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## VLADIMIR RADUNSKY. A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST IN CONTEXT

Five years after the passing of artist and illustrator Vladimir Radunsky, it is time to draw a portrait of this complex figure, in the context of his life and migrations. Born in Russia, in 1954, Radunsky embraced illustration after difficult vocational junctures, rising to fame in New York City in the 1980s, in the epicentre of publishing. Despite international acclaim and the lure of a major North American metropolis, Radunsky chose the ancient city of Rome as his preferred and final domicile. This study aims to relate the profound effect context and cultural upbringing had on this multifaceted artist.

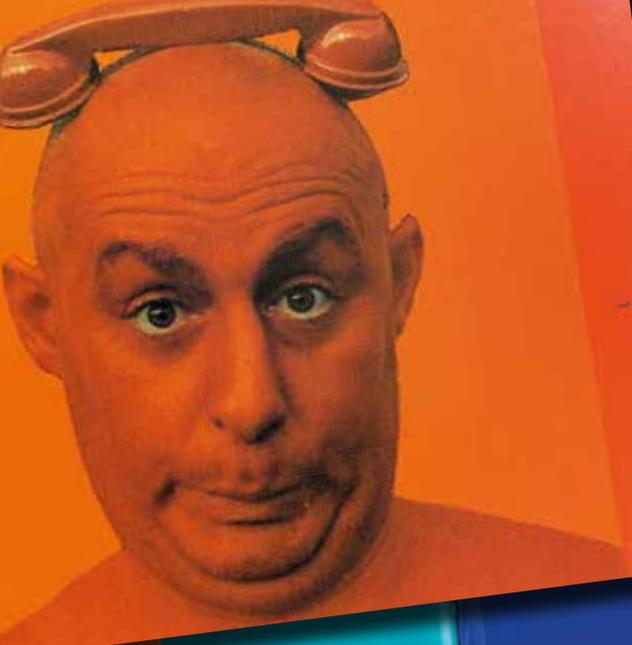
The major hinge points in Vladimir Radunsky's artistic life were his two emigrations. The first, in 1982 at the age of 28, catapulted him from a grim USSR to New York City, via Rome. Eighteen years later and now an accomplished artist and illustrator, Radunsky moved permanently to Italy, as the husband of Eugenia Uritskaya and father of their twin girls. This geographic zigzag divides Radunsky's life into three distinct periods and accounts for the rich cultural heritage that informs his artistic oeuvre.

*Багаж (Baggage)*, as it happens, is the title of the 1929 poem by Samuil Marshak that sparked Radunsky's first published book in the

USA as sole illustrator, in 1989. The irresistible rhyming cadences of the original are beloved by all Russian-speaking children even today, and many an artist has tried his hand at illustrating them—including Russian avant-garde luminary Vladimir Lebedev. For Radunsky's edition, Henry Holt and Company settled on the title, *The Pup Grew Up*, from Richard Pevear's rather free English translation.

For his second book, Radunsky again reached back to his Moscow childhood, illustrating Marshak's *Почта (Hail to Mail)*, a didactic picture book explaining the postal system (also the basis for an iconic 1929 silent animated film).

Look closely at Radunsky's cover art for *Hail to Mail*. The profiles of three identical postmen in indigo-blue uniforms dominate the composition, like a single three-eyed military creature looking straight into the reader's own gaze. Behind the postmen in the lower-right corner, New York City peeps out in the form of a red brick tenement, roof-top water tank, and Coca Cola billboard. The artist's visual vocabulary is expanding. He is now a New Yorker and an American. Similar cultural accretions and stylistic changes accompany his second migration, to Italy.



Radunsky, the son of a  
was born in the Ural  
ins of Russia. He has il-  
ed numerous books for  
n, including *The Maestro*  
*Hail to Mail*, *The Pup*  
*Up!*, and *The Story of a*  
*amed Will*, *Who Went Sled-*  
*Down the Hill*, which was  
ished by North-South  
ts. He has won many  
da—so many that we can't  
count them.

Chukovsky (1882-1969)  
major Russian writer, lit-  
ritic, and translator. The  
of *The Art of Translation*  
*om Two to Five*, a classic  
on the psychology of  
n's speech, he is perhaps  
own today for his clas-  
dren's poems, including  
bone" and "Dr. Aibolit."

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E was once a litt  
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Twirly tweely  
Little eel.



