts accepted my application. I studied there during the week, which left weekends for the club. But while I worked at the club full time, a very kind American lady -- one of the staff members -- took an interest in my sketching. She spoke to me, gently corrected my English as we became friends. I did several sketches of her, while telling her

the story of my life. She even invited me for lunch in the officers club. I was very embarrassed -- there was a dress code -- jacket and tie for men, but I had no tie. The checkroom supplied a tie and I clumsily tied it around *my* neck. Her name was Carol Franz and she was from New York -- "from Brooklyn," she added smiling. At the time, I didn't understand why the smile.

One day, I think it was in 1947, she asked me whether I planned to emigrate.

"Yes," I said, "very much so, but I don't know where."

"Would you like to immigrate to America?"

"Of course, but I have no one there."

"Perhaps I can help you," she answered. And she did.

If two men, a German and an American MP, saved me from life behind the Iron Curtain, Carol Franz enabled me to immigrate to America and my gratitude to her knows no limits. It was she who secured a sponsor in Wilton, Connecticut -- a retired teacher, who did a lot of charity work.

Carol recommended me as a decent young man with knowledge of the English language; who was willing to do any kind of work, but having a dream of becoming a professional artist. It happened that my sponsor, Miss Mary Kumpf, was an amateur artist herself and was sympathetic to my goal. We

corresponded briefly, and Miss Kumpf gave me an affidavit to come to the United States to work as her gardener. It had to be that way because listing my profession as an art student wouldn't do -- the United States needed workers, not aspiring artists.

Of course, Miss Kumpf did not need a fulltime gardener, and we had an unwritten agreement that I would seek fulltime employment somewhere else. As a backup I obtained an affidavit from Tolstoy Foundation that would give me room and board until I found work, and I would pay back the expenses. It never came to that.

Miss Kumpf, who met me that evening of November 5, 1949 in South Norwalk, was a small, elderly lady and, as I later learned, a spinster, Christian Scientist and Republican. She loved birds and therefore hated cats and dogs. She lived in a converted barn which she called Birdbarn Studio. Around the house was some property, including an apple orchard. She never harvested apples, however, they rotted away on the ground. At the end of the property stood a summer cottage she called Ringo-Yen. I have forgotten what it meant in Japanese. This was my lodging.

The three months I spent there were the most memorable months of my life. I wish I knew more about America to fully appreciate what I experienced there, but, even so, I knew that I was in a strange and beautiful world that greeted me, (a total stranger, born, of all the places, in the Soviet Union) with a warm welcome.

I later learned that Wilton is an old New England town with families whose ancestors took part in the American Revolution. Families that came to Wilton some 25 to 30 years ago were still called "newcomers". It is therefore even more remarkable that I, a Russian, was invited to Thanksgiving dinner with Miss Kumpf. The family was Mr. and Mrs. Firman in their late 60's. Everything was new to me -- antique English furniture, a dining table without a tablecloth, but with place mats, several forks, knives and spoons on both sides, and a large roast turkey, which I never tasted before.

Apparently, I made a favorable impression on my hosts because more invitations from other families followed. "I want you to know the better America," Miss Kumpf said to me several times. And, indeed, it was something from merry old England, as I imagined, having read Dickens in Russian translation, with positive characters only. The day after my arrival I was getting oriented, and the day after I started to work, I was getting paid one dollar an hour. I raked leaves, cut poison ivy, washed windows in the local firehouse and took care of the dogs whose owner, Miss McKendrick had five French shepherd dogs. The mother was called Jenny and the four puppies (about six months old) were Antoine, Gregoire, Giselle and Francine. My duty was to feed them and to see that they didn't try to breed. They were of an age that made it possible. Indeed, I caught Antoine and Giselle about to do just that, and to their great displeasure, I had to separate them. One day Miss McKendrick had to drive the puppies to New Jersey to the kennel for a medical checkup. She took me along.

Before the trip she fed the dogs their favorite dish -- peanut butter. Everything seemed to be fine. The

dogs dozed off, but in the middle of our voyage, I soon began to smell something. All dogs became carsick and not only the station wagon, but my coat smelled of wet dogs and peanut butter. I have never touched peanut butter since that day some fifty-three years ago. As I mentioned before, Miss Kumpf loved birds and her property was full of birdfeeders. To scare neighborhood cats she often leaned out the window and barked in a high-pitched voice, like a little lapdog. On the lawn between her house and my cottage she fed pheasants. My duty was to watch that a neighbor's dog wouldn't chase them away. I had to go after the dog, several times -- even pretending to throw something at him. The dog never forgave me that. I was given a bicycle to ride to the supermarket for food, and each time I slowed down on a hill, the dog, a cocker spaniel with a vicious temper, would chase me -- trying to bite my ankle. I had to descend and make threatening gestures, but as soon I was back on my bike, the enemy was after me. This epic seesaw battle lasted until I moved to New York.

Freedom is not enough, Miss Kumpf would say to me: you must know how to use it. She considered New York a cesspool, a sin capital of the country and worried that upon settling there, I would succumb to all kinds of evil temptation. I tried to assure her that it would not happen.

While doing odd jobs I became acquainted with other families in Wilton. They not only gave me work, but they also invited me to their homes. One family was the Bigelows. They invited me to dinner at Christmas time. They had a son David, a little younger than I. Miss Kumpf informed me that the Bigelows were in the tea business. Many years later I saw David Bigelow's name as a head of Celestial

Seasoning Company.

Then there were the Easons, a very affluent family who had beautiful antique furniture and proudly showed me an 18th Century bar with intricate woodcarvings. They also had a stable of four horses, and they gave me my first art commission -- portraits of them. Armed with red, brown and black chalk I did four large drawings. The likenesses were perfect -- one horse was brown, the other, black; the third was white and the fourth brown with a white spot on the forehead. I was paid 15 dollars each and had thus amassed a capital of $60. This enabled me to move to New York and rent a room at $40 a month.

Friends found work for me at a silkscreen printing shop on 112th Street and Broadway. Miss Kumpf and I parted very amicably when in February, 1950, I left Wilton to become a New Yorker. We corresponded for a while. Miss Kumpf also wrote poetry and I remember one poem about the "atom of love". She worried about the state of affairs in the world: The Korean War broke out. Then the letters stopped and one day I received a note that Miss Mary Kumpf had passed away. As a Christian Scientist, she didn't believe in doctors and died in her early seventies. She left her estate to the University of Connecticut. I remember Miss Kumpf with great fondness. In spite of all her peculiarities, she was a warm and giving person -- very much the better part of America.

