Nikita's 80th birthday

Portrait by G. Shishkin, 2014

Renaissance for a Russian Prince

A chapter from Richard Coulson's book
A Corkscrew Life, Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2014

June and Nikita getting ready for the dinner for President Putin at the Spencer House, London

Rurik dynasty

Anyone who knows anything about Russia has heard of the Romanovs, the 300-year-old dynasty whose power vanished in 1918 when Tsar Nicholas II, with his wife and children, was murdered by the Bolsheviks in the early days of the Russian Revolution. But how many non-Russians are familiar with the Rurik line, which preceded the Romanovs and whose genealogy begins in the dim 9th Century, when, we are told by a mixture of history and legend, a Viking warrior who called himself Prince Rurik came down south and settled in Novgorod, northwest of today's Moscow, leaving a trail of progeny who fused together the lands that eventually became known as Russia?

I certainly knew nothing of the Ruriks, when in 1960 I met in New York City a slim, impeccably dressed young man called simply Nikita Lobanov, speaking meticulous English with an undefinable European accent. Years passed before I read articles naming him Prince Nikita Dmitriyevich Lobanov-Rostovsky, by then a famous art collector renowned in post-Soviet Russia for dealing directly with President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev. He has never himself used the hereditary title and explains that the Russian word for "prince" means in effect "ruler" and is his inherited birth-right, for his lineage can be traced through a chain of ancestors to the original Rurik.

As plain Nikita, he was introduced to me by his fiancée-then-wife Nina George-Picot. My wife Edie and I had befriended the charming, raven-haired Nina, daughter of the French Ambassador to the United Nations Guillaume Georges-Picot, and his Russian wife. We could see that Nina, circulating though New York society, would not be satisfied with a standard all-American husband, but needed to mate with a man

Nina, Paris, 1962

who shared her intense intellectual interests. As she later stated, when they met at violinist Nathan Milstein's dinner, "It was love at first sight... Nikita immediately asked me if I was interested in ballet and opera." And of course she was. He captivated her with the tale of his life-changing epiphany, when in 1954 he had viewed a retrospective exhibition based on Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. As a result, "I, a mere art lover," she told an interviewer, "was the acolyte of a true collector for 40 happy, interesting years."

When in 1962 we first visited their tiny rented apartment just up Lexington Avenue from the 92nd Street Y, both Nikita and Nina were struggling on respectable but minimal salaries. He was a very junior officer at Chemical Bank making, he later recalled, $86 per week, and Nina, a research assistant for Readers' Digest, "perhaps a bit less". But whatever else was lacking, the cramped rooms glowed with art taking every inch of wall-space – art of a type that I had never seen before. They had already begun acquiring the vivid sketches of costumes used in the ballet, all designed by Russian artists before 1930; their rigid budgets could just afford works that had not yet caught the interest of the commercial art world. These privately-hung pieces were the obscure, bargain-price beginnings of the 835-piece collection that in 2008 was sold to Russia for display in St. Petersburg, now revealed in an overwhelming coffee-table book published in 2012. This assemblage was described by Professor John Bowlt, the leading American expert

on Russian art as “unique in size, scope and composition, and among private collections is unequalled globally”.

The Lobanov collection. Collage by Eugene Scheffer, 2010

BULGARIA

The story how the Lobanovs created this collection is a deeply personal one, and must start with the experiences of Nikita’s early life, that froze into him a steely determination to excel. He was born in 1935 in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, a European back-water that had attracted members of the Russian nobility when forced out by the Bolshevik regime after the 1917 Revolution. Most of the noble families who had served the Romanovs fled to Paris, since they already absorbed French

Nikita with his mother and father, 1942

language and culture as second nature. But Nikita's paternal grand-parents made their way to Odessa and eventually through Romania, and a perilous, disguised passage across the Danube to Bulgaria, where a substantial exile group gathered, drawn by their devotion to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and its liturgical performances, sung by the choir of the Bulgarian National Opera. In 1934, they were joined in Sofia by Nikita's parents, Dmitry Lobanov-Rostovsky and Irina Wyrouboff, who had escaped Russia as children and met and married in Paris after their education in England. Sustained partly by assets rescued from Russia and partly from Dmitry's ability to find work as an accountant, the Lobanov-Rostovskys, with Nikita as their only child, were able to survive far from the bitter struggles that wracked Russia as Stalin carried out his brutal purges against any shadow of dissent from Soviet orthodoxy.

The exiles kept a low profile in Bulgaria, a complex Balkan state which itself suffered abrupt changes of government in the years between the two World Wars. Through age eleven Nikita had a normal close-knit family childhood, with photographs showing him wearing short pants in warm scenes with his primly dressed parents. He received the basics of a solid education both from a private school and also from the highly cultured émigré society that surrounded him. He developed his life-long ability in languages, becoming fluent in Russian, Bul-

garian, French and German, to which he later added English and Spanish.

Doubtless his parents instilled in him a profound appreciation of his ancestors' stature. His father's line included the Rurik Prince Aleksei Borisovich Lobanov-Rostovsky, the wealthy 19th century nobleman who became a diplomat and close adviser to Tsar Alexander II, and finally the Foreign Minister negotiating key treaties with adjacent nations. A true eccentric aristocrat, he became an "octogenarian grand seigneur, collector of Hebrew books and French mistresses, who sparkled in salons and attended church in his dressing gown." Nikita's mother's lineage ran equally deep. Her Wyrouboff father came from established landowners near the city of Orel, and he was a nephew of Prince Lvov, a Rurik nobleman and Russia's brief first Prime Minister after the abdication of the Tsar in March 1917, preceding Kerensky before Lenin's successful October coup d'etat. Lvov and Wyrouboff escaped the oppressive left-wing regime and tried, in London, Washington and Paris, to find international

Prince Alexei Borisovich Lobanov-Rostovsky

Vasily Wyrouboff, Nikita's maternal grandfather

aid for the "White" forces battling against Lenin's Bolsheviks. They failed, and never returned to their homeland, remaining rigid anti-communists.

Clearly Nikita learned "who he was", a lesson that sustained him in the hard days to come.

In World War II, the Kingdom of Bulgaria, torn between conflicting loyalties, became a half-hearted party in Germany's Axis alliance, but avoided sending troops in the campaign against Russia. When the powerful Russian armies swept westward across eastern Europe in 1944, they invaded Bulgaria and in September forced the resignation of the monarchy, replacing it with the People's Republic of Bulgaria a puppet state controlled from Moscow. At the tri-partite Yalta Conference in April 1945, Roosevelt and Churchill gave in to Stalin, accepting the Russian dominance as a fait accompli, and Bulgaria fell firmly into the eastern side of the Iron Curtain.

