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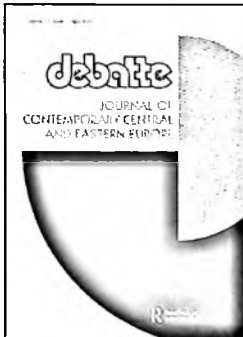
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# Conversation with Vladimir Kabo

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*Anna Taitslin*

In one of Canberra's oldest surviving bungalows there lives an elderly Russian scholar Vladimir Kabo; born in Moscow in 1925, and raised in a Menshevik household, he fought in the Battle of Berlin, was arrested as a "cosmopolitan" in 1949, endured five years in the camps, and emerged to establish himself as the leading Soviet authority on the Australian Aboriginals. Kabo is the author of 150 scholarly and popular works, including the books: *Origin and Early History of Australian Aboriginals* (Moscow, 1969), *Tasmanians and the Tasmanian Problem* (Moscow, 1975), *Primitive Pre-Agricultural Community* (Moscow, 1986), and *Road to Australia, Memoirs* (Canberra, Aboriginal Studies, 1998).<sup>1</sup>

At first Kabo seems a reserved, silent man, but he rapidly becomes almost ardent. His closeness to his parents is evident: When he speaks of them it is as if they separated only yesterday. Through this tie he appears to me a keeper of a century of Russian Jewish experience. I decide to begin by asking him about his parents' revolutionary ideas.

(A.T.) Both of your parents, Jews by birth, were active participants in the Russian revolutionary Social Democratic movement. Why was the Jewish environment of the beginning of the twentieth century so radicalized? Why didn't your parents confine themselves to fighting against discrimination against the Jews? Why instead pursue the revolutionary goal of the creation of a new society, without private property?

(V.K.) The answer to your question is partly contained in the wording of the question itself. Discrimination against Jews in the Russian empire is well known: Jews, as a rule, couldn't leave the Pale of Settlement; the number of Jews in schools and universities were limited by a "percentage norm". At the very end of the nineteenth–beginning of the twentieth century in South-Western Russia Jews became a target of pogroms, with the connivance of the police and the government. The fight against discrimination by legal means was impossible

<sup>1</sup> More information about Kabo, his family, and his writings can be found on the site: <<http://aboriginals.narod.ru>>.

since, until 1906, Russia had no parliament. As to the participation of Jews in the revolutionary movement, Jews, as a whole, took part in a wide liberation movement. Many of them, for example, were members of the relatively moderate Constitutional-Democratic Party. As Berdyaev wrote in his book *Christianity and Anti-Semitism*, it was natural for Jews, as the oppressed, to form a part of the revolutionary intelligentsia. The revolutionary movement had deep roots in Russia. From the end of the nineteenth century Marxism began to be more and more popular. My parents chose the Marxist Social-Democratic movement because it answered their social consciousness and had already spread widely in Southern Russia.

(A.T.) Did your father also take part in the revolutionary movement in order to integrate into Russian society?

(V.R.) My father wrote very well about it in his memoirs, *The Pale of the Settlement*; my father's childhood environment was stagnant and secluded, isolated from surrounding Russian society. His father, a dress-maker, was an orthodox Jew, who hardly could read in Russian. There was a process of mental ferment among some Jewish youth. Those young people protested not so much against discrimination as against this secluded and stuffy environment. They wanted to escape their own surroundings, to break with religion, and with traditions which tied them down. They chose to join a wider intellectual environment of Russian culture and its liberation movement, as a way to integrate into the European intellectual tradition.

(A.T.) Did Marxism, thus, represent a means of radically breaking with the past?