To find a place to live, I went to a Russian delicatessen on 139th Street and Broadway. The owner, Mr. Balaklitzky, was well known in the Russian immigrant community. His deli had a profound Old World

look; there were huge bins along the wall with flour, sugar, grain and macaroni. In one of them slept Balaklitzki's cat.

"Don't worry, we are not selling from this bin," he would say to customers. His smoked ham was famous. "How do you want it sliced -- thin, for the guests or thicker, for yourself?"

The store had a bulletin board with all kinds of notices. "Big room for rent, $40 a month, corner Broadway and 135th Street." I read on one of them. Having found the apartment, I rang the bell. A black maid opened the door, and I realized that a family employing a maid did not rent rooms. It was the lady of the house who opened the door. I had no racial prejudices; the room was great, and I moved in. The lady's name was Mrs. Prinston. She came from Jamaica and spoke English, French and Spanish. Her husband Pepe was from Dominican Republic. They had many relatives and on weekends there was usually a party, to which I was invited. Obviously, they were very pleased to have a white man as a lodger and for the two months that I lived there we got along very well. However, I wanted my own apartment and soon found one on the same 135th Street.

All houses on upper Broadway had fire escapes facing the street, something I was not used to in Europe. I found them very ugly, something you do not show -- like suspenders if you take off your jacket. Of course, buildings in midtown had no fire escapes facing the street, but I didn't live there, I lived in "the city with suspenders".

The silkscreen print shop occupied a huge loft on the second floor at 2875 Broadway. Small stores and a Chinese restaurant, *New Asia,* were located on the ground floor. The print shop was called Hilda Newman Studio and was founded by an emigrant from Germany. Quite a few such shops existed in New York in the early 1950's. One was owned by a distant relative of Leo Tolstoy. I met him once. Behind his back we called him "Necktie Tolstoy".

These shops were a blessing for emigrants arriving in New York. No skills needed; the pay, minimal but adequate for a very modest living. We printed mostly neckties -- popular designs -- being heads of dogs, sailfish and sailboats. Most employees were Russians with a few Italians, Hungarians and German Jews. And there were at least 7-8 artists among us. Our designer was the son of a famous Russian stage designer and graphic artist Mstislav Doboujinsky, who did stage settings for Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina.* Alas, the son, also a graphic artist, didn't have the talent nor the reputation of his father and had to content himself with drawing heads of dogs.

We all had to join the union and I still have my membership card of Textile Workers Union of America, an affiliate of CIO-AFL. Printed designs were colored by hand. This was woman's work. Among them, a middle-aged lady from Berlin, Margot Himmel, a fine painter on glass -- actually behind glass. This technique, popular in Europe in those days, was not accepted by American dealers -- glass breaks. Unable to sell her work, Margot had to work in a print shop. She also introduced me and my friend, a fine Ukrainian artist, George Bobritsky, to her artist friends from Berlin, Karl Heidenreich and Mark

Heine.

Thus we refugees from Stalinist Russia, met refugees from Hitler's Germany, We were a happy group, full of hope -- making plans for the future, It was at that time my friend George Bobritsky met an old Russian émigré artist Joseph Levine. After Hitler invaded France, Levine fled to the United States, but retained ties with France and had one-man exhibitions in Paris. An abstract painter, he practiced the art of "above consciousness" and tried to convert us to the abstract mode of expression. But we were stubborn realists and resisted his attempts to convert us. Night shifts at the print shop allowed us to enroll in day classes at the Art Students League. George studied with Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and I studied with a German painter of the New Objectivity Movement, Ernst Fiene. Despite our differences in art, we remained good friends with Levine.

It was a very hot summer of 1951 and Joseph Levine, who had a summer cottage in Congers, New York, invited George, his wife and a little daughter to spend two weeks there. I was also included.

"I have a tenant living there," said Mr. Levine, "but he is a nice, quiet man and won't bother you. And there is plenty of space for all." We accepted the offer with gratitude and arrived in Congers one sunny Saturday morning. The cottage was located deep in the woods, but there was a large lawn with a picnic table. A well was nearby. George's wife, Ilse, prepared dinner, and as we sat down to eat early in the evening, the tenant appeared. He was a middle-aged man, who worked for a farmer not far from here.

His name was Alexander Ivanovich Todika; he was from Bessarabia, formerly Rumania, but later annexed by the Soviet Union. His wife and two children were still there; he missed them very much. "Why not sit down and join us for dinner?" we asked him.

"No, no, thank you," he replied.

"But really, be our guest," we insisted, but he again refused. We later learned that he was offended by our not inviting him to the table."

"But wait a moment!" we protested, "he was asked twice and he refused!' We were told that he was a peasant: you had to invite him three times. An old peasant tradition says -- you refuse twice and agree by the third time. But city people don't know good manners. However, Alexander Ivanovich forgave us our "bad manners" and we lived side by side peacefully during our visit.

In many ways Alexander Ivanovich was an unusual man. Deeply missing his wife and children, he would occasionally visit New York and buy second hand clothing for them on the Lower East Side.

"My wife always liked flowery dresses: look what I bought for her! My boy is now fourteen and I guess this shirt and pants will fit him fine. And for the girl, this skirt. What do you think?"

Considering the fact that the Iron Curtain separated Russia from the free world, the chances of his seeing

his family were close to nil. Buying clothes for them was an act or faith that sustained him. Indeed, Alexander Ivanovich was a deeply religious man, probably belonging to some Christian sect in Rumania. His dream was to become a village preacher. Noticing that we were artists, he invited us to his room. On the shelves we saw many scrolls of paper.

"Let me show you something," he said, and, taking one of the scrolls and unrolling it on the table." You see it is a map of an ideal village. In the center, the church, all streets go out like rays from the sun, "And there is the cemetery!" The cemetery occupied at least a half of the scroll, with graves neatly outlined in pen and ink. He showed us several sections. "Here good people are buried, and there, little children." Small rectangles were decorated with tiny flowers. A large part of the cemetery was given to people killed by "godless Communists". Finally, outside the cemetery were black dots. "That's where people who committed suicide are buried. Suicide is a sin". George and I were moved but also saddened by his preoccupation with "cities of the dead." We could picture Alexander Ivanovich spending long and lonely evenings drawing these maps and finding bitter solace doing it.