While many of the Russian émigrés had prudently abandoned Bulgaria as the Soviet forces approached, the Lobanov-Rostovsky family, perhaps naively, decided to remain, expecting a tolerant acceptance from the new regime. They were soon disabused. The "Reds" of the Bulgarian Republic shared the same suspicions as the USSR about "Whites", unrepentant descendants of the Tsar's nobility, and imposed harsh, restrictive conditions that compelled the family to seek emigration. But legal exit permits were unobtainable for the likes of the Lobanovs. There was only one solution: clandestine flight. Through friendly contacts with intelligence units in England, Dmitry made arrangements for escape over trackless mountains fringing the border with non-communist Greece, where they would be guided to safety. On a winter night in 1946, the little family of three, bearing rucksacks with a few possessions, trudged for two days over snowy passes, and waited. And waited. Through some betrayal or failure of communication, no

Greek guides appeared. Instead, the Bulgarian border guards followed their tracks and seized them on Greek territory for return to Sofia and immediate incarceration.

Commander Geoffrey Marescaux de Saubrui, Royal Navy, Allied Control Commission, and Nikita's parents, Sophia, 1945

Nikita, at age eleven, was separated from his parents and thrown into the prison reserved for political prisoners. Most cells were windowless, but his at the end of a corridor had an opening through which he could hear screams of prisoners being beaten and occasionally shot in the courtyard. Luckily, through it he also heard the familiar whistling of It's a Long Way to Tipperary, the only sign that his father was a fellow prisoner. After several months he was close to starvation on 150 grams of bread per day. The authorities transferred him to the central jail for common criminals, where the food was somewhat better – cheese and lime tea were offered.

Years later, he was asked in a Russian interview whether he found the prison experience essential: "Definitely", he answered (rough translations by Google system are quoted). "Inmates reassessing their values; that's one of the most crucial things jail can give. I was lucky to be imprisoned with thieves, and I learnt many useful things – how to transport currency on your body so it won't be discovered, how to steal in the crowded morning trams, how to survive as an illegal immigrant."

And perhaps a deeper effect, as stated in another interview: "It has very much influenced my mind, has created an indelible hatred of oppression, which helped in the formation of willpower. I have always tried to succeed at everything I did."

Prison even affected his personal style of dress and bearing. He was then clad "in an onion bag instead of clothes". In reaction, I have invariably seen him, in person and in many photographs, wearing immaculately tailored suits or sports jackets, with a silk square visible in the breast pocket to harmonize with a discreet tie. An interview unabashedly revealed his view: he does not adopt the "worldwide fashion of the casually dressed lowest common denominator. I try always to be elegantly dressed, walk boldly, stand tall."

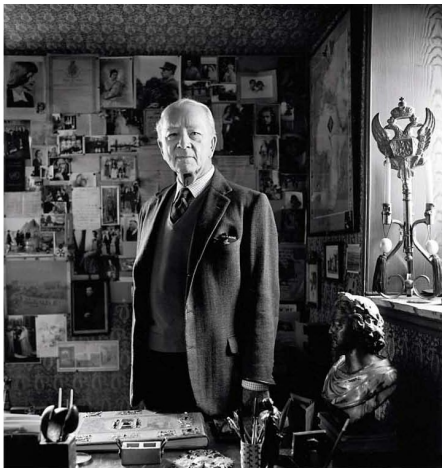
After a year, he was released, alone, and ejected into Sofia as the son of an "enemy of the people", whom old family friends were scared to harbor. Only his former nurse dared to shelter him, herself trying to feed a large family with hand-to-mouth jobs. He survived by collecting cigarette butts on the street and putting them in bags to sell by the kilogram to gypsies, and stealing vegetables from the fields and coal and wood from the railway station. When his parents were eventually freed, a semblance of normal family life returned in cramped quarters arranged by friends, with Dmitry and Irina finding sketchy work as translators. But it was not to last. In 1948 Dmitry walked out one morning to buy milk and was never seen again by his wife and son. Only after perestroika years later did Nikita obtain a document showing simply that his father had died in government custody. Clearly, he had refused to cooperate with the Soviet-dominated authorities by giving information about other "White" refugees and had been thrown into one of the secret camps outside Sofia maintained for political dissidents – something like today's "extraordinary rendition".

Nikita, fatherless, but enrolled in a state school, was diagnosed by a friendly doctor as suffering extreme muscular and lung weakness and directed to take up swimming. This sport marked his first great success. At age 17 he became Bulgaria's junior champion in the 100 and 200 m breast-stroke. Photographs show him receiving the school championship prize, and standing by the pool, a smoothly muscled Greek Adonis, wearing only a cod-piece bathing suit. He was ready for the first great sexual romance of his life, with an older teacher at his school, whom he often recalled emotionally. Nevertheless, the main objective of his swimming prowess was to escape Bulgaria by sea, swimming down the Black Sea coast to reach Turkey. He was actually preparing to do this, when another avenue towards freedom in the West opened for him and his mother, who still could not obtain exit permits.

Being awarded a decoration for swimming

Wearing a "cod piece" at Maria-Louisa swimming pool, Sofia, 1949

Salvation came via Paris. His mother's brother Nicolas Wyrouboff, who had fled Russia in 1924 for education in France and England, in WWII joined General de Gaulle's Free French forces and fought through many campaigns, being



Nicolas Wyrouboff in his office in Forge, near Paris. Photo by Barry Moore.

Nicolas Wyrouboff being awarded the Great Cross of the Legion of Honour by President Chirac

wounded and decorated twice with the Croix de Guerre and as a Commandeur de la Legion d'Honneur. He became friendly with another de Gaulle war-time compatriot, the French writer Romain Gary, who in the early 1950s was posted to Sofia as Secretary of the French Legation to Bulgaria. The two men planned together how to extract Irina and Nikita, this time safely and legally. The opportunity soon arose. Bulgaria was negotiating to buy 2 French-built Schneider diesel locomotives for its decrepit railway system, and a French bank would have to accept a letter of credit opened in Bulgaria. Negotiations dragged on, until finally the Bulgars made a formal demand, "Where are our engines"? To which Gary caused the French Legation to send a prompt answer: "Where are our French citizens?" Suddenly, barriers fell away. Nikita and his mother were given 48 hours to pack up and report to the Sofia station for the Orient Express to Paris. Despite farewell sobs from their Bulgarian friends on the platform, they did not hesitate in boarding. Two

days later, on September 30, 1953, they arrived at Paris' Gare de Lyon, free at last from the communist yoke.