(V.K.) Yes. The protest of Jewish youth against the stuffiness of their own environment expressed itself by their joining the movement representing the protest against the surrounding Russian reality. Jews joined the already existing revolutionary "stream", and, they, in their turn, further radicalized it. But there were different layers in the Jewish society. Some were more assimilated and less radicalized. Even the Social Democratic movement itself was not homogeneous. My parents joined the (anti-Bolshevik) Menshevik faction of the Social Democratic party. There was also the Bund, which represented those Jews who were inclined to preserve their national roots. Such Jewish inwardness was alien to my parents. They considered that the Russian revolution would liberate all nations of the Russian empire, Jews among them. My father was an outward-looking man with life-long striving for knowledge and education. He was truly a self-made man: having only four years of formal schooling, he eventually became a professor [of economic geography] with dozens of pupils.

(A.T.) Did the Revolution help the social promotion of people such as your parents?

(V.K.) If we talk about the revolution, we should talk not only about the October (Bolshevik) Revolution, but also about the democratic revolution, which was the agenda of the non-Bolshevik revolutionary movement. My parents,

as Mensheviks, opposed the October Revolution. My father considered it to be a Blanquist conspiracy coup. My parents were true democrats and people of high moral principles. They were an integral part of the wide Russian democratic movement. They participated in the revolution out of deep conviction (not out of self-promotion). They could not do otherwise. There were many such people then, in Russia, though they disappeared afterwards.

(A.T.) But why did they oppose private property?

(V.K.) My parents' attitude to private property was largely defined by their Marxist views, according to which the relationships in society were seen through the prism of the relationships of property. In their habits of life, my parents, and the people of their circle, were very undemanding people. They didn't seek to acquire property. The acquisition of property was alien not only to their convictions but to their very nature. That was the mark of the way of life of Russian intelligentsia. In the case of my parents, I think, there was also the influence of the Jewish tradition of "the people of the Book". To my father, by his confession, the biggest joy in life was to rake through books.

(A.T.) Let us move from your parents to you. You have written in your memoirs about the house where you spent your Moscow childhood in the 1920s. The intelligentsia occupied this house. How did they come to live there?

(V.K.) Our house originally belonged to a tea factory. After the factory's closure, the academics, from the new Communist University of the Workers of the East, my father among them, came to live there. The house and our flat were, thus, inhabited by the intelligentsia. They tried to introduce a new socialist mode of life. Each flat in our house consisted of a corridor as the room, or a couple of rooms, constituting the family dwellings, with a common toilet and kitchen (there was no bathroom). The families collectively hired a cook to prepare food to free women from housework, so they could pursue their professional careers. The parents collectively provided for a governess for their children, who were about the same age. There was an inspirational intellectual atmosphere in the flat. However the social situation changed in the 1930s.

(A.T.) Did a social change take place in the 1930s, not in the 1920s?

(V.K.) The process of the falling away of the former revolutionaries (both the former sympathizing intelligentsia as well as the intelligentsia which directly participated in the revolutionary movement) probably began in the late 1920s. A new generation emerged, which attempted self-promotion in the conditions of the forming Soviet society, from "the bottom" of society, at the expense of the old intelligentsia. The old intelligentsia sacrificed itself in pre-Revolutionary times, went to the prisons, into exile, to bring the Revolution; but this intelligentsia wasn't in demand now.

(A.T.) But, for example, the representatives of White immigration could very well say: "The revolution eats its own children. They thought they could

eliminate the class of proprietors and live happily ever after. Now it is their turn.”

(V.K.) Yes. Now it was the internal struggle. A new generation had grown up, which had no connections with the pre-revolutionary life. The 1930s brought, moreover, the wave of Terror, with the mass arrests. Our house was a model of society at large: at least two, or three, families from the several, living in the flat, became victims of the Terror, such as the Velikovsky family.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, the father was arrested, then the mother, and if the daughter (my childhood friend) had not had an aunt, who took her in, she would have been sent to the orphanage. The books of their large home library were dumped in the corridor. So the Velikovsky family disappeared. In their place, a rude, uneducated family of a promoted NKVD employee appeared. Those people were from the “bottom” of society without any moral principles or traditions, aside from communist phraseology.

(A.T.) Was, in your opinion, the Terror a consequence of this lunge of the lower strata of society for social promotion?