Because of the summer heat we slept on two open but screened porches and at night heard a lot of commotion about the house: some small animals, most likely field mice or chipmunks or squirrels were busy with something. We mentioned it to Alexander Ivanovich.

He smiled and said, "I'll show you something." On the other side of the cottage was another small porch

where we saw dozens of cartons, bags and small sacks. "Here I have fifty pounds of flour; there forty pounds of sugar. Also macaroni and buckwheat," he explained proudly and added: "I buy buckwheat from the Jews on the Lower East Side. Most Americans don't even know what it is!"

"But why do you do it?" we asked. He smiled slyly; "The war is going on -- the Korean War -- when it spreads, the crooks will buy all the food and most people will starve, but I have my supplies!"

"But field mice and chipmunks are eating up all your goodies!"

"Don't worry," was his reply, "let them eat. They are God's creatures, too, and there is enough for all of us!"

Poor Alexander Ivanovich! What a pathetic combination of hopes and fears typical of a man touched by the experience under totalitarian rule and war! We came back to New York and have not seen him again. Hopefully, his faith sustained him for the rest of his life.

In 1952 the print shop started to receive fewer and fewer orders, and we had periods of layoffs. Of course I knew that I had to look for another job. When the shop finally closed I enjoyed six weeks of unemployment -- exploring the city, sketching and painting. Then I went to an employment agency, "Jobs Unlimited" and explained that I needed a job somehow, someway related to art. Inevitably, it would be in commercial art. I was hesitant about it -- fearing that I would spoil my hand and vision, but

what choice did I have? To remain a factory worker for the rest of my life and a "Sunday Painter"? I was given an address in Long Island City. It was a commercial lithography plant called Kindred McLean and Company. They had an art department and needed help.

I went to Queens Plaza, where I have never been before and still consider one of the ugliest places in the city: an elevated subway with its screeching noises, huge gray factory buildings and smells. In order to reach Kindred McLean I had to pass through several narrow streets. On one side there was the Drake Bakery, from which a strong smell of sweet sugar glazing emanated. Opposite the bakery was a soup factory, apparently specializing in chicken soup. The smell of burnt chicken feathers competed with the aroma from the bakery.

On the way to my future employer I also passed Lyon Match Company, well known among Russian émigrés. Its owner, I was told, an Armenian, gave work to elderly Russians nearing retirement age, so that they could collect their Social Security benefits. You could spot these people from far away: they all dressed in dark coats, with black berets and with worn-out leather attaché cases -- so European, containing most likely, a Thermos bottle with coffee, a sandwich and a daily Russian language newspaper to read at lunchtime.

The art director's name was Noble Lincoln Hecht, but everybody called him Tony. He looked at my drawings and shook his head.

'You are overqualified," he told me. "I need a kid who will bring me coffee, do simple paste-ups." I reassured Tony that, although 27, I'd do anything he needs, including going out for coffee. I needed a job because I cannot make money with my so-called fine art. Tony thought for a minute, smiled and hired me for $50 a week.

He was an interesting man. In his early fifties, of Irish-German descent, he was born in California and went east to make money. He once hoped to become an artist, but got involved in advertising and gave up his dreams. His father, he told me, was a Socialist and a friend and drinking companion of American writer, Jack London. I was impressed because Dzhek London, as Russians pronounce his name, "is very big in Russia".

I was surprised to learn that he is not ranked very highly in America, but we loved him as much as we loved Mark Twain, Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo. Russia doesn't have much in literature for teenagers and young adults: from fairytales and legends you go straight to Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Anyway, Tony Hecht was, like his father, a Socialist and knowing that I was from Russia, took a liking to me. He was genuinely surprised that I was anti-communist and hated Stalin. We had many arguments about politics, including his sharp criticism of the capitalist system and the American political establishment. Yet we remained good friends. Tony was a kind and decent man although grumpy and easily irritated.

"Good morning, Tony," we would greet him.

"What's good about it," he answered in a raspy voice. He smoked, drank and had an ulcer. "I have two doctors," he told me. "One is Irish, the other, Jewish. When I feel I could stop smoking, I would go to the Irish doctor, who would categorically forbid smoking, but would allow a drink or two. The Jewish doctor's advice, the opposite: no drinks at all, but an occasional cigarette does no harm."

Aside from Tony, the art department had four people -- a construction man: two lettering men and me to do all kinds of assignments. I did paste-ups mixed paint and prepared color backgrounds and under the supervision of the construction man -- cut simple cardboard displays.

The company printed large Chesterfield cigarettes, Maritrop bananas, and Coca-Cola posters and medical bulletins. I remember Lederle bulletins with wonderful drawings by David Stone Martin and other printed material. The company also produced cardboard displays for such companies as General Electric, Westinghouse, Universal and Johnson and Johnson. There were several artists who specialized in rendering Coca-Cola bottles, electrical appliances, foods, and pretty women. Needless to say. I could not compete with them, nor did I so desire; I was content with what I was doing.

There were times, however, when my help was needed. For a poster that said "Ham and cheese sandwich on rye tastes better with Coca-Cola" the rendering of the sandwich did not please the art director.

"Hey, Serge, you have painted still lifes in your art school. Can't you do a decent sandwich?" I said I'll try. A fresh sandwich was brought into the studio. I painted rosy ham, a very green salad, a very red slice of tomato. My work was approved.

This success was the beginning of my ascent in the ranks of the company's artists. Another occasion soon presented itself. An artist, Mary Horton, was known for her cute baby faces, often used for Johnson and Johnson baby powder posters. However, one order required the whole figure of a baby in diapers sitting on a pillow with a plastic baby powder bottle on the side. Mary Horton rendered a beautiful face, but baby's body didn't look healthy enough.