# DO NOT SPIT

PENALTY UNDER BYLAWS  
FIRST OFFENSE £2  
EACH SUBSEQUENT OFFENSE

Thumpy  
Pumpy  
Dumpy thumpy  
Little pump.

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## Soviet Russia

Radunsky grew up in a world that was not only Russian, Eurasian, and isolated from the west. It was also a world of material hardship and erratic scarcity. Food and consumer goods were centrally planned, manufactured, and distributed with an eye to utility, nothing more. There were two kinds of bread – white and brown – and one rubbery cheese, labelled simply *сыр* (cheese). Daily necessities including food were subject to frequent shortages, and a Soviet citizen learned always to carry a net shopping bag in purse or pocket, in case she happened upon a group of people queueing outside a shop – a sure sign that some desirable product had just been delivered and soon would be sold out again.

Shortages, cramped apartments shared with strangers, erratic availability of hot running water, and other hardships were daily reality. The Communist Party's grip on history, culture, and personal behaviour was exercised through school curricula, publishing, broadcast media, ubiquitous propaganda posters, strict border controls, hiring and firing, university admissions, and ostracisation and harsh prison sentences for anyone stepping out of line.

Soviet Jews had a harder row to hoe than their non-Jewish peers. Like Russian Orthodoxy, Jewish religious practice was suppressed after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Successive generations of Jews gradually lost the 'habit' and indeed knowledge of Jewish faith and rites and came to experience their Jewishness as only an official identity category.<sup>1</sup> In a vast country spanning eleven time zones, all citizens were issued domestic passports with their nationality (read 'ethnicity') prominently indicated. If his family name or non-Slavic appearance did not call attention to a person's Jewishness, his passport certainly did. Birth certificates, too, announced the parents' Jewishness or other 'nationality.'

Even if the official government policy was that everyone was first and foremost a Soviet, Jews were effectively second-class Soviet citizens.

Bullied at school, taunted with racial slurs, and denied a place at medical school in spite of his excellent grades, the young Vladimir Radunsky finally enrolled at the Moscow Architecture School, where his older brother was studying at the time. Small wonder, then, that Radunsky – born in Perm in 1954 and growing to young adulthood in Moscow – always considered himself a 'secular Jew.'

Life in late-twentieth century Russia was not all gloom and doom, however. Many individuals today who are old enough to have experienced it, including Jewish émigrés, cherish the memory of certain features. Ironically, the dreariness of 'official' culture drove a certain segment of the population to seek out off-limits books, magazines, music, film, and art. Contraband cultural material from the West was smuggled in via strictly limited student exchange programmes, a few intrepid (and closely monitored) tourists.

This was the era of *samizdat* copying of forbidden literature, and cassette tape duplication of Western pop music. Homegrown writers, musicians, and visual artists in the Soviet Union stayed creatively active, too. Some earned a living with paid propaganda art assignments from the state while secretly producing their own work on the side – sometimes at great risk to themselves and their families.<sup>2</sup>

Western and pre-revolutionary Russian art exhibited in a few state-operated venues offered another cultural bright spot. Thanks to avid eighteenth century collectors such as Catherine the Great, museums like the Hermitage were – and are – chock full of top-shelf works from East and West, from antiquity through the Renaissance and onward.<sup>3</sup> Again, in the absence of interesting alternatives for spending their free time, Russians flocked to museums. Not only the educated elite and quiet dissidents: teachers, factory workers, doctors, clerical workers, and street cleaners went to art museums, too.

Perhaps it was during his time as an architecture student that Radunsky first encountered

Matisse's *La Danse* in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. This painting is quoted visually in two of Radunsky's books – *The Maestro Plays* (text by Bill Martin, Jr.) and *I Love You, Dude* (written and illustrated by Radunsky) – and in both cases the languid dancers have become chubby red pigs.

In *The Maestro Plays*, Radunsky also quotes a Cubist work of Picasso – an artist with no fewer than 38 works in the Hermitage collection. The museum's collection of French impressionist paintings (21 works by Monet alone) may also have made their impression on the young artist-to-be.

Throughout his career in the USA and Italy, Radunsky drew upon the cultural storehouse of his Russian childhood and youth: folk tales, poetry, fine art, illustration, cartoons, and literature high and low, including early twentieth century Russian Avant-garde art.<sup>4</sup>

In 1993, he illustrated *The Story of a Boy Named Will*, a translation by Jamey Gambrell of a work by Daniil Kharms (1905–1942), a Russian avant-garde poet who was effectively backed into children's literature when he came under scrutiny (and worse) by the state cultural authorities.