(V.K.) No, the Terror was organized from the top. The struggle was at the very top. But society was in such a shape after the terrible experience of the First World War, the Revolution, the Civil War, that millions of people readily served this regime. If the Terror embraced the whole country, if millions were sitting in the prisons and camps, it is because other millions, a significant portion of society, were informing on their neighbours, friends, co-workers, even relatives; they were serving in the secret services and police apparatus.

(A.T.) In your memoirs you gave a striking illustration of this phenomenon: in your flat a quiet, single woman lived, who, as it was discovered after her death, kept the records of all private phone conversations in the flat. Was mass involvement in informing a perverse way of popular participation in the forming totalitarian state; the worst way of participation, with abnegation of any self-responsibility?

(V.K.) I disagree. To inform is be ignoble, morally corrupt. This practice spread as a result of a transformation of the society. Society became degraded. This was obvious in the example of our house: it became inhabited by very different people. Besides, even if the initial decision to work for the secret services was voluntary, afterwards, as one false friend once confided to me, it became obligatory to provide information to the secret services about all your acquaintances and conversations.

(A.T.) Was this 1930s change of the society of a quantitative or qualitative kind?

(V.K.) Without doubt it was qualitative change. The new society, with a new social conscience, which had never existed before in Russia, came to life. The transformation of society also manifested itself in the disappearance of the peasantry. One sign of the time was begging. Our house was not far from three

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with Immanuel Velikovsky.

rail stations, from where the victims of the early 1930s peasant starvation came en masse to beg in the surroundings for any scraps of food. Another sign of the times was the ever present black buses of NKVD transporting prisoners through the Moscow streets.

(A.T.) In your memoirs you also wrote about your happy times in 1930s at the Moscow House of Pioneers. There enlightened (and free) activities, such as lectures by leading academics, talks with the writers, visits to the museums, personal tutoring, and so on, were organized for the children. Could anyone become a member of the House?

(V.K.) Any child could become a member of any group of the Moscow House of Pioneers. For example, to become a member of our literature group one merely needed to bring a sample of writing of any kind. Of course some children would disappear and others would stay.

(A.T.) Had such an institution for the education of children any analogs in pre-Revolutionary Russia?

(V.K.) No. Of course the Soviet reality was a complex phenomenon. I was also in a good Moscow school with very good teachers. There were children from different social layers, who lived near the school. There were children of workers, office employees, intelligentsia, writers, even members of Politburo.

(A.T.) Was such a mix of different social groups [together] a new post-revolutionary phenomenon?

(V.K.) Yes, this egalitarianism was result of the post-revolutionary change of 1920s, still retained in 1930s. There was no segregation in our immediate environment, but, of course, there was segregation at the top. In a sense, in the pre-war years, the life had two faces: one, festive, during the day, and another, terrible, during the night. The House of Pioneers was the festive side of life. About the dark side of life, the arrests at night, people didn't talk. Only after much later I learned that parents of some of my friends at the literature group and the school were arrested.

(A.T.) You wrote in your memoirs how you read the records of the political trials of "enemies of the people" of the 1930s as gripping detective stories. Did you, as a young boy, believe the propaganda?

(V.K.) As a young boy, I believed in the alleged conspiracy plots, which, of course, were concocted by the secret services and were complete fakes. But for me, the participants, in what I thought was a political struggle for power, were not "enemies of the people".

(A.T.) Did you not share your elder sister's view of the processes as a sort of continuation of "romantic" class struggle?

(V.K.) Indeed. My sister, born in 1917, was formed among the enthusiasts. My generation of the late 1920s was already more sceptical. Step by step, I began to understand the real nature of the regime.

(A.T.) When did your happy mood of acceptance of surrounding reality change?

(V.K.) It happened in 1939, when I was 14, almost at the eve of the war.

(A.T.) Did something impel you to change?