"Serge, you have painted nude women in art school, can't you do a naked baby?" I said I'll try, and I executed a well-fed baby, using a new technique I just learned -- airbrush. Again, it was a success. All artwork in those days was done on illustration board, from which paper could be stripped, cut out and pasted onto another board. Baby's head by Mary Horton was stripped, and attached to the body painted by Serge Hollerbach. We called this composition "Mary's head and Serge's body". Such small laughs broke the monotony of every day's work. Of course, I had my failures, too. Asked to sketch some young girls, I produced several drawings where the girls looked too old and worse yet had low breasts.

"You draw European women, Serge," said Tony "they all have hanging breasts! Our American girls have high bosoms."

Once I tried to paint Santa Claus.

"But your Santa is not cute!" Tony exclaimed angrily. Indeed, he was not cute, and I never did one again. Sometimes, a really fine piece of artwork would come to us. Well-known artist Dean Cornwell painted a very decorative still-life of bananas and other tropical fruits in a basket with a high arched handle. On top of it sat a beautiful parrot. The painting was greatly admired until one junior salesmen said: "But parrot is a dirty bird and it will do his business right on the bananas!" (A shorter verb was used). Everybody agreed and Dean Cornwell painted out the bird.

As time went by, I became friendly with two lettering men. One of them, Mario, was of Italian descent and loved opera. He also collected old records. While doing some lettering, he would stop, turn toward me and with a sweet, nostalgic smile announce: "I have a very rare record of Amelita Galli-Curci, singing Lucia di Lammermoor. Did you ever hear her voice?"

"Mario, I need this lettering now!" our art director yelled angrily.

"Yes, yes, Tony, right away." But as soon as Tony left the room, Mario continued, "and the other record I have is Caruso, singing Pagliacci." It so happened that I have heard Galli-Curci, Caruso, and Chaliapin, on records, of course, as a teen in Russia in the late 1930's. Leningrad radio had a good music program. A gentle soul, Mario was a mediocre lettering man, it was obvious that his heart was not in his work. What ambitions he had in life I never knew.

The other lettering man was Henry. A big man of German ancestry was an old bachelor and lived with his aged mother. Henry was enormously strong. He could grab a leg of a heavy chair and lift it with his outstretched arm. His huge body was crowned by a small head with full cheeks, small nose and a mouth with small, yellow teeth. There was something of a little boy in him, both funny and pathetic. He loved bowling, but it was not his main hobby. "What I really love to do is to write short stories and," he added, "I have completed a correspondence course in short story writing at Columbia University with good grades!" Unfortunately, all his attempts to publish his writings failed.

It soon became clear to me why. Henry strongly believed that the force which makes the world go around is coincidence. It delighted him to find it everywhere. "Can you imagine," he would tell me, "last week I met a man, who lived on the same street where my parents lived when they first married!" Or: "A neighbor of mine mentioned the other day that his wife, before he married her, worked in a factory in Brooklyn, the same factory that my mother worked, too, before she met my father! What a co-incidence!" Unfortunately, Henry's imagination did not go any further, although the idea of coincidences in life may have given another man some material with which to work.

"I have more than a hundred rejection slips from magazines and newspapers," Henry said to me. "At times I get very discouraged."

"Well, you never know," I said to be polite. Henry's face lit up.

"Exactly the way I feel. You never know. You just have to keep trying." Perhaps it was cruel on my part not to ask him to give me his stories to read, but I couldn't bear the thought of being obliged to comment on them. One day Henry's aged mother became sick, and he took a leave of absence. Two weeks later she died, and Henry was back at work. He looked shaken by this loss, but at the same time there was a new expression on his face -- almost mischievous and expectant.

"I asked a lady I recently met to have dinner with me in a restaurant and she agreed," he said beaming. Being very thrifty, Henry had substantial savings and now tried to make up for the years lost. The places he went to were rather expensive, and he told me how much his lady enjoyed it. I bet she did, but I knew it wouldn't last. Indeed, after a few outings Henry came to work crestfallen. "She said to me that she couldn't see me again," he said. Quite possibly Henry made some advances or she felt she could no longer exploit an old guy of fifty some years any longer. There was a touch of "Blue Angel" in this story -- an innocent older man falling in love with an experienced woman, who in this case turned out to be fairly decent. Henry didn't fall apart, but probably directed all his energies to short story writing.

I don't know what happened to Henry because I soon quit my job and started to freelance, making twice as much money. The company was sold. Tony retired and went back to his beloved California. We corresponded for some years until I was informed of his death. Looking back, I realize that quite a few unfulfilled lives passed before my eyes. I was yet to encounter a person, who could be a textbook example for any psychoanalyst.

My freelance work eventually took me to a small art studio in Long Island City, owned by two partners, a man and a woman. Her name was Edie Brown Eisenberg; his, Harold Tannar. The studio was Tannar-Brow Studio. She was young, attractive, talented, a democrat with very liberal views. "I am a child of the Roosevelt Era," she said. He was years older than she -- a conservative Republican with a dim view of the world. He, too, was an artist. She was happily married, but he was not happily married. He deeply mistrusted all women. Rarely could you find people so different as these two partners, who, nevertheless, worked together in harmony, fortuitously complementing each other. She had a great sense of color, preferring tones of orange, green and magenta. His colors were heavy and subdued. He loved to paint boats and fishing villages in New England, but no matter how bright and sunny was the day, the sky in his landscapes was gray, the water, heavy black-green.

Only boats were left white -- their masts reflected in the water. These reflections resembled long corkscrews and one had a feeling that their regularity gave great pleasure to the artist. One of our co-workers, seeing these seascapes, would make a fist and blow into it, producing the mournful call of a foghorn. "Darkness at Noon." That's how I called these paintings. Their author died at the age of 63 from Alzheimer's syndrome. He stopped eating and starved himself to death.

His funeral was the first Anglo-Saxon funeral I have attended. It made a lasting impression on me. The cemetery was called" Restland" and had no graves or tombstones -- only small tiles imbedded in cut grass in this charming park. Why remind the living of the possibility of death? When I arrived, quite a

few people gathered in the chapel with a closed coffin visible at the far end. Everybody chatted merrily, even laughed. Then came the minister and announced that we gathered here not to mourn, but to celebrate the life of dear deceased. The very notion of a celebration at a funeral struck me as bizarre, if not totally lacking respect for the dead. Only later, I understood the true meaning of it. I still believe that celebration of deceased's life and fond memories are more appropriate at wakes and memorial services than at funerals. Having extolled the deceased's virtues, the minister led us across the green lawn to the grave, said the prayer "ashes to ashes, dust to dust", and the coffin was lowered into the grave. We all stood in silence, which was interrupted by sobbing. It was the 90-year old father of the deceased, the only human emotion heard during the entire ceremony. What a sad ending to a sad life it was.