In 1996, Radunsky illustrated Korney Chukovsky's *Телефон (The Telephone)*, also a Gambrell translation of a favourite Russian children's poem. Here, Radunsky clearly revels like one of his hand-painted characters in a world of rich textile patterns, surfaces, and textures.

Even after years in the USA, collaborating with American writers, translators, and publishers, Radunsky continued to pepper his illustrations with bears, concertinas, a balalaika, and other, subtler, cultural signposts.

A Lebedev-like dog appears embroidered on a doll's smock, just below its Cyrillic nickname Ушик (Little Ears) in *My Dolly*, one of two books in which Radunsky's illustrations accompany a text by American folk singer and composer Woody Guthrie. (The actual smock was embroidered by Radunsky's friend and fellow artist Irina Zatulovskaya.) *The Mighty Asparagus*, published in 2004, is Radunsky's award-winning<sup>5</sup> adaptation of the Russian story

*Penka (The Turnip)*, which in turn is based largely on the Grimm Brothers' *Die Rube*.

## Emigration

For decades, all Soviet citizens were effectively caged inside their country, forbidden to travel abroad, much less emigrate. Israel's Knesset passed the Law of Return in 1950, entitling anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent to immigrate to Israel and become an Israeli citizen, but only a trickle of Soviet Jews were allowed out. In 1965, publication of Elie Wiesel's book, *The Jews of Silence: a Personal Report on Soviet Jewry*, brought increased awareness and international attention.<sup>6</sup>

The early 1970s saw the birth of a unified "Free the Soviet Jews" movement in the American Jewish community. Although it struggled at first to gain traction at a time when the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement had centre stage, the drive to free Soviet Jews gained strength and momentum year on year, and ultimately drew the support of key non-Jewish national political figures like Democrat US Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, and Republican President Ronald Reagan. December 1974 saw the Jackson-Vanik Amendment overwhelmingly approved by the US Congress, linking trade concessions and low-interest loans for any 'non-market' (communist) country to that country's demonstrated "respect for the right to emigrate."<sup>7</sup>

Many Jewish students in the USA were motivated to take part in the movement to help Soviet Jews, because they felt the American Jewish community had not done enough during the Holocaust era.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by the biblical Exodus story, one of the campaign's rallying cries was "Let My People Go."<sup>9</sup> For more than 20 years there were constant protest vigils – largely organised and maintained by Jewish students – in front of the Soviet consulates in Washington DC, San Francisco, New York, and Houston. Active for many years in the movement, American attorney





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I was lovingly cleaned, scraped free of chewing gum, and dressed in an ornate gold frame. I was carefully taken to a museum and hung on a wall for all to see.

"Dude, this is your home now and these are your neighbors. This is a Picasso and this is a Matisse. I'm sure you will like one another."

Just then a whole crowd of people rushed in. "Genius! Extraordinary!" "Just look at this Dude. What a face!" "How simple and dignified! Subtle, yet provocative!" "Oh, and the shoes! How clever. How elegant!"

Every day, tour group after tour group came to see me and my new friends. Children of all ages, adults, students, senior citizens—they all admired us.

Never had I known such happiness, not even when I was on a cup filled with milk. At last I could bring joy to people. I wished those Seven From Paris could see me now. Too bad they do not allow elephants in the museum.



Painters came and quickly and...



# pencil



This nonsense went all day long. Jing-a-ling, ting-a-ling, ding-dong! What a monumental First Day! Good-bye!



Dorit Grossman Perry recalled how American Jewish families made use of the Jewish coming-of-age ritual of bar mitzvah:

The whole bar mitzvah scene was transformed by this. Most bar mitzvahs in those years involved a Soviet twin. Someone in the Soviet Union who could not have a bar mitzvah. It gives me shivers to remember it. At each American bar mitzvah, there would also be a photo of a young Soviet Jew and their name and something about them, so there was a lot of identifying with these people.<sup>10</sup>

A Soviet Jew who requested an exit visa from his government could expect a waiting period of several months. During that time he had to survive without income because his application to emigrate triggered immediate dismissal by his employer (or expulsion from university), and no other employer would hire him. In this period Natan Sharansky and other high-profile Soviet Jews became *causes célèbres*, having been jailed, exiled, and otherwise persecuted merely for having requested exit visas. When their applications were denied by the Soviet authorities, they came to be known as ‘refuseniks’ and became the public face of Soviet Jews hoping to leave. (Sharansky and others were finally allowed to emigrate to Israel in 1986, thanks in large part to external pressure from the USA and Israel.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, Radunsky had already made his way out.)