(V.K.) Firstly I became older. Besides, I was, in a sense, impelled by my whole environment: I had clever friends at the school and Pioneers' House, we all had clever parents. The sceptical, even sometimes cynical attitude to the surrounding reality prevailed among us. For example, one girl from my class, my friend, told me as a secret about Lenin cautioning against Stalin. In 1939, the so-called "Political Testament" of Lenin was yet unknown, but some "echo" of it reached us. Our mood reflected the atmosphere around us. People feared each other; they tried to be silent about their losses. The whole pre-war atmosphere was oppressive. Moreover, in 1939, after the pact with Germany, it became clear that the war was approaching.

(A.T.) Did you fear the war?

(V.K.) No, with recklessness characteristic of me, the beginning of the war was seen by me as an opportunity for the great adventure. My parents, in sharp contrast, immediately understood that a terrible tragedy had happened. I didn't feel that, and had no idea that in two years I myself would become a soldier.

(A.T.) You eventually took part in the fighting in the front line: in Poland and in the storming of Berlin; and won a bravery award. But your first experience of a soldier's life began in the early 1944 soldiers' echelon, transported from Siberia to the front, where you became a target of anti-Semitic abuse. Was this a novel experience for you?

(V.K.) As a young boy, I encountered hostility to Jews, for instance, playing with the children from surrounding houses. But there was no anti-Semitism at the school or the Pioneers' House. The Moscow intelligentsia was mixed. Among the intelligentsia someone's nationality was no matter of interest. But the non-intelligentsia environment was different. When in 1943-45 I found myself in the soldiers' milieu, among the common people, it was very different. I then realized how widely anti-Semitism was spread. It was rooted in a still pre-revolutionary public conscience. In 1920s Jews poured in the Russian towns from the Pale of Settlement, and took up the new opportunities for self-promotion. Their success provoked a new wave of anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitism had only strengthened during the war. It was implicitly encouraged from the top by the means of the army's party apparatus, by limiting the number of decorations to the Jews, for example. Besides, there was the influence of Nazi propaganda, through their leaflets, which chimed in with the soldiers' attitudes.

(A.T.) Did this realization of the widespread anti-Semitism bring you to the decision (which you quickly reversed) to use the end of the war's chaos to change your name and nationality? Was it a desperate attempt to secure a promotion in the Soviet society?

(V.K.) Yes, of course, it was an attempt at self-preservation; an attempt to succeed in after the war life. It was an attempt at mimicry. My youth can be my only excuse.

(A.T.) You also have also written about your the end-of-the war encounter with underworld figures in soldiers' uniforms, who, instead of fighting, "collected" abandoned German "trophies", which they shared with the army officers, who protected them. How could you have been attracted to these figures?

(V.K.) They were people, who attempted to build their lives on half-legal foundations, who manage to live such an apparently un-Soviet life inside the Soviet system.

(A.T.) But were you not repelled by their aim of the acquisition of property?

(V.K.) No. Firstly, I thought that they represented a marginal phenomenon, but then I understood that majority of the Soviet people were just like that: acquisition was the true ideal of the Soviet man. The Soviet man, in spite of all proclaimed ideals, was characterized, on one hand, by conformism, and, on another hand, by striving for personal welfare.

(A.T.) After the war you became a student at the History Faculty of the Moscow University. Were, in the Moscow University of 1940s, there any pre-revolutionary lecturers?

(V.K.) No, only very few professors were formed in the pre-revolutionary times, such as the historians Vipper—a former émigré—Tarle and Bahkrushin. As a result of the late 1920s political trial against the historians, many of pre-revolutionary historians were forced into exile. Most of the late 1940s professors were professionally formed in 1920s. Moreover, the Stalinist Terror profoundly affected people. After the war the Stalinist Terror took a new direction of a campaign against "cosmopolites", which was directed primarily against Jews.

(A.T.) Was your arrest in the Fall of 1949 a part of this campaign?