I started to freelance for a while and tried to break into book illustration. My mentor was a famous German-born graphic artist and illustrator of classic literature, Fritz Eichenberg. He advised me to start with juvenile stories.

"Nobody will give you Shakespeare or Edgar Poe to illustrate," he told me, after seeing my drawings for Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death.* Having selected a story about a family with two children, a boy and girl, and the dog named Spot, I did a series of drawings and showed them to a well-known agent for illustrators. Her name was Nettie King. She received me -- puffing on a cigarette; she looked at my drawings. "The parents and the kids are not nice, and the dog bites. You have no flair for children's books. Try science fiction or something similar.

I was disappointed, but not discouraged and on my own managed to get two books published, but artistically they were below my standards, and I realized that Nettie King was right.

My acquaintance with Fritz Eichenberg continued, however, and he has invited me several times to his home in Tuckahoe, NY There I met a well-known Russian-born children's book illustrator, Fedor Rojankovsky. An old emigrant, he came to the United States from France, a country he disliked, although he was quite successful there. He hoped to be successful in America, too; that proved to be correct. His drawings of animals were exquisite, charming and funny, unlike my feeble attempts in that genre. But Rojankovsky didn't even like America -- too capitalistic and unappreciative of his talent.

He admired the Soviet Union and was, as we, a refugee from communism; such people were called "a pink", that is, not quite red, but going in this direction. Nevertheless, he didn't want to go back to Russia, knowing well, that he wouldn't be able to live there as well and as free as in capitalist America. I realized now, that Rojankovsky was just one of those who are never happy where they are. Fedor enjoyed being controversial. At the same time, he was a charming, friendly man and we became good friends, since his political views didn't bother me too much. Some of my friends, however, were easily irritated. A close friend of mine, an excellent artist, George Bobritsky, was born in the Ukraine. He witnessed the collectivization of farmers and the terrible famine that followed. He was a staunch anti-Communist. Once, invited to Rojankovsky's house, he heard the host praising Stalin's method of collectivization. Turning red in his face, George stormed out of the house and sat in his car for the rest of

the evening. The wives tried to patch up things, but George didn't speak to Rojankovsky for two years. Such incidents were common among emigrants with different political views.

I continued supporting myself with freelance work. I went regularly to different sketch classes to draw and paint. There were many of them in the late 50's and early 60's. One had an impressive name, Pan America Art School and was run by Nestor Castro, a Peruvian married to a blonde American lady who was a head taller than he. She sat at the cash register, while he conversed in Spanish with Puerto-Rican students enrolled in the school on the GI bill. The school was located on Eighth Avenue and 57th Street; it occupied several large rooms, the biggest one being the sketch class. It was divided by a large screen. On one side a model took short poses for drawing; the other side, a long three-hour pose for painting. The classes were well-attended by amateur and professional painters alike. The school's attraction was the central location and cheap rates -- a few dollars per session. One could always find one or two old men with tiny sketch pads. They sat very close to the model. They couldn't draw at all and visited sketch class for one reason only -- to look at a nude woman, a pleasure otherwise denied them.

Occasionally, some slightly deranged people would appear: one had a clothespin on his nose; another, holding a piece of graphite, sketched wildly on pages of the New York Times, ripping the paper to shreds. Still another admired his drawings, by lifting preceding pages of a large pad and in doing so blocked the view of the model.

Most of the people were normal and some were professional artists. One man in particular caught my attention. His name was Frederick Franck. A dentist by profession, he came to the United States from Holland and became here a successful painter. Zen Buddhism became his philosophy, and he published several books, one of them called *The Zen of Drawing.*

He was also interested in Catholicism; he traveled to Rome when the Ecumenical Council was in session. He sketched several cardinals and met Pope Paul the Sixth.

"How did you manage to be at the session of the Council?" I asked him.

"I sketched the captain of the Swiss Guard," he answered, "and he let me in." Frederick Franck also showed me a photograph of himself and the Pope. Both of them looked like twin brothers -- bald heads and aquiline noses. Returning to the States, Frederick Franck settled in Warwick, NY. He built an interdenominational chapel called *Pacem in Terris.* He also published a newsletter, *The Shoestring.* Many times he invited me to come to Warwick to participate in a ceremony of burning all the issues of the *New York Times* on New Year's Eve. He wrote to me that each year he builds a float, piles up the newspapers on it, sets them on fire and watches them burn as the float goes down the river. I never accepted his invitation; I preferred greeting the New Year in New York. Frederick Frank was older than I and probably is no longer with us. I was not in touch with him for many years, but have fond memories of this talented and interesting man.

All kinds of models posed at the Pan America Art School, professionals from Art Students League and unemployed girls, trying to make a few dollars. One of the professionals was a middle-aged French woman. Her name was Claude, and she claimed to have posed for Henri Matisse.

"How did he treat you?" someone asked her. "Comme chaque garcon" -- as every boy would -- was her answer. She lived in Brooklyn and took the GG train to get home -- "Zhee Zhee" in her heavy French accent. Sometimes the models would not show up, but Nestor Castro knew what to do: he would go out and invite some hookers from Eighth Avenue to pose for us. They were a bit shy, not knowing why they are going to be paid for doing nothing.

At that time I began to participate in group shows of different art societies in New York -- Knickerbocker Artists, Allied Artists of America, American Watercolor Society and some others. Eventually, I became a member of all of them. Finally, a small gallery on the East Side approached me asking for paintings to be left on consignment. It was called The Ground Floor Art Gallery, located on 52nd Street between Third and Second Avenues. Its owner Tami Apt was a very nice lady and we soon became good friends. She had a daughter, Jane and a son, Charles. Jane later married a well-known portrait painter, Daniel Greene, and Charles became a member of the National Academy of Design in New York. Our association soon proved profitable and Tami suggested a one-man show. The gallery, previously a store, was quite small with the backroom, a frame shop and the front room, the exhibition space. But I still could fit a dozen small caseins and a dozen drawings. Most of my work was sold, at

modest prices, of course. Tami and I were happy.