ENGLAND

For Nikita, it was the start of his new world, although his beloved mother, already ill from years of privation, only survived until 1957. After four months with a French abbé tutoring him in Latin, then a requirement for acceptance by Oxford university, he set off for England. On arrival in London in 1954, one of his first sights was the dazzling retrospective exhibition created by the English ballet critic Richard Buckle, featuring works used by the impresario Sergei Diaghilev in his many productions of the Ballet Russes. Diaghilev had employed 42 painters for performances over 20 years, of whom 22 were Russian.

"I was particularly struck by the dynamism and vivid colors of the designs created by the Russian born painters as compared to their western counterparts," he later wrote. "The impression made on me was so strong that there and then I decided that one day I would have a similar collection. It took me 45 years…"

It is easy to understand that after a youth spent in the drab confines of Sofia, having never seen pictures hung in a museum, his eyes and his spirit were enthralled by the boisterous audacity of ballet art; what is

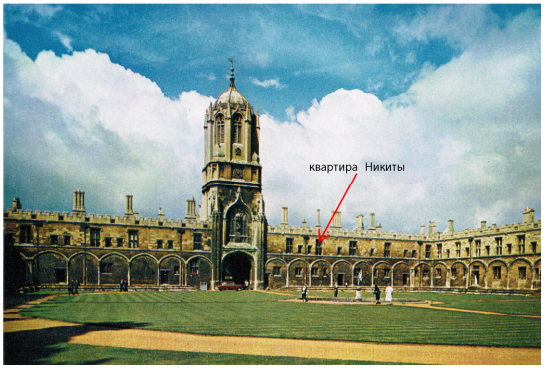
With Richard Buckle at the exhibition of Natalya Goncharova's portraits of Sergey Prokofiev, Jilian Barran Gallery, London, 1997

Oxford graduate, 1958.

more remarkable is that of the thousands who saw the exhibition, it was Nikita alone who had the vision and the tenacity to create an even greater one. At that point, of course, he could do nothing. He was penniless; he had to start building a career that would finance his dream.

His first step was applying for, and winning, a scholarship that Oxford University offered to East European refugees. He later learned from Sir Isaiah Berlin, a long-time Oxford professor and member of the awards committee, that he was selected because he was the only applicant to request a degree in engineering and geology, rather than the "soft" subjects of classics, history or philosophy. His arrival at the historic center of learning was smoothed by his godmother Catherine Ridley, a grand-daughter of the last tsarist ambassador to London, who had married a don and opened an entrée to the best of University society. Not only was he taken into Christ Church, Oxford's largest and most eminent college known simply as "The House", he had the good fortune, unheard of for a new undergraduate, to be assigned for his first year the duplex digs of a recently deceased don, furnished with that rarity, a private bathroom. He has retained a photo of the main quadrangle with an arrow marking his lodgings next to the famous Christ Church clock-tower, and a later one of himself in cap and gown after accepting his degree in 1958.

Although he worked unremittingly hard and often struggled to find engineering libraries that stayed open late enough for his needs, his Oxford career was marked with one elegant diversion. He was elected to the Bullingdon, a social dining club favored by wealthy English "bloods", frequently old Etonians, often pilloried in the leftish wings of the English press as revelry of the "Young, Rich and Drunk", and immortalized by Evelyn Waugh as "the sound of English county families baying for broken glass". A group photograph shows Nikita with his fellow members all wearing the Club's distinctive (and expensive) uniform of dark-blue tailcoat with ivory lapels over a yellow waistcoat. An unknown European, he was already displaying the self-confident charm that led to acceptance in England's structured class system and many other future social settings. The photo includes his early



Christ Church, Oxford; Nikita's rooms marked with an arrow


Bullingdon club. Peckwater Quadrangle, Christ Church, Oxford

friend Ian (now Sir Ian) Rankin, whose second wife he later married. Ian's mother was the exuberantly eccentric Lady Jean Rankin, long-time habitué of the Royal Household as a lady-in-waiting to Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

USA

With his Oxford degree in hand, he sensed that the United States might better satisfy his ambitions than the still somnolent England (which had not granted him permanent visa.) With a scholarship from the National Science Foundation he entered Columbia University, which granted him an MSc degree in economic geology in 1960, leading to his first job. A Texas oil company sent him on exploratory trips to Patagonia and other bleak areas, far from the culture of city life. Seeking a new career, he was advised by Oxford colleague Oliver Fox-Pitt (the founder of major stock-brokerage firm): "go near the money – join a bank." His early career at New York's Chemical Bank was far from lucrative, but it allowed him to settle in New York, where he met Nina and married her in 1962. My wife Edie had established a close rapport with Nina, so it was natural that we helped when Nikita sought US citizenship. I wrote a supporting letter, and Edie went down to the Federal Courthouse to lay her hand on the Bible and cheerfully

Argentina, 1960

perjure herself by swearing that she had known him for the required five years, instead of the actual three.

During those early New York years, his artistic dreams did not die, but he was initially so broke that he could not even afford the two dollars for a ballet costume sketch by Natalia Goncharova, the Russian painter whose paintings were auctioned by Christie's in 2007 for prices in the $10 million range Gradually, acknowledging Nina as "very much a partner and not a mere acolyte", he was able to start buying, still at bargain prices. They both agreed that the objective was not Russian art in general but rather art specifically intended for the ballet, and also theatre, opera and even cabaret shows – designs of costumes, sketches of sets, programs, publicity posters, – frequently commissioned by Diaghilev. Although these artists were well known in the early 20th century when Diaghilev first introduced them to Paris where he settled after the Revolution, in more recent years they had faded from memory and became virtually unknown . The Lobanovs could avoid competitive bidding and

Natalia Goncharova, Costume for a Cherub, ballet Lithurgie, 1915

Sergei Soudeikine, Costume for a Wet Nurse, ballet Petrouchka, 1925

pick up items from the artists themselves or their families, at $25 for a Soudeikine water-color.

