

Vladimir Rafailovich Kabo
(7 February 1925 – 4 June 2009)

In memoriam

In Vladimir Rafailovich Kabo, who died in Canberra on 4 June 2009, at the age of 84, Russia and Australia have lost an outstanding ethnographer and expert in the history and culture of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, all the more remarkable in that he achieved his unquestioned eminence in the field long before he was able to visit Australia or establish personal acquaintance with the object of his studies. His professional interests aside, he was also an extremely erudite representative of the independently-minded Russian intelligentsia and an astute observer of the times in which he lived, as his later writing makes clear.

Vladimir Rafailovich was the younger of two children born to Rafail Mikhailovich Kabo and his wife Elena Iosifovna (née Gubergrits), both of whom had suffered administrative exile to northern Russia in Tsarist times for their support for the revolutionary (Menshevik) cause. Their daughter Liubov', born in the year of the revolution, would go on to become well known as a writer, the author of many books, including *Rovesniki oktiabria* [Coevals of October] (1998). When Vladimir and Liubov' were children, their father was a professor at the University of the Toilers of the East and the Moscow Pedagogical Institute, where he lectured in political economy and later in economic geography. His studies of the economy of Tuva may have lain at the root of his son's interest in ethnography and anthropology, and there is no doubt that Vladimir inherited his father's gifts as a scholar.

In his memoirs, *The Road to Australia*, Kabo divides his life into six separate 'lives'.¹ The first of these was his childhood and schooldays in Moscow, which lasted until October 1941, when the family were evacuated to Oyrot-Tura, in the distant Altai. There he completed his secondary education and, on reaching the age of eighteen in February 1943, was called up for military service. A vivid account of his experience of the army and his war service, his 'second life', figures

¹ Vladimir Kabo, *Doroga v Avstraliu* (New York: Effect Publishing, 1995; revised and updated Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2008). The English translation by Rosh Ireland and Kevin Windle, *The Road to Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1998), is of the revised text.

prominently in his autobiography. Having quickly abandoned his early dreams of officer training, he spent a period at an artillery school in Tomsk, before being assigned to an anti-tank company on the Ukrainian front. In the spring of 1945 he took part in the advance through Poland, then found himself an artilleryman during the final assault on Berlin, and from there was sent south in time for the German collapse in Prague.

Demobilized in autumn 1945, after a summer spent with the army in Hungary, Kabo was admitted to Moscow State University to study history. This he came to see as the beginning of his third life. His contemporaries at MGU included Andrei Siniavsky, Svetlana Stalina, Liudmila Alekseeva, and H  l  ne Peltier, a French student later involved in the case of Siniavsky and Daniel'. In this period he was close to Yury Bregel', later to become a distinguished Turcologist and expert in the Islamic history of Central Asia at the University of Indiana, and it was the misfortune of both to fall in with the mercurial Sergei Khmel'nitsky, a precocious poet and connoisseur of painting, brilliant intellectual, *agent provocateur* (in Kabo's words '*po  te provocateur*'), and enthusiastic *stukach* [informer]. On the strength of a fictitious two-man conspiracy, contrived by Khmel'nitsky to implicate his friends, Bregel' and Kabo were arrested in the autumn of 1949. Kabo's fourth life began on 7 October with his induction into the baleful workings of the Soviet penal system.

The investigation of the 'anti-Soviet activity' of Khmel'nitsky's victims saw them incarcerated and interrogated for a period of months in Moscow's renowned prisons: Lubyanka, Lefortovo and Butyrka. It ended in mid-1950, when they were sentenced to ten years in general-regime 'corrective' labour camps. Kabo was sent north to the Kargopol' complex in Arkhangel'sk region, near where his parents had lived as political exiles in pre-revolutionary times. This, his fourth life, though in many ways the darkest, also laid the foundations of a new life when times eventually changed. The camp population, though largely controlled by the class of professional thieves, included many of the country's best minds. Their company, the unique social environment, and the books on ethnography which he avidly read, steered him towards the career he would later take up. Prisons and camps as social systems, with their own hierarchy, castes and strata, their own archetypes and codes of behaviour, even their own forms of language, awakened in him new perspectives on the history he had studied at MGU and turned his enquiring mind towards ancient and primitive societies.