The show was memorable for me for other reasons. It opened in early November 1966, the very time, when floods in Florence destroyed thousands of great works of art. I visited this great city three years before and painted there for two weeks, falling in love with this cradle of Renaissance art and architecture. It seemed so wrong to have an exhibition of my mediocre work while great paintings were being destroyed.

Another incident connected with my show was the arrival of a letter from the Soviet Union. I had some friends working in the Voice of America and was interviewed in connection with the show. Apparently, the broadcast was heard by the artist, Yevgeny Ruchin. He wrote to the gallery and in broken English asked to show his work here. The letter was adorned with splashes of paint a la Jackson Pollock. I had no idea who Ruchin was and answered him in Russian saying that the gallery is small and is not looking for new artists to represent. Ten or so years later I learned that one of Leningrad's most prominent dissident artists Yevgeny Ruchin perished in a fire in his studio, a fire allegedly set by the KGB. Ruchin's work was acclaimed by Western critics.

Some ten years later I was introduced to Ruchin's daughter, Masha, who immigrated to the United States with her widowed mother. The introduction was made by Alexander Glezer, a poet and prominent figure in Russia's human rights movement. He was organizer of the so called "bulldozer exhibition" of non-

conformist paintings in Moscow in 1974 and later founded a Museum of Russian Unofficial Art in Exile, first near Paris and later in Jersey City, New Jersey.

He also published a magazine *Strelez,* to which I contributed reviews of exhibitions of the Russian *émigré artiste.* Masha's fate in the USA was tragic -- two years later in San Antonio she committed suicide. I wrote an article for the Russian language daily in New York. *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* --"In memory of Father and Daughter". Tragedies seem to follow Russian intellectuals and artists at home and abroad.

While my solo show at Ground Floor Art gallery was still on, I came by to say hello to Tami Apt. "Guess who stopped to look at your painting in the window?" she said to me.

"Greta Garbo!" I knew that Garbo lived in that neighborhood and saw her several times on the street, dressed in black and walking without looking at anybody. "And then what did she do?"

"She walked away." It so happened that many years later, while Greta Garbo was still alive, I visited a Russian lady, who lived in the same building as Garbo and knew her well, although both ladies were not on speaking terms. The Russian lady's name was Valentina Schlee, and I met her through Susanne Massie, an American writer and wife of Robert Massie. They wrote a book *Nicholas and Alexandra* about Russian Czar Nicholas II and the Czarina, whose son prince Alexei was a hemophiliac, just as Massie's son, Bobby. Their interest in Russian history led to publication of Robert Massie's book, *Peter*

the Great and Susanne's history of Russian art, *The Land of the Firebird*. Susanne wanted a Russian-born artist to design the book jacket, and through a friend of mine I landed the commission. Simon and Schuster published the book.

Susanne and I became friends, and one day she called me and asked whether I knew Valentina.

"Valentina who?"

"Valentina is a famous dress designer, she does dresses for Greta Garbo! She saw your book jacket, liked it and asked me if you would come a small party?"

Of course, I said yes. On the given day I arrived at the house at the end of 52nd Street, overlooking the East River. Valentina lived on the fourth floor. I rang the bell. A maid took my coat and asked me to wait. The room was fairly large, well-furnished with some paintings on the walls. One of them looked like Giorgio de Chirico. There were some framed photographs on a table, too. In one of them I saw Winston Churchill and a man standing next to him. In another photo, Prince Renier and Princess Grace of Monaco with their two girls posed with an elderly lady. At that moment the hostess came in. Valentina was perhaps eighty years old, with wrinkled face, but she was most energetic and quick in her movements. She greeted me warmly, and I, in European fashion, kissed her hand.

"Is that painting by de Chirico?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, Giorgio was a good friend of ours!"

"And the gentleman next to Winston Churchill?"

"My late husband. They were friends." The lady standing next to Prince Renier and Princess Grace was obviously Valentina. "They are such a nice family, I spend my summers with them". Seeing my interest, Valentina wanted to show me her apartment. In one of the rooms I saw a pencil drawing of an attractive young girl.

"Is that you, Valentina Nikolaevna?" I asked, using patronymic, as it is done in Russia.

"Yes, an artist sketched me in Paris in the early twenties. Do you know Dimoucshka?" It so happened that I knew Dmitrij Bouchesne, a Russian émigré of French origin, who came to Paris after the Russian Revolution and became very well known as a stage designer. I used to meet him in Paris in the late 1970's.

"I was not bad looking when I was young" said Valentina. "But now I am so old!" She embraced me put her head on my shoulder. "Let's have a drink." While I was touched by this gesture, there was no time for a drink. The doorbell rang and Robert and Susanne Massie came in with their daughter, Elizabeth. We all sat down in the living room. It was obvious other guests were expected. The bell rang again and Gloria Vanderbilt came in, escorted by Jose Quintero. I knew who they were. I remembered the nasty

divorce Gloria Vanderbilt had to endure with Leopold Stokovsky, who took their two sons to England against her will. No matter how many drinks I will have, I said to myself, the name Stokovsky will not come from my lips. Sandwiches with caviar were brought in, a bottle of vodka and seven small silver cups.

"This is Russian silver from the era of Peter the Great," explained Valentina. "In my will it goes to Metropolitan Museum."

"They don't have these," Jose Quintero poured vodka into the cups. Valentina took one of them and did something that left me speechless -- making a sign of the Cross over the vodka, she gave the cup to Gloria Vanderbilt and said: "Glorushka, this in Stoki's memory." She spoke English with a heavy Russian accent. Blessing water or food is common in Russia, but vodka? Valentina was, obviously, a free spirit. Gloria gave Valentina her famous square smile and took a sip.

It was soon decided that we must eat. Gloria's chauffeured limousine, motor running, was parked on the street. We piled into it and drove for about five minutes, stopping finally at a French restaurant in the West 50's. We were expected because the manager came out, exclaiming "Mesdames! Messieurs!" The table was set in a private room, and I found myself sitting to Gloria Vanderbilt's left. I must confess I was quite nervous, not knowing what I could discuss with her. But she understood my predicament and was most gracious -- making small talk and putting me at ease. It is difficult remembering what the

conversation was about. The name of Tammie Grimes and her new romantic involvement came up, but I didn't even know who Tammie Grimes was! One phrase, spoken by Gloria Vanderbilt I do remember was "we cried so much that we had no tears left," she said. Poor little rich girl, indeed.