By the mid-1970s, as many as half of all emigrating Jews were the United States rather than Israel as their destination of choice. Typically, they would declare a plan to immigrate to Israel and receive an Israeli visa at the Dutch Embassy in Moscow (which handled Israeli affairs in the Soviet Union.) If a Soviet Jew was fortunate enough to receive an exit visa, he would then surrender his USSR passport and travel by train or bus to Vienna<sup>12</sup> – with a Soviet ‘stateless passport,’ two suitcases maximum, and the equivalent of only a few hundred dollars.<sup>13</sup> (Radunsky left

with just a duffel bag, his widow Eugenia said in a recent interview.) Soviet border guards often demanded bribes of vodka or cigarettes before letting the emigrants through – in disregard of their exit visas and legal entitlement to pass.<sup>14</sup>

In Vienna, HIAS and other Jewish organizations met the new arrivals. Those entering Austria and choosing a destination other than Israel were transported to Rome for processing.<sup>15</sup> The US Immigration and Naturalization Service had its European office in Rome, and HIAS likewise set up a Rome office to help the refugees prepare their applications and present their cases. When the Soviet government became aware of this trend, it clamped down again on emigration.<sup>16</sup>

Vladimir Radunsky’s application for an exit visa was approved in 1982, at what was actually a low point in the third wave (1948-1986) of Jewish emigration from the USSR.<sup>17</sup> HIAS reported having assisted a total of just 1327 Soviet Jews that year,<sup>18</sup> down from a high of 51,000+ in 1979.<sup>19</sup> By 1984, more than half of all applications for emigration were being denied, swelling the ranks of the refuseniks.<sup>20</sup> According to one source, more Jews in that period were imprisoned, exiled, or sent to psychiatric hospitals than were allowed to leave.<sup>21</sup>

While in Rome, those hoping to settle in the USA or another western country underwent medical examinations and security clearances by their intended destination country. They attended US government-sponsored English classes and were offered Jewish educational and social programmes arranged by American Jewish organizations.<sup>22</sup>

Immigration processing required them to remain in Rome for approximately six weeks, though in Radunsky’s case the sojourn became extended. It seems he was so delighted by Italy that he dragged his feet, sabotaging the efforts of HIAS to send him on to New York.<sup>23</sup> The Italian government extended hospitality to both HIAS and its Soviet Jewish clients during their waiting period in Rome.<sup>24</sup> Housing was provided in towns along the Tyrrhenian coast such as Ladispoli

and Santa Marinella, about a one-hour train ride from Rome's city centre. Through a French friend, however, Radunsky found very modest accommodations in a monastery in Trastevere, operated by nuns who rented rooms to pilgrims. Every night they would bring him chamomile tea, Radunsky's widow Eugenia said.<sup>25</sup>

## United States

Eventually Radunsky would fly to New York and settle in the New York-New Jersey area, where in the meantime his brother with his young family had become established. It is worthwhile to pause here and imagine the impact of arriving in the USA of the early 1980s – a bustling, colourful land of commerce and abundance. American Jewish families and individuals welcomed the newcomers, assisted them with housing and employment, arranged English-language classes, and helped them learn the ropes of their new country.<sup>26</sup> Dorit Grossman Perry, a young Jewish activist in the San Francisco Bay Area at the time, recounts a personal episode that has remained with her:

Each of us was paired with a recently arriving family from the Soviet Union. We were to be their guides to the USA – how to get a driver's license, and basic everyday stuff. I met with my family and brought them up to speed on life in America . . . I took them to the local Safeway (supermarket, *ed.*). There was a father of about 45, the mother, and a young teen. We got to the bread aisle, and I'm starting to show them, white, whole wheat, sourdough . . . and the man asks, "Will all this be here tomorrow?" and I say yes. Then the man asks, "And also tomorrow?" I say yes. "And tomorrow after that?" I again respond yes, and he starts to cry.<sup>27</sup>

It is impossible to say how closely this scene tallied with Radunsky's own early impressions of the United States. Perhaps the shock of New York for an arriving Soviet was slightly muted as a result of his six-month stay in colourful, chaotic Rome. In any event, he wasted no time establishing himself. He found work at first as a graphic designer with Harry N. Abrams (now Abrams Books) and with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Later, he worked as an art director at Macmillan Publishers.<sup>28</sup> Gradually, though, he found a fruitful niche in children's book illustration.