A greater problem than money was lack of information. Virtually nothing was published about these artists, in any language. In the Soviet Union they were considered "non-persons", émigrés originating from the despised Tsarist regime. With no Internet available, Nikita and Nina had to search out obscure books, poke through the dusty archives and storerooms of little-known galleries, seek out-of-date programs, and track down survivors often living in obscurity – the typical pains-taking work of obsessed collectors. Fortunately their careers included travel - six months stints at Chemical's Paris office in 1965 and 1966, where they had many discovery adventures, such as finding the studio of recently deceased Goncharova and her husband Mikhail Larionov "up four flights of rickety steps, where the chaos that reigned was indescribable, with dozens of paintings by both artists stacked against the walls or hanging on them." They also became friends with the daughter of Alexandre Benois, who maintained his studio in excellent condition where they first saw his set design for the ballet Petrouchka, which became Nina's all-time favorite work.

They also befriended Nikolai Benois, son of Alexandre, living in Milan as chief designer of the La Scala opera house. He told Nikita that La Scala held an entire set of costumes and decorations for an early production of Petrouchka by his father that they

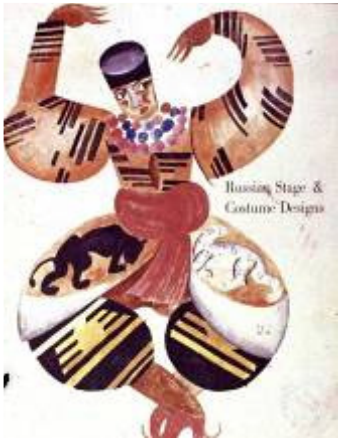
In Nicola Benois's studio, Milan, 1967

were about to junk. Nikita, an enthusiast of New York's Joffrey Ballet Company, quickly arranged for the sale of the whole production to the Joffrey at a give-away price of $5,000.

Leon Bakst, Red Sultana,Scheherazade, ca. 1920

Another serendipitous find came their way one hot summer afternoon in Athens when they chose to drink lemonade in a café named "Petrograd", as the Bolsheviks had re-named St. Petersburg. Nikita spotted the water-colors on the wall as Russian, and to his excitement identified them as costume designs by Tchelitchew. The waiter told them the owner would come for a drink at midnight, so the Lobanovs returned for negotiations with the eccentric and charming fellow Russian Nicky Iakovleff. He offered all of them for bargain price of $10,000. With only a $100 travelers' check left on the last day of their holiday, Iakovleff generously sold them one piece, and held five more of them for later purchase. Like many other owners they met, he preferred to make a rock-bottom sale to serious young scholars of the genre, rather than to wealthy collectors simply amassing more holdings.

With diligence and good fortune they slowly assembled the work of artists who had worked with Diaghilev: Léon Bakst, (perhaps the foremost of the costume designers with the colorful sensuality that made him Nikita's favorite), Benois, Goncharova, Larionov, Valentine Serov, Serge Soudekine, Pavel Tchelitchew, and many others. A Russian publication summarized their contribution to art history as follows: "They have



Cover of the catalogue of the exhibition of the collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1967, featuring Pavel Tchelitchew's costume design for Boris Kniaseff at Zimin Ballets, Istanbul, 1920.

rescued from oblivion the art that otherwise would have vanished without a trace, in countless bazaars, flea markets, auctions, and fairs, or simply rotted in attics and basements".

By 1967, they had moved to larger premises in New York, where their findings could be displayed. One day, a friend brought John McKendry, Curator of Watercolors, Prints and Drawings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who took one look and said "This is wonderful; we must have an exhibition". Seeing their collection get its first public viewing at the Met, America's premier art museum, served to validate their taste and encourage further collecting. It earned them no money, but the publicity was invaluable, and was developed further when Anne Marie Pope, Director of the International Exhibitions Foundation, negotiated with the Met to take the collection for guest shows around the country, eventually displaying it at some 50 museums throughout the United States. Alfred Barr, innovative Director of the Museum of Modern Art, also saw their collection and gave them heartening motivation to continue.

Meanwhile, Nikita had to think about his career as a banker, the sole source of his funds. Not enchanted with the staid Chemical, he spotted an employment ad from California's more aggressive Wells-Fargo Bank for the head of its Europe, Middle East and Africa Division. He promptly applied, but

when he learned there were 19 applicants to be processed at the rate of two per day, he decided to short-circuit the process by writing a letter describing exactly how he would market the bank's business. This earned him an invitation to San Francisco and a meeting with Ralph Crawford, the vice chairman in charge of international business, who liked the style of this unusual candidate and offered him a job, but at a beginner's salary that Nikita found derisory. Dramatically, he proposed to work free for six months to show he could bring in earnings five times the salary he asked. With the deal accepted, he immediately set off and got Wells-Fargo profitably engaged in trade finance in Algeria, Libya, and Turkey, doubtless capitalizing on his fluent French, his experience with authoritarian states and his hard-won bargaining know-how from childhood days. On expiration of the six-month trial period, he joined the permanent staff, and was pleasantly surprised that New York City law required the bank to pay him for his "volunteer" time.

Wells-Fargo required that he relocate to the bank's west coast headquarters. One night before they regretfully left New York, the Lobanovs were invited to meet visiting Salvador Dali, with his exotic Russian wife Gala. They left Dali at a reception with instructions to follow to our home where we were giving them a farewell party. The eminent surrealist, with little English, got lost ending up, alone, ringing the buzzer of our neighbors' apartment, solid citizens who were staggered by the appearance of the famous pointed waxed moustache and silver-topped cane. Finally finding the right door, he seized my red-haired wife for a tempestuous kiss, grabbed a glass of champagne and then harangued Nikita for half an hour before departing. We understood he was re-negotiating the fee Nikita would pay him for painting a semi-nude portrait focusing on Nina's bosom. We never heard whether the exotic work was set to canvas.

Nina, interpreter and Nikita in Bamian, Afghanistan, 1974.

With Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Tsar Simeon II of Bulgaria, later prime minister of Bulgaria. Khyber Pass, Afghanistan-Pakistan border, 1976. Simeon travelled on a Spanish passport as Count Rilsky and was nicknamed in Iran and Iraq as Padishah Bulgaristan.