The food was pre-ordered, but I do not remember what we ate. The dinner didn't last long. Gloria Vanderbilt took Valentina in her limousine, the Massies had their car, and I took a cab. I brought Jose Quintero to his apartment in the Dakota on 72nd Street, continuing on to my humble dwelling on West 75th Street, where I live to this day.

Dropping names is not considered to be in good taste. But my excuse is that my one-man show in a small New York gallery brought me in touch with people I would otherwise never meet and thus created a strange pattern in my basically uneventful life. The next day I sent Valentina a bouquet of flowers and called her to thank her for dinner. She was most friendly and asked me to visit again some day. But I never did -- thinking that was just a kind gesture on her part. Besides, I didn't belong to her circle of friends.

From Susanne Massie I learned a few details about Valentina's life. Living in the same building, Greta Garbo and Valentina avoided each other, Garbo called Valentina "the fourth floor", and Valentina referred to Garbo as "the seventh floor". Elevator men were instructed never to allow the two ladies to ride the elevator together. But once it happened and Valentina, seeing Greta, made a sign of the cross, as

if she saw the devil herself.

In the summer of that year Valentina went to Monaco. Soon after Princess Grace had her fatal accident. Valentina came back shattered by this tragedy, fell ill and died. Greta Garbo, I was told, was deeply affected by the death of Valentina; after all she was her contemporary and former friend. She followed Valentina soon afterwards. I remember an article in *People* magazine about the two ladies, appearing after Greta Garbo's death -- recounting basic facts about their relationship.

There is still another story connected to my exhibition at Ground Floor Art Gallery. To put an ad in *Art News* or any other well-known art magazine was too expensive, and the gallery advertised in a small French-English newspaper, *France-Amerique.* They sent an art critic, who gave me a fairly good review. His name was Avel de Knight. An African-American, he was member of the National Academy of Design, spoke fluent French and traveled to the Soviet Union in the early 60's on an exchange program.

After a few years the Ground Floor Art Gallery closed, and I switched to another gallery on East 67 Street, Eileen Kuhlick Gallery, It was also on the ground floor, but on the second floor was Larcada Gallery, where Avel de Knight exhibited, Once it happened that our shows were at the same time, We became good friends, taught at the National Academy School of Fine Arts and showed our work in the same gallery in Paris, MarieTherese Cochin Gallery near Centre Pompidou, Unfortunately, Avel de Knight died at the age of 71. I have very fond memories of this fine man and excellent watercolorist.

Eileen Kuhlick, the gallery owner, had a friend in a TV station that showed a program called *To tell the Truth*. Older New Yorkers may remember it, A panel of judges interviewed three entrants, one of them being "the real person"; the others, imposters. The "real person" was someone who made news recently and was distinguished in some way. At that time a volcano erupted in Iceland, and it was photographed and filmed by a local photographer, who came to the United States, sold his work to the National Geographical Society and became the toast of the town, It was decided to put him on *To tell the Truth*, Two imposters were needed, That's where I came in, Eileen thought publicity would help sales of my paintings and sent me to her friend at the TV station who looked at me and figured I could pass for an Icelander.

Anyway, who knows what the Icelandic accent sounds like? The panel of judges would try to find out who the real person is and we, the imposters, had to learn something about Iceland, its geography, history and economics. There was a dress rehearsal, and I was given a white sweater with red reindeers embroidered on it to enhance my Nordic look. The judges were Kitty Carlyle Hart, Arleen Frances, Bennett Cerf and someone else.

The show lasted about twenty minutes and finally, the real person revealed himself. There were Oh's and Ah's and everybody went home happy. I had to return the sweater with reindeers, but I was paid $50 and received a pair of cufflinks. My national exposure or, perhaps, my fifteen minutes of fame, did nothing for the sales of my paintings, but it was fun to be on TV.

I kept exhibiting in group shows, and someone suggested I try the National Academy of Design Annual. The Academy, known as a very conservative society of artists, was shunned by most younger painters. It was even labeled as a "kiss of death" by abstract painter Lee Adler, whom I met on a Fifth Avenue bus. Still, why not try? I submitted a painting, was accepted and came to the opening. Most paintings were indeed very conservative and, as I have found out later, the average age of academicians was 72-plus. At the founding of the Academy in 1825, the oldest person was the President Samuel Morse. He was 28 years old. A professional portrait painter, he became world famous as the inventor of the telegraph which is in use to this day.

As I look back, the Academy was my destiny. In 1940, living in Russia, I had enrolled in the High School of Art, connected to the Academy of Fine Arts in Leningrad. My goal was to study at the Academy and become an artist. Unfortunately, the war interrupted my studies. I was taken to Germany to work; was liberated by the American army and in 1946 resumed my studies at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. I remained there for 3 1/2 years -- but not completing the course because my visa to the United States came up. It seems logical that the third Academy was in my future. Eventually, I became a member and have taught there for twenty years, until 1995.

Earlier in my career, becoming a member of the National Academy of Design in New York was not my goal, but some older artists who became my friends suggested it. They pointed out that the Academy needs "young blood". At age 50, I was not exactly young. I was elected an associate member (ANA) of

this venerable body. I later became a full member (NA).

Two years later I was asked to teach at the Academy, and I agreed. An entirely new chapter of my life began. In retrospect, I realized that because of teaching I remained more of a realist than I wanted. On the other hand, teaching helped me formulate my thoughts, and enriched my vision. I have also met hundreds of most interesting people, some of whom became my lifelong friends. Of course, there were some minor conflicts and misunderstandings, and at times I felt quite frustrated, but these experiences helped me grow.

Miss Alice Melrose, Director of the Academy, wanted me to teach a drawing class. There would be a nude model, she said, and a monitor would assist me. The day before I prepared a short speech, outlining the goals and methods and, not without nervousness, faced my class the following morning. About twelve people enrolled, and some of them were elderly ladies and men and a few young people.