Indeed, it would be more accurate to say children's book design and development, since by all accounts Radunsky had precise notions concerning a book's every detail – from typographic choices to page layouts, from cover to inside cover to the appearance of the preliminary pages and backmatter. "He took total control," said his widow Eugenia, "including placement of the barcodes. He would never let anyone touch his designs. For some of the books, which required calligraphy, he would do the calligraphy himself for every foreign edition." (It should be noted that several of his books were not only designed and illustrated but also written by Radunsky.)<sup>29</sup>

In the words of Eugenia, "He was still a very young man when he arrived in New York. Everything he saw there – its unique architecture, light, music, the whole atmosphere of artistic New York of the '80s – consumed him completely."<sup>30</sup> New social connections must have acted as a stimulant, too. Radunsky moved in Russian émigré circles, meeting and marrying the young Eugenia Uritskaya, from a Soviet Jewish émigré family in Boston.

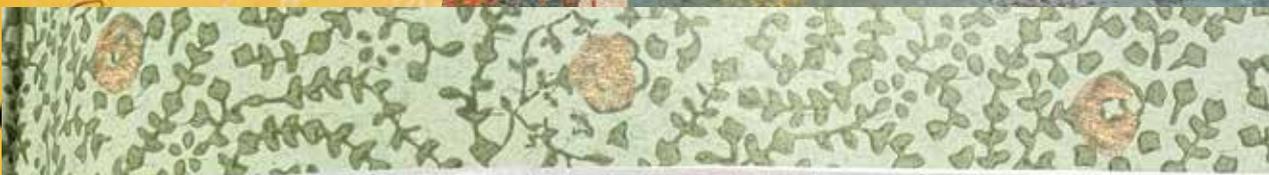
He forged relationships with other fellow émigrés, including poet and Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky. In the mid-1990s, the Brodskys and the Radunskys were friends and neighbours in Brooklyn Heights. Ballet legend and fellow émigré Mikhail Baryshnikov also figured strongly in their lives,<sup>31</sup> and Radunsky ultimately collaborated artistically with both men.

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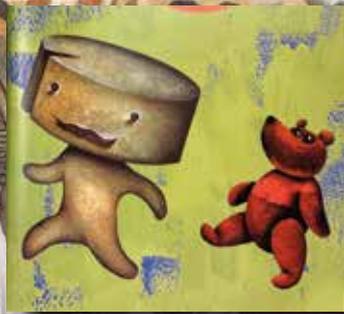


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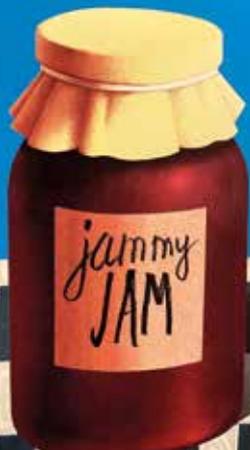
**Piero della Francesca, Giovanni Bellini, Perugino, Fra Angelico, Andrea Mantegna, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Masaccio, Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Fräulein Gasters, thank you and sorry.**

—V. R.



Maybe that the  
what a terrible

I was once a jar of jam,  
Jummy  
Mummy  
Clummy  
Jummy  
Sweetie swummy  
Jar of jam.



*Discovery* – Brodsky’s poem published as a book with Radunsky’s design and illustrations – rethinks the meaning of the discovery of a new continent. The book appeared shortly after Brodsky’s death in 1996, but the poet did see some of the artwork in progress and, as a fellow artist, even dared to offer Radunsky some advice.<sup>32</sup>

Together with Baryshnikov, Radunsky created the book, *Because*, published in 2007 by Simon & Schuster – a light-hearted introduction to dance and the life of a dancer. Prolific Russian-British writer Boris Akunin also numbered among Radunsky’s friends.