From San Francisco, Nikita was soon traveling to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, maneuvering through their byzantine sectarian complexities and finding business through local merchants. This served him as good preparation for 1970, when the Soviet Union was actively seeking foreign finance and had to turn to western banks. Wells-Fargo fortunately had Nikita as a rare fluent Russian-speaking banker to dispatch to Moscow for opening contacts. Despite partial détente policies followed by the current leader Leonid Brezhnev, there had been no real "opening to the west". Nikita's first visit to his native country must have aroused sharp vigilance in the Kremlin and the KGB at this singular arrival — not only a representative of suspicious Western capitalism who might well be un-

der CIA cover, but an heir of the highest levels of the despised tsarist aristocracy and a Prince no less. In this and many subsequent trips to Russia, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Nikita maneuvered smoothly and suffered no indignities other than normal snafus for a foreign citizen. Once when travelling with Wells-Fargo's President Richard Cooley, Nikita negotiated a first-class triplex apartments for the Cooley couple, only to find that he and Nina were relegated to a closet-sized hotel room. . He could not budge the Intourist bureaucracy until he made it known that in Paris he had arranged for Brezhnev's daughter Galina, short of foreign currency, to purchase an admired fur coat at a big discount. Suddenly a telephone call advised him that a suite had miraculously become available — the first of many lessons that Russian red-tape could best be cut by dropping a name.

In Isfahan, Iran, with Richard Cooley, 1975

BACK TO ENGLAND

Nina found California too remote from her mother, in poor health and living in Paris. Nikita arranged a transfer to London in 1979, and soon resigned from Wells- Fargo and joined an affiliate of Bank of Montreal with roots in the mid-east, specializing in project finance. They were both able to resume frequent travels to Europe searching for additions to their collection, and they renewed their contact with Russian art specialist Professor John Bowlt, who became a close friend and adviser. In November 1981 he joined Nikita in Paris for a recorded

Nina and John Bowlt at the opening of the exhibition of the Lobanov-Rostovsky collection for the first time at a public museum in Russia, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, 26 February 1988

Nicola Benois, Portrait of Nikita, 1981

three-way luncheon conversation with Nicolai Benois, who explained to Bowlt the portrait of Nikita that he had recently finished, showing him with an enigmatic smile, dressed in a typical tailored suit and surrounded by ballet sketches.

"The collector's personality is quite fiery," said Benois, "because he's one of those people who create culture. This is a serious person. He has a deep love of Russian art. And also — he is a Prince. His family comes from the very heart of Russian history… in some ways his attitude to life [is] somewhat demonical."

Their chat also revealed that Nikita was an iconoclast in art appreciation, often deviating from the popular line. The two friends dismiss Picasso's famous Guernica, celebrated for dramatizing the atrocity of bombing a Spanish town during the Civil War.

Benois: Tremendous attention is given to that painting. To me it seems a complete non-entity.

Nikita: Neither do I understand it.

Benois: It's absolute piffle. Apparently those terror-stricken

eyes reveal tragic events. What terror-stricken eyes? Some sort of caricature, and quite a mediocre one at that.

Nikita: Well, Guernica was bombed. But Stalingrad was completely ruined. Berlin was destroyed.

Benois: It's a terrible thing.

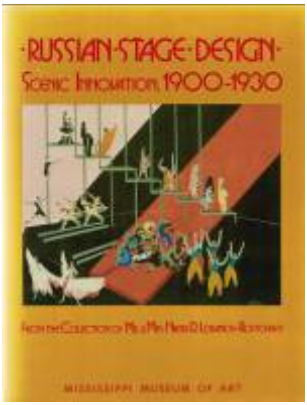
Nikita: And it's terrible not because it's bad, but because it's frightening. You see horrifying human-like faces with a strong mark of erotica. But it's not humanly beautiful erotica.

Benois: No.

Nikita: It's some sort of awful sex.

Benois: Awful, degenerate.

Nikita: And I completely fail to understand the attraction. Why is there such demand?



Cover of the collection's exhibition catalogue, Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Mississippi, 1982

Professor Bowlt had been working with the Lobanovs to fully document, organize and display their collection, and in 1982 he curated an exhibition, "Russian Stage Design", for the Mississippi Museum of Art, showing some 253 selected works by 92 artists. The complete catalogue can still be found, but is of interest mainly to scholars, as it includes very few full-color plates that are needed to bring the works alive for the normal viewer.

In 1987, Nikita's career veered sharply in a new direction that put him in much closer contact with Russia, just as the USSR was beginning to collapse. The secretive De Beers Group, privately-owned by the Oppenheimer family, that had a monopolistic grip on world diamond resources through its Central Selling Organization, needed a Russian speaker with high

Teddy Dowe, Nikita and Sir Philip Oppenheimer in front of the National Hotel, Moscow, 1988

Leonid Zamiatin, USSR Ambassador to the UK 1986-1991

level contacts among the nomennklatura who could introduce De Beers management as reliable and trustworthy partners. After six months intense vetting by the security service of the UK and the US, he was hired by the decisive, dominant boss Sir Philip Oppenheimer, with a brief to open delicate negotiations and report only to Sir Philip and two other top executives, neither to the company's Moscow representative office nor to fellow colleague Georgy Vasilchikov, a long-time family friend. Nikita's style in his new job was shown when he took a chance by inviting Leonid Zamiatin, the Soviet ambassador to the UK, a hard-boiled proletarian communist, to a home dinner with Sir Philip, the quintessential gentleman-capitalist. Surprisingly they got on well, and the Ambassador (a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party) passed on key information about a new Russian diamond field on instructions from Moscow.

His ten years with De Beers was doubtless a profitable period for Nikita, as it also gave him the expertise and contacts to advise diamond investors, and his income was abetted by consultancy contracts with first Christie's and then Sotheby's auction houses. His reputation in Russia was enhanced so that in 2001 he was permitted, even encouraged, to open the Lobanov-Rostovsky Museum in Moscow's Fili Park of Culture and Leisure.

Lobanov-Rostovskys Memorial Museum, Fili Park, Moscow

Nikita in the kitchen of the Lobanov-Rostovskys Memorial Museum, 2002

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the rise to power of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency in 2000, Putin's policy appeared to be re-glorification of Russia's Imperial might during the Romanov Dynasty. With the blessings of the Kremlin, Nikita stocked the new Museum building, clad in logs to look like a farmstead of "old Russia", with photographs, family portraits, maps, works of art, documents, and memorabilia of all kinds recording the life and times of himself and his ancestors. Although he had no rights of ownership, he became the

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov addresses the Conference of Russian Compatriots, Moscow

unofficial curator, and an apartment was reserved for his use whenever he visits Moscow. He told a local reporter that the opening of the Museum symbolized "the return of our family after years of exile — a landmark event for me, for Moscow and Russia as a whole."