I should have known that no entrance examinations are required in American art schools. You pay, enroll and see what comes out of it. Drawing a nude model is, of course, the most difficult challenge. Years ago students spent a year or so drawing plaster casts before being allowed to go to a life class. Who are my students, I asked myself: what do they know about drawing?

"Please, start drawing" I said to them "and in about five minutes I will come to each of you -- depending on how advanced you are, I will give you personal instruction and suggestions." Everyone went to work

energetically, except for one young girl who sat motionless without touching her paper.

"Why didn't you start?" I asked her. "I have to see what you can do?"

"How can I draw a figure not knowing anatomy," she replied, "I thought you would teach anatomy first, so I would know what to draw." Her answer caught me completely off guard. I should have been prepared for that. Carefully choosing my words, I started to explain to her that anatomy, as important as it is, cannot be a substitute for the ability to see what is long, what is short, thick or thin. "Why don't you try to draw the model the best you can, she has long legs, thin arms. Try it!"

The answer was a blank stare. I cannot do it," said the girl. "I have to know what I am drawing." At the break she took her pad and left.

Other students did their best, but what an array of styles, techniques and ineptitude it was! Many books with titles how to draw human figure or heads, animals etc. are published every year, some useful and some downright misleading and harmful, because they teach techniques that make a false impression of competence. In other words, everything that shouldn't be done in drawing was practiced by my students. What shall I do with them? How can I teach them? I was quite desperate; nevertheless, it was a challenge. It is difficult to say whether my attempts to make them see were successful.

I was soon asked to teach a painting class. Not that teaching painting was easier; it was a slower, more

deliberate process, which also gave me the opportunity to paint with my students. Not having finished the Academy in Munich, I still craved for a big, well-lit studio with a model posing for two weeks.

The National Academy School of Fine Arts is located on the Upper Eastside in a very affluent residential neighborhood in Manhattan. Most of my students were wives of prominent lawyers, physicians, businessmen and even diplomats. Having raised a family with a supportive husband, these ladies, many of them very talented, had their studies interrupted by years of marriage and bringing up children, who were now in college. These women simply resumed their art careers. Perhaps, this is a typically American phenomenon -- middle-aged and even elderly people continuing their education. It may also be an ideal situation -- no financial worries, no dealers to please in order to sell and no craving for fifteen minutes of fame.

Of course, there were also young students on scholarships and there was quite an ethnic mix among them. In the course of twenty years I had in my class a Japanese girl, two Chinese students, one Hindu, one Haitian, a former Yugoslav army paratrooper, and a talented surrealist painter, an Iranian lady, a Philippine, a Senegalese, an Italian, a German and several African-Americans. And also ladies--one an immigrant from Bulgaria, the other, from the Ukraine. Many of them became my good friends, and I am still in contact with some of them during the eight years since I retired.

To mention names would make a long list, but there were two men in my class that I was privileged to

meet. Both of them have an indirect connection to my old country, Russia. Martin E. Segal, a very prominent figure in New York's cultural life, President Emeritus of Lincoln Center, organizer of International Music Festivals, is a third cousin of Marc Chagal. A talented amateur artist, he came to my class to study landscape painting and did very well -- even joining my workshop in Sedona, Arizona, where we painted outdoors. A wonderful, generous man, he was recently honored by the National Academy School of Fine Arts for his contribution to New York City cultural life.

The other man was Henry Solomonoff, of Russian-Jewish descent, born in Paris. "You are the only person who pronounces my name correctly Solomonoff," he told me. "I have been called Salmanov and even Salamov!"

Henry, who passed away some ten years ago, was a successful businessman, entrepreneur, musician and artist. He also founded the first Negro dance company in America and became a friend of the legendary Leon Theremin, the inventor of electronic music. A Russian of French descent, Leon Theremin or Lev Sergeyevich Termen, as he was known in his native land, came to the United States or was sent here by the Soviet Government, and worked for David Sarnov's RCA.

A brilliant musician and inventor, he created a musical instrument, producing electronic sounds that resembled a violin, or a human voice and being able to interpret classical music. It is called Teremin-vox and there are musicians who still play it successfully. In America Leon Teremin married a black dancer

Lavinia Johnson, which in those days was quite daring. In 1938 he was called back to Russia -- some say he was kidnapped -- without his wife and ended in Stalin's Gulag. However, he kept working as an inventor and is credited for producing the best listening devices ever. They were used by the KGB and Soviet army and navy for many years. Rehabilitated after Stalin's death, Theremin eventually came back to America to visit his old friends. He died in his early nineties, allegedly joining the Communist party shortly before his death. There was a film produced about Theremin's life, in which Henry Solomonoff spoke about his friendship with this famous person. After Henry's death his family asked me to attend a memorial gathering, where I spoke about Henry as an artist.

After a few years of glasnost and perestroika the mighty Soviet Union ceased to exist. I went back to see my old country in 1993. Some say that one should never visit places where he or she has spent their childhood or younger years. A big disappointment is inevitable. Not true -- at least for me. I was thrilled to stand at the banks of the Neva River in Leningrad -- now St. Petersburg. I looked at the spot where our house once stood and every thing was as beautiful as in 1930-40's. Some of my school friends are still alive -- class of '41, and I have found my nephew, Yevgueni Gollerbakh -- that's how my name is spelled in Russian. A bright young man with a degree in philology he represents a new generation of Russian intellectuals in the post-communist era. He has visited me several times in New York. In an interview I gave a reporter in Tsarskoye Selo, a suburb of St. Petersburg, where I was born I indicated that occasionally in Europe Roman marble busts are still found -- always with the nose broken off. A

complete likeness is therefore missing. I thought of myself as being such a bust; coming back to Russia I found the missing tip of my nose, glued it back on, and my complete likeness is restored. But who am I? In Russia I am a native son, living in America. In Western Europe they think of me as a European, born in Russia, but residing in the United States. And in the States I am an American born in Russia as so many Americans are. All three statements are correct.

However, thinking of myself, I realize that I am not fully-ripened Russian; not fully-cooked European and not thoroughly-baked American. In many ways I lead three parallel lives, which do not meet. Yet as my creative life nears its conclusion, I feel that these lines or lives are coming closer to each other and will eventually form one thick line. After all, that's what will be seen from a distance.