(V.K.) Yes, it was a part of the general anti-Jewish campaign. During this campaign the Jewish professors (among them my teacher Professor Rubinstein), were expelled from the MSU, with either the silence of or encouragement from their colleagues. Nobody stood up for them. Among the students there were real pogrom-makers.

(A.T.) But you stood up against this campaign.



(V.K.) Yes, I am proud that I was the only student who stood up to defend Professor Rubinstein at the open meeting of the students of the Faculty of History.

(A.T.) Why did you do this? After you spoke out you were expelled from the communist youth organization, and almost expelled from the university. Didn't you fear the regime's revenge?

(V.K.) I think I did it partly from my natural recklessness. Ludmila Alekseeva, later a well-known human rights activist, remembered meeting me around this time and being shocked by my open anti-Soviet talk, which she thought was reckless.

(A.T.) Did you assume that as long as you were not involved in openly anti-Soviet activity, aside from merely words, you could survive?

(V.K.) Who was involved in "openly anti-Soviet activity"? Nobody was. The most that people did was to talk in the company of two or three, and the third one usually was an informer, as it was in my case.

(A.T.) When you and your friend, returning from the camps after the death of Stalin, decided openly to expose your former third "friend", as an NKVD informer, was it a rare event?

(V.K.) To my knowledge, it was the only case of the public exposé of an NKVD informer. We did it during the procedure of an open PhD presentation in his Moscow research institute in 1965. The rumours about this event quickly spread around Moscow. This informer was forced by his friends to confess his deed, and to leave Moscow; later he reappeared in West Berlin.

(A.T.) In your memoirs you wrote how this traitor-friend induced you to form a literary discussion group, but you declined, as if suspecting something. All the same, you were arrested as belonging to anti-Soviet organization, with this informer's records of your and your friend's private meetings and conversations serving as the only proof of the existence of the mythical group. After prolonged torture by sleep deprivation, you signed the minutes of the interrogations. Nevertheless, you had a faith in a miracle of liberation, which strengthened after your communication with other prisoners, who too hoped for the coming collapse of the regime, which could be brought about by atomic war with America. Did you really wait for an atomic war to begin?

(V.K.) I, like my companions in imprisonment, did wait for an atomic war as the only way of deliverance from Stalin's regime. We felt it was necessary to put an end to Soviet communism at any price.

(A.T.) In relation to your time in the camp in 1950-1954 in the south of Archangelsk region you wrote about all sort of people you met there. Some made a life long impression at you. Some puzzled you, like a Lithuanian catholic priest, who professed anti-Semitic views. Why were you surprised at this anti-Semitism,

didn't you know that the Lithuanian Jews were slaughtered with the cooperation of many Lithuanians?

(V.K.) I was surprised because he was supposedly a man of European culture. I am not sure I knew about the scale of extermination of Jews at the time. The Soviet propaganda suppressed information about the Holocaust. For instance, my grandfather and his family with all other Jews, who lived in Berdiansk, were shot by the Germans during the occupation. After the war some relatives attempted to erect a memorial at the place of the killing, but it was dismantled by the authorities.

(A.T.) You have said that your interest in study, and in the books that your parents sent you, helped you to resist depression in the camp. Was it possible to send books to the camp without restriction?

(V.K.) There were camps of different categories. Some were harsher, like the camps described by Solzhenitsyn in Archipelago Gulag. Our camp was less harsh. We could receive books and letters and packages, though subjected to the camp censorship. Only once a pre-revolutionary book on history of ancient people containing a somewhat archaic terminology of "Aryan" people (as well as something on Semites) was returned to my parents.

(A.T.) How could you find time to study?

(V.K.) I was working as a statistician in the planning department of the camp. At night I summed up the day's results of camp timber production. After I finished, I stayed in the office and read until dawn.

(A.T.) Your life-long interest in primitive society arose during your time in the camp. How did it happen?