Yet he clearly remains ambivalent about present-day Russia. He has never sought Russian citizenship. After years of residing in the United States and England, he openly prefers the freedom and easy comforts he finds in London life. In a 2008 interview, he called Russia "a country where the judiciary is subordinate to the gangsters who are referred to as businessmen and where corruption has penetrated everything from top to bottom." He shudders at the thought of maintaining any contact with billionaire post-soviet "oligarchs" who now control the gems of Belgravia and Knightsbridge real estate. Although he is the active Deputy Chairman of the International Council of Russian Compatriots, which ordinarily meets in Moscow, he can promptly return to his home in London.

His attachment to Russia seems devotion, not so much to present reality, as to an image of an historic Russia to which he is indissolubly linked through his blood-lines and to which he owes a duty. He has told interviewers "I feel like part of Russian history… I hope that I serve in the restoration of certain areas of Russian culture, and in this I see my mission." Begin-

ning in the 1970s, he and Nina had begun not only to arrange circulation of their collection for display in Russian museums, but also to make outright gifts, gradually growing in value. In 2007 he gave a portrait of Alexander II, valued at $25,000 and subsequently of Alexander the III, to the Russian Embassy in Paris, and in early 2008, he gave two works of modern impressionism, by De Chico and van Duisburg, to Moscow's Pushkin Museum, worth in experts' eyes roughly $300,000.

Portrait of Alexander II
by Yu. Kovako, 1868

Portrait of Alexander III
by N. Bogatsky, 1887

Georgio De Chirico,
Melancolia del Poeta, 1916

Theo van Doesburg,
Black Zig-Zag, 1924

SALE OF THE COLLECTION

Inevitably, they began to consider what was the future of their collection. With over 1,000 pieces, it was far too large for any personal residence. For safe-keeping between showings, they kept it stored in an air-conditioned, climate-controlled warehouse in Germany, but that could not be a long-term solution. Overtures were received from the Library of Congress, but came to no firm offer. Instead, President Putin, in his usual decisive fashion, decreed that since the artists were Russian, the collection should be "repatriated" even though many of the works were created after 1920 when the artists, finding the Bolshevik cultural controls intolerable, had emigrated to France and Germany. Needing art to decorate the Konstantin Palace outside St. Petersburg, in late 2007 Putin directed Vladimir Kozhin, head of the Presidential property committee and chairman of the Konstantin Charitable Fund (a front for the Kremlin itself) to open negotiations with the Lobanovs. According to Nikita, it was smooth sailing. He quoted a price, established by Sotheby's and later by Bonham's, and without haggling Putin scribbled an immediate "do it" on Minister of Culture Sokolov's memorandum, and the deal was signed in February 2008, although not without dissent from Nina. She would have preferred to keep the works in the West, open to a wider public, and she was

With Minister of Culture Alexander Sokolov and his wife, Lobanov-Rostovskys Memorial Museum, Fili Park, Moscow

doubtful of the Russians' commitment to proper conservation measures for the delicate water-color designs. But her concerns that Putin might later split up the items for a huge profit were dismissed by Nikita as unrealistic, and his determination to deliver to his native country prevailed. Some 835 water-colors, drawings and gouaches were delivered to the Fund, with about 200 pieces retained for Nina's collection of personal favorites.

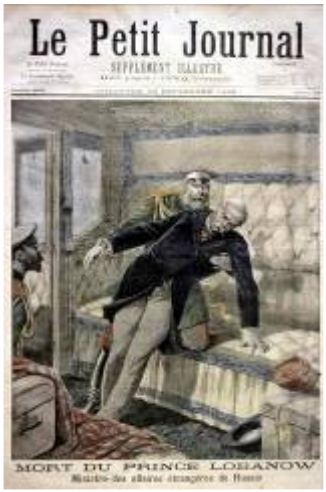
Vladimir Kozhin, Nikita and Nina raise glasses on signing the transfer of the collection.

Publicity was delayed until June 2008, when the Russian press started a series of bubbly announcements, including a long article "Art Repatriated" in the English-language magazine Russian Life published in March 2009. Photos of Nikita and Nina appeared quaffing champagne among Russian hosts at the official reception in St. Petersburg's State Museum of Theatre and Music, the collection's first home

At the opening of the exhibition of the newly acquired collection, Theatre Museum, St. Petersburg, 25 September 2008.

Lobanov-Rostovsky Palace in St. Petersburg next to St. Isaac's Cathedral.

pending restoration of the Konstantin Palace. It must have been Nikita's, proudest moment, as he was shown standing ram-rod straight wearing the golden Order of Friendship on the breast of his elegantly cut blue suit, accepting the accolades of government and museum grandees, in the very heart of the city where his family had been ejected nearly 100 year earlier.



Foreign Minister Alexei Lobanov-Rostovsky dies in a train to Moscow. Cover of Le Petit Journal, Paris, 13 September 1896

Just a few blocks distant, next to the towering St. Isaac's Cathedral, Nikita could see a reminder of their historic prominence: a massive triangular structure of exquisite proportions and elegant detailing, built in the early 1800s and originally owned by Prince Aleksei Lobanov-Rostovsky, and known as "The House with Lions" after the two marble lions guarding the entrance, memorialized for all Russians in Alexander Pushkin's famous poem "The Bronze Horseman". In 1993 it had been offered to him for $3.5 million,

but the estimated $1 million annual maintenance was unthinkable. Now, he had to stoically accept that it had been snapped up by one of the up-start new property moguls and was being renovated to become the city's leading five-star hotel under the Four Seasons banner.

The publicity of this sale soon made Nikita into something of a celebrity in the closed world of Russian media, operating in a language barely known in the West and rarely translated. He was interviewed on subjects far removed from Russian art. He was asked, and was happy to respond, on the peculiarities of the diamond trade, problems of the Russian economy, Russia's relations with Europe, Russia's relations with Japan in the 19th century, the meaning of an ideal marriage (if any), the declining standards of present-day dress, what it meant to be a Rurik Prince and why the status did not violate US law.

SECOND MARRIAGE

A particularly persistent lady journalist, eager to explore the "inner" Nikita, saw him frequently over several years and wrote a long article with the objective of proving that he was the incorrigible "Don Juan in search of the eternal lover" – which he could well have been, given his looks, his charm, and his disdain for the platitudes of bourgeois sexual morality. He of course downplayed this image. He e-mailed me the Russian original of this piece, with his own comment

Nikita and June on their wedding day, 2001.