He frequented the Russian Samovar, a mid-town Manhattan restaurant catering to Soviet émigrés, opened by Roman Kaplan in 1986. Radunsky gifted Kaplan with an autographed drawing titled *Игрушки (Toys)*, which for years was displayed in the restaurant.<sup>33</sup>

The artist’s years in the United States (1982-2001) were also a period of stylistic fecundity. In his earliest works, such as *The Pup Grew Up* and *Hail Mail*, we see richly detailed paintings with a ‘retro’ and European feel. As time passed, he came into contact with the work of American children’s book illustrators such as Eric Carle (*The Hungry Caterpillar*), Lane Smith (*The Stinky Cheese Man*), Maira Kalman (*Next Stop Grand Central*), and Leo Lionni (*A Color of His Own*) and began to experiment with new techniques. Radunsky’s total *oeuvre* includes illustrations created with everything from old-school gouache or tempera<sup>34</sup> paint and brushes on textured paper, to cut-outs, collage, photography, digital post-production, fabric construction, lino etching, and pencil scribbles. His pure, sometimes melancholy early style gives way to riotous colour combinations and surprising contrasts between deep texture and utter two-dimensionality.

Fortunately for Radunsky, the picture book of the 1980s had become an experimental art form, as Stoppa observed in her unpublished 2009 paper on Radunsky. Here, she wrote, the role of the designer becomes preponderant, acting skilfully in an invisible way on the structure and

the packaging of the book.<sup>35</sup> Other important artists who also designed children’s books include Juan Miro, John Cage, Sonia Delaunay, Andy Warhol.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, there is no reason to limit to children’s illustrators the list of likely influences on Radunsky. Why not propose Cy Twombly? Marc Chagall? Vassily Kandinsky? In a thought-provoking tribute published one year after Radunsky’s 2018 death, fellow writer-illustrator Eugene Yelchin drew a heavy through-line between Radunsky and the Russian avant-garde of the early twentieth century: “Picture books produced in the USSR at that one moment in time reflected the revolutionary avant-garde at its most gleeful, most rebellious, most innovative – the very qualities that came to define Vladimir Radunsky’s spirit.”<sup>37</sup>

It should be noted, however, that Radunsky rejected the importance of Russian Avant-gardist Vladimir Lebedev in the evolution of his own style:

With all my old affection for V. Lebedev,” he told his friend and Princeton philologist Yuri Leving, “the only thing that unites us is that we are namesakes, that sometimes I also wear a cap, I also sometimes draw with pen and black ink and even a brush, I also made a couple of books (illustrating) Marshak . . . What else? Oh, we both love boxing, ballet, and order in the workshop. I would love to find some other similarities, but I’m afraid that’s where our similarities end.”<sup>38</sup>

Radunsky’s widow Eugenia has her own thoughts about the many styles and techniques her husband used over the years:

When he started doing children’s books, I think he was very influenced by the Russian children’s book illustrators of the ’20s and ’30s, obviously. Later on he was kind of growing out of it and was really interested in doing something more, I wouldn’t say abstract, but kind of on a bigger scale.

There he was just drawing inspiration from everything that he saw around him. And of course he had a very classical training in architecture . . . In Russia, in order to get into architecture school, you have to know how to draw classical busts . . . and so he had to do that. But as far as painting, he never had a lesson. That's also part of the reason that his style is so eclectic: every book he approached as a new project, as a way to learn new techniques. It was a very tortuous process because he was never trained. He had to reinvent the wheel every time.<sup>39</sup>

Interviewed in Rome in 2008 by Belgium-based curator Anna Stoppa, Radunsky was asked directly about the relationship between today's children's books and contemporary art more broadly. He had this to say:

Children's books, their design and style of illustration, are a mirror reflection of what is happening in the contemporary art world at large. In fact, they are a fragment of this grown-up art world. Sometimes a very valuable fragment.<sup>40</sup>

In the course of that same interview, Radunsky expressed his admiration for certain Western forerunners in children's book art: Ludwig Bemelmans of 'Madeline' fame, Shel Silverstein, 'Babar' creator Jean de Bruhnoff, and many others.<sup>41</sup> He was also marked by Soviet *multiki* or animation artists, for example Yuri Norstein, and by graphic artist and children's book illustrator Mai Miturich, his widow Eugenia added.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to possible influences already observed by others, this writer would propose American-British animator Terry Gilliam of Monty Python fame. Like Gilliam, Radunsky enjoyed lifting retro photography and drawings from their historic settings and pasting them into his colourful make-believe world of illustration. His book *An Edward Lear Alphabet* is brimming

with this technique. It stemmed from his love for old photographs, which he collected from flea markets all over the world, said Eugenia. "All the photography used in the book *Alphabetabum* came entirely from his own collection, she added.<sup>43</sup>