(V.K.) It was a gradual process. In university I was interested mostly in Russian and Arabic history. In the camp, going through an inner crisis, I shifted my interests to more fundamental and general questions of the origin of culture and society. In my camp the common criminals were the dominant group, with the prisoners, like me, convicted by the (political) Article 58, being in minority. Firstly so called "suki"— the thieves, who transgressed the thieves' own code, ran the camp. Then they were ousted by the regular thieves ("vory v zakone"). Observing the society of regular thieves, I came to a conclusion about the existence of several social structures going back to one common "archetype". Such social structures were the community of the thieves, the communist party, and the so-called "primitive society".

(A.T.) Have all three societies the same rigid social structure?

(V.K.) Every structure has a degree of social mobility. A member could progress in the hierarchy, or become a social outcast (as happened with so called "enemies of the people" in the Soviet system). With respect to primitive society, there are two models of archaic society: the egalitarian one, as of South-African

Bushmen, and the hierarchical one, as of the Australian Aboriginals. When I compared the thieves' society and the communist party with primitive society I had in mind a primitive society of hierarchical kind. Of course, speaking of similarities, I mean not simple parallels, but only some basic principles, which could be traced to the common archetype. Such archetype would be reproduced in the conditions endangering the preservation of the social structure and forcing the social group to close up. This archetype could be found in the secret societies of all times, beginning with the primitive "male unions".

(A.T.) You wrote in your memoirs about your fight against the so called matriarchate theory of primitive society that dominated Soviet ethnography. How did the matriarchate theory begin to dominate Soviet ethnography?

(V.K.) This tradition relied on the thesis formulated back in the nineteenth century by Marx and Engels about five necessary social formations: primitive society or primitive communism, then the slave-owning system, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. In its application to primitive society this scheme was embodied in the concept of matriarchate, originated by Morgan, borrowed by Engels, and supported by Stalin. According to this doctrine there was initial dominance of women, later replaced by patriarchy.

(A.T.) But there never was any matriarchy?

(V.K.) There was, but not in the beginning, and not as the universal stage of development, but as an isolated example of the development of relatively few societies. Twentieth century ethnography accumulated a huge mass of new material, that necessitated the revision of the old dogmas. This new material, in significant part, emerged from research on Australian Aboriginals, that had its origins in the nineteenth century. From the early 1960s, in the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Ethnography, a small group of researchers, myself among them, attempted to break with this dogma of Soviet ethnography, that was protected by the Moscow leadership of the Institute. In the end our "Leningrad group" succeeded in shaking the foundations of matriarchy theory, and with difficulties overcoming the Institute's censorship. Our "Leningrad group" radicalized the situation inside the Soviet ethnography and undermined its dogmatic foundations. But there was also a natural process of the development of ethnography. Still, of course, only perestroika brought to an end the isolation of Soviet history studies and social anthropology.

(A.T.) But in some sense the Soviet (pre-perestroika) academics had a sheltered existence, hadn't they?

(V.K.) It is true that in the institutes of the Academy of Science (for example in the Institute of Ethnography) there were good material conditions for research, though only up to certain limits, including inviolable ideological principles. Besides, there was also a monopolization of academic research. In our institute the monopolist was a group around the Moscow leadership of the Institute.

(A.T.) Was it because you were not part of this monopolist group that you, a leading Soviet researcher of Aborigines, were never allowed a trip to Australia?

(V.K.) Besides my opposition to the institute's monopolist group, I was also in the KGB's bad books, as a man who not only was a prisoner during Stalinist times, but who also dared to expose their agent. As a result, during Soviet times, in all the years of my work in the Institute of Ethnography, from 1957, I never was in any scientific expedition to Australia. Only in 1990 could I, at last, visit Australia. As it happened, I never went back to Russia.

(A.T.) Do you regret leaving Russia?

(V.K.) No. I have a lot of bad memories. Of course, I was formed as a man of Russian culture, Russian language, literature, music, one of the Russian intelligentsia, which judged people by their moral principles, not their nationality. But I feel myself very naturally at home in Australia. I am, by my nature, a cosmopolitan, in the wide, positive meaning of the word.