(in English). “That is her idea; it does not reflect me”. Nevertheless, buried in the over-heated verbiage (I have had to rely on Google’s often mysterious, but free, English translation service), are nuggets of hard fact. It revealed to the Russian public what all of Nikita’s friends in the West had long known: he and Nina had split in 1990, and four years later he had fallen for June, the English former wife of his Oxford friend Ian Rankin, whom he married in 2001. In Google’s inimitable translation, the journalist described the events as follows:

“Our hero began to seriously think of to finally part with his wife. Untamed mustang must not keep any ties! Constant surveillance, jealousy and reluctance to release brought him to fury. In the end, took it and slipped on a separate apartment. And began to live a bachelor. His eyes shone again youthful fervor. A major obstacle to divorce was a collection that gathered together for years! How to share this priceless treasure? After all, its main advantage is in unity, a magic panorama of the amazing phenomenon of ‘Russian Modernism’. [Photo shown of Nikita and June at Buckingham Place reception] But all the ordeals behind him. And the divorce was obtained, and financial problem are solved with his ex-wife. And a new marriage entered. A true English lady! Nice, educated, charming, not his prime, but with a body of eighteen young girls! [sic]”.

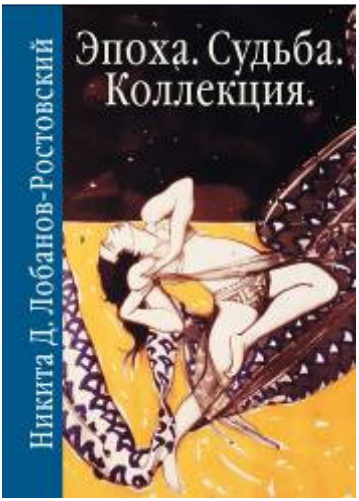
This dramatized summary had already been confirmed to me by my late wife Edie, who lived in London until her death in 2003 and was deeply sympathetic to all parties of this classic triangle. Having enjoyed friendship with both Lobanovs since 1960, she was distressed to see the break-up, but came to accept it as inevitable between two high-strung intellectuals of such conflicting temperaments. Beginning in the late 1980s, she could see that the cool, independent Nikita was chafing at the suffocating possessiveness and over-mothering (in the absence of children) imposed by Nina. As with many men, he

took to philandering, not to find a new partner but to assert his male autonomy in the only activity not governed by his wife. This predictably sterile activity came to an end when he began to court June, now divorced from Ian. Edie, who played weekly tennis with June, spotted and encouraged her as the perfect match for Nikita, a calm blonde-thatched lady with wide-set eyes from the undemonstrative ranks of the stolid English upper crust, the gratin as the French would put it. All three of the trio came to Edie's memorial service, held next to a tennis court, where Nikita unexpectedly gave an effusive eulogy.

I am not privy to the details of the financial settlement with Nina, or precisely how the ownership of the collection, to which her efforts had contributed so much, was divided.

One friend told me she was treated unfairly by Nikita, others told me the opposite. If she had any complaints, I never heard them,

Nikita's fame in Russia led to the collaboration between him and a Russian publisher to produce an autobiography. This remarkable work, bearing a three-word Russian title whose Cyrillic letters translate to *Epoch. Destiny. Collection*, appeared in 2010, a hard-cover folio-sized volume of 583 glossy pages, with innumerable black-and-white photos and a fair number of color reproductions of works of art. Its physical production must have been staggeringly expensive, and I have not heard whether sales gave any profit to author or



Cover of N. Lobanov's memoirs Epoch, Destiny, Collection, *Moscow, 2010*

publisher. My own copy, sent from Moscow, eventually arrived and I have retained it as a decorative icon bearing on its cover a seductive semi-nude dancer by Bakst. I have not been able to get it translated, but just riffling through its pages gives me a picture of his life. In American publishing jargon, it would probably be called a "vanity work", as we see countless pictures of Nikita greeting, being greeted, drinking, dining, signing papers, making speeches, studiously consulting, accepting awards, even standing over a mining drill-rig and holding a shotgun (better dressed than his fellow sportsmen). But it is a valuable reference work, as it provides, among many eye-catching illustrations, rare ancestral portraits and many views of the exceptional Lobanov-Rostovsky Museum in snowy Moscow, and it does not hide his marital switch, as he is shown often with Nina up to 1990, and thereafter with June, except that Nina re-appears to take part in the climactic St. Petersburg ceremony in 2008.

When I last visited Nikita in the summer of 2011, he expressed no interest in having his autobiography, or any parts of it, translated into English. I told him this seemed a pity, since it doomed his extraordinary life to be well known in Russia and hardly at all in the English-speaking world. By coincidence he was also hosting Edward Gurvich, a Russian journalist, who was taking notes for a book comparing their lives as immigrants, again to be in Russian. Nearly two years later, Nikita sent me the initial chapters of this work, in an English translation. . In the analytical style typical of Russian literature, Gurvich does his best to bore deep into Nikita's character. Among other things, he writes that he has never met a subject who is such a narcissist "who loves himself so much". And yet he expresses surprise at Nikita's spartan, abstemious habits, noting that his visits to Nikita's home were not marked by spreads of food and drink being laid on.

Tea for two: Ashchurch Park Villas, Hammersmith

Nikita and June live in a quiet corner of northwest London, occupying a house built in 1875, typical on its lightly-trafficked street, solid, unpretentious, with a patch of lawn in front and a back garden just big enough to keep June busy weeding, clipping and trimming. The interior embraces a visitor with sedate comfort, the eye catching some under-stated antiques and plenty of family portraits and dusty-rose cushions; the over-used phrase "shabby-chic" might apply. If Nikita is narcissistic, it merely reflects his pride in the completion of his life mission and its enjoyment with a wife who utterly understands his ways. She keeps housekeeping and meals simple with no live-in staff, respecting his daily routine that includes afternoons and many evening working on correspondence with his indefatigable Russian assistant Olga Shaumyan. June can metamorphose in a flash from gardening slacks and gloves to a ball-gown to accompany Nikita in his old Bullingdon tail-coat for a reunion dance.