Kabo and Bregel' were among the beneficiaries of the amnesty which followed Stalin's death. Kabo was able to return to Moscow in August 1954 and shortly resumed his studies, now with a different specialization, which led to an academic career of singular achievements in the field which the labour camp had opened. Using the resources of the famed *Kunstkamera* in Leningrad, he produced a dissertation on the collection of Australiana brought back from Australia by Alexander Yashchenko in 1903, and later became a research scholar at the Leningrad Division of the Institute of Ethnography. There he worked for many years on Australian material and artefacts, producing books and articles on the origins and early history of the Australian Aborigines, on the Tasmanians, on primitive societies, their cultures and belief systems, and on over-arching cultural 'archetypes of consciousness'. His memoirs record the special features of Soviet academic life, in particular the influence of ideology and the dead hand of Marxist dogma, which he did his utmost to resist. When in 1977 he moved from Leningrad to the Moscow Division of the Institute of Ethnography, among his colleagues was a specialist in the history of religion, Iosif Romual'dovich Grigulevich, whose colourful past included many years in the service of the NKVD, planning the assassination of Trotsky and preparing an attempt on the life of Tito, called off only when the prime mover, Stalin, predeceased his victim.

The story of Khmel'nitsky, to Kabo an archetype of another kind, continued to resonate through Kabo's fifth life. When Khmel'nitsky defended his *kandidat-skaia* dissertation in 1964, Bregel' and Kabo were able to exploit a unique opportunity to declare publicly that the candidate was socially unworthy of the degree as he had been responsible for sending them to prison on a trumped-up charge. Here Kabo's memoirs intersect with Siniavsky's autobiographical novel *Good Night* (1984), in which he tells of his own friendship with Khmel'nitsky and an unusual triangle of mutual deception involving H el ene Peltier. In the two complementary accounts, Khmel'nitsky is invested with symbolic significance, representing all that was flagitious in the Soviet system and standing unambiguously for the personal treachery which it actively fostered.²

² *The Road to Australia*, see especially Chapter 7. Abram Terts, *Spokoinoi nochi* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1984). See also Kevin Windle, 'The Belly of the Whale Revisited: the history and literature surrounding a character in Terts's *Spokoinoi nochi*', *Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 76 (1), January 1998, 1–27.

Early in his fifth life, Kabo was married to Valentina, who bore him a daughter Elena in 1961. Valentina died, still young, in 1976. Several years later, in 1983, Kabo met and married the historian Elena Govor, who at an early age had established a reputation as an expert in the history of Australia and the Pacific.

Long unable to travel beyond the borders of the ‘fraternal’ socialist bloc, in the period of *perestroika* he and Elena were at last able to obtain permission to do so, though much determination was still required. He had been invited to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) as a visiting scholar. At last he and Elena were able to see Australia for themselves and travel the continent they knew so well from afar. With the support of specialists in Australian history and Russian studies, such as Professor Harry Rigby, Elena was able to embark on doctoral research at the ANU. Canberra became their new home, and in 1992 the birthplace of their son Raphael.

Kabo’s sixth and last life, his nineteen years in Canberra, were spent mostly in retirement, which did not mean inactivity. His lifelong absorption in ethnographic and anthropological research stayed with him. He attended seminars at the ANU and AIATSIS, and remained as intellectually active and curious as before. He kept up with the work and fortunes of the ANU Russian Program, to which Elena contributed much as a tutor. At ‘Russian weekends’ with students and staff at Kioloa on the NSW south coast, he could expound at length on the Aboriginal middens found there. Even in his last years, as his health began to fail, he continued to write: a late work, *The Wandjina and the Icon*, showed his gift for discerning previously unnoticed parallels between distant civilizations. At the same time he followed events in post-Soviet Russia, to which he returned only once, with interest, and often disquiet. He reported his impressions of that last visit in the winter of 2006–2007, in the pages of this journal.³

Those who met him were quickly won over by his kindly manner and ready sense of humour, though in the last period of his life he was hampered increasingly by failing hearing.

His ashes were laid to rest in Queanbeyan cemetery on 24 October 2009, in a bushland setting appropriate for one who had devoted his career to Australia and

³ Vladimir Kabo, ‘An Encounter with Russia’, translated by Matthew Bogunovich, *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, Vol. 22, Nos. 1–2 (2008), 121–148.

loved the Australian bush. He will be remembered for much, not least his unique contribution to the study of Australia in Russia.

Vladimir Kabo is survived in Russia by his daughter Elena, two grandchildren and a great-grandchild, his sister Liubov' having died in 2007, at the age of ninety. His wife Elena and Raphael survive him in Canberra.

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