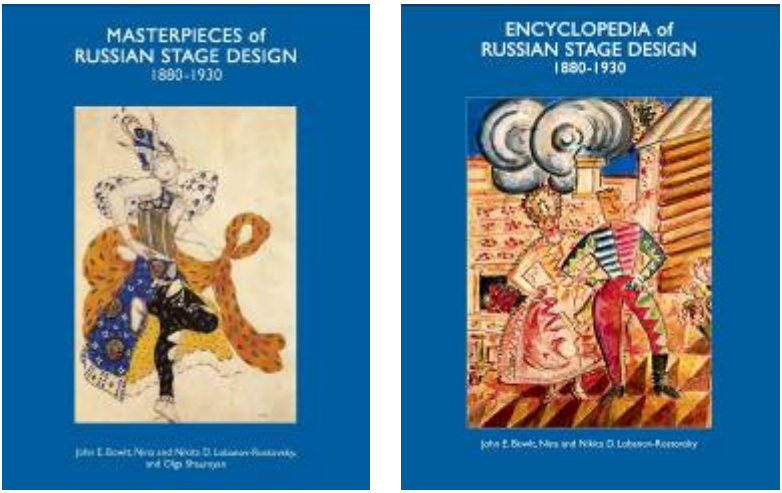
Bullingdon Club Ball

He can clearly afford frequent trips, often with June, to Russia or Bulgaria for the various cultural bodies he supports, or occasionally to New York to participate in his fellowship, in perpetuity, with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a winter trip to the Caribbean. But he loathes wasteful or conspicuous spending. Ballet aficionados, they hold good tickets for the London ballet season, but when they invited me to join them one evening for The Firebird, no hired car was ordered for the long trek from W12 down to Covent Garden. Instead, Nikita drove us in his sensible Volkswagen Golf to a parking lot at the closest Underground station, where we boarded the tube for a brisk one-transfer ride, strap-hangers like many young jeans-clad opera goers who eyed Nikita's blue pin-stripes and June's Hermès scarf. "It's absurd paying for a driver just to fight the traffic," he exclaimed to me, as he led us to the opera bar to buy, naturally, champagne.

A few days later, Nina invited my family and me to lunch at the same high ceilinged L-shaped flat that the Lobanovs bought when they first arrived in London in 1979. It was a pleasure to gaze once again at the 200 vivid works covering the walls that she had kept out of the St. Petersburg sale, centered around her favorite Benois. Even the brief attention span of my two under-ten granddaughters was captured by the brilliant colors and animated designs. Her solid block of flats is less than a two miles from Nikita's house, but since London is divided into hundreds of small hermetic communities, there is little chance of casual meeting. Nevertheless, she told me she has no problem collaborating with Nikita on their final joint effort: a complete illustrated catalogue raisonné of their entire collection. After years of research, this was still taking many hours of communication between the two of them and their scholarly advisor, Professor John Bowlt, sometimes face-to-face, others by post or e-mail. Any animus toward the former husband was

long gone, although I gathered not quite the same towards the second wife. Nina keeps her intellectual curiosity occupied with attendance at all conceivable cultural events and boundless travel: this year, after Sotheby's and Christie's Russian art auctions, she is visiting Portugal, Turkey, and the burial mounds of Central Siberia, before leading a group around St. Petersburg.

Nikita and Nina kept me informed of the progress of the catalogue, and in late 2012 Volume I of Masterpieces of Russian Stage Design 1880-1930 was published by London's Antique Collectors Club, available in selected art and museum bookstores in the United States. (Volume II, the technical companion directed towards museums and scholars, is scheduled for July, 2013). I found my copy at Washington's National Gallery of Art, sold in conjunction with their exhibition of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes costumes and scenery. At roughly $50, it will not become a best-seller, but this handsome 13 x 9 in. work will not only grace any coffee table but holds unique



Covers for Volume 1 and Volume 2 of Russian Stage Design + catalogue raisonné of the Lobanov-Rostovsky Collection.

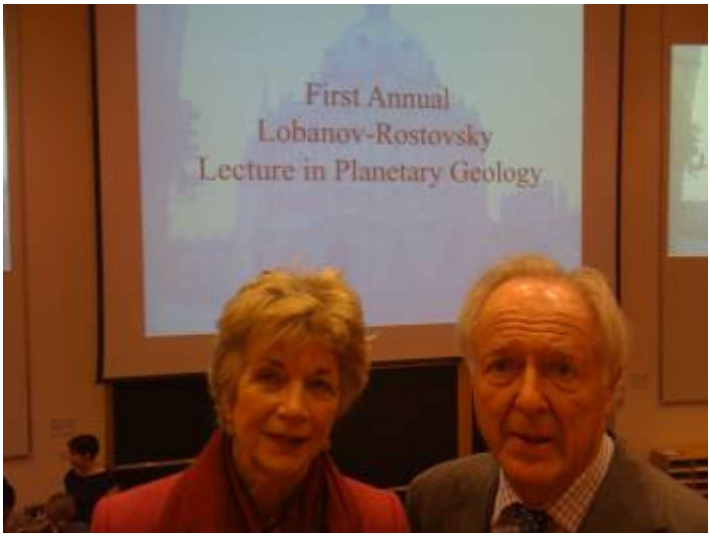
artistic and historical value. Its 241 immaculate color plates (from a printer in China), alphabetically covering Aizenberg through Yakulov, with natural deference to the recognized greats Bakst, Benois, Goncharova, Larionov and Roerich, now represent the only convenient way Americans, or anyone outside Russia, can see the best of these protean, brilliant artists. The items sold to Russia are still held in the inadequate showrooms of the Museum of Theatre and Music pending the long delayed restoration of the Konstantin Palace. Even then, the continuing bureaucratic obstructions to ordinary Russian tourist visas are likely to deter travelers who hate signing up for large sponsored, rigidly planned excursions — the millions who can simply hop on a flight to see Paris' Louvre, Madrid's Prado, London's Tate, or Florence's Uffizi. Unless the controlling Konstantin Fund takes the commercial decision to produce and sell high-quality prints of the originals, the works are virtually lost to independent viewing.

However, one can take a tough, but practical, decision: destroy the book to make a personal gallery. First read the illuminating joint interview with Nikita and Nina and the informative historical essay that stretches through Volume I. Then select

Glinka Branch of the St. Petersburg Museum of Theatre and Music, where the Lobanov-Rostovsky Collection found its temporary refuge.

your favorite works and carefully excise from the spine the full-page reproductions, have them handsomely framed with wide borders, and hang them close together on convenient walls. With 50 or 100 examples decorating your home, you will sense how the collection had its birth and started to grow in the Lobanovs' miniscule New York apartment as I saw it in 1962, long before Nikita became known to the world as a Rurik Prince.

June and Nikita, London, 2012



June and Nikita at the First Annual Lobanov-Rostovsky Lecture in Planetary Geology, Oxford

Prof. Philip England receives a gift of a portrait of Sir Charles Lyell on behalf of the Department of Earth Sciences, Oxford

June and Nikita with Sally

Lobanov Rostovsky Palace, St. Petersburg, 19th century lithograph

The Lobanov-Rostovsky coat of arms