## Italy

For almost twenty years in the USA, Radunsky's reputation as a consequential children's book artist did nothing but grow. Throughout those same years, though, he incubated the memory of his six-month stay in Rome in 1982 – a time spent in immigration limbo but under the care of kindly nuns near the Ponte Sisto bridge in Trastevere. His friend and idol Joseph Brodsky was also under the Eternal City's spell, visiting almost every year after first seeing it upon his own (forced) emigration from the USSR in 1972,<sup>44</sup> and producing landmark poetic works during a stay at the American Academy in Rome in 1981.<sup>45</sup>

"Rome had a very special meaning for both of us," said Eugenia, "especially for (Vladimir) because he had studied architecture." Ancient ruins, Renaissance and Baroque palaces, and Rome's many other monuments were familiar to Radunsky from his studies, but until emigrating he had known them only from reproductions. "To see it all was really life changing."

So, in 2001 with their twin daughters still pre-schoolers, the couple indulged a shared dream and relocated their little family from Brooklyn Heights to Rome.

"We were supposed to be here for a brief stint, a year or two," said Eugenia, long enough for the girls to experience another culture and learn another language. But two years soon became three, then five, then ten . . . and the Radunskys never returned to the USA.

"We fell into a rhythm," she said. "The children started going to an Italian school and we just felt very comfortable. Vladimir especially felt very comfortable . . . he felt like it was a place

where he knew everything, and he knew the people, he could relate to people, which he never could in the United States, even though he loved New York and was fascinated by New York and absorbed New York energy. In Rome he felt like he was basically home.”<sup>46</sup>

Radunsky set up his artist’s studio on via degli Orti d’Alibert in Trastevere, in a somewhat ramshackle complex of one- and two-storey buildings encircling a courtyard. These quarters were owned and rented out by the Vatican, mainly to artists, Eugenia said.

Radunsky’s daily routine began with a morning bicycle ride – from his home in Rome’s Celimontana neighbourhood to the studio in Trastevere. There, he worked not only at his art, but also at repairing and remodelling the building. “It was really shabby and falling down,” said Eugenia. “He rebuilt it and created a really nice space for himself and for other people. We used to invite people there, we used to have parties in the courtyard. There was a nice sense of community there.”<sup>47</sup>

He liked to take long walks about Rome with the family dachshund, and had a comfortable, proprietary air when visiting the Italian capital’s museums and open-air monuments.<sup>48</sup> Being surrounded by Italy’s rich artistic heritage was a double-edged sword for Radunsky, according to Eugenia: “Rome inspired him, but it also made him very aware of his own artistic shortcomings.”

The years in Rome – tragically curtailed by Radunsky’s illness and death in September 2018 – were at least as productive as his New York period. Stylistically, his work became increasingly daring and eclectic. In *The Mighty Asparagus*, published in 2004 and mentioned earlier, he quotes not only early Italian Renaissance architecture and painting (Piero della Francesca, Gentile da Fabriano), but also ancient Roman wall painting (perhaps the frescoes from Roman Empress Livia’s suburban villa at Prima Porta). He adopts the Renaissance habit of slipping his self-portrait into the corners and shadows of his

books – here a graceful pen-and-ink drawing, there a photo of a red-faced man with a telephone receiver atop his head.

“After New York, Rome was like coming back to something he already knew, somewhere in his subconscious,” said Eugenia, “but seeing it in its original form emboldened his work.”<sup>49</sup> In 2009, Radunsky was selected for a prestigious artist’s fellowship at a spectacularly well preserved medieval castle in Umbria. The competitive Civitella Ranieri Fellowship provides small cohorts of talented artists, composers and writers with a secluded, peaceful space in which to work for six weeks.<sup>50</sup> It may have been there that Radunsky first started to experiment with working in three dimensions.

During his final decade Radunsky’s work indeed took flight from the printed page. In 2008 and 2009, the Nina Lumer Gallery in Milan mounted successive exhibits of his work, including *Vestiario / Bestiario* (*Cross-dressed*, in English),<sup>51</sup> also published as a children’s book in 2011, and reiterated as an exhibit in Rome in 2011-12.<sup>52</sup> For this show, Radunsky designed and oversaw the detailed construction of articles of clothing for animals – horses, elephants, pigeons, hippopotami – presenting them as a haute couture fashion collection.

In 2010, Radunsky again pushed beyond his habitual genre with *Иęc Xun-Xon*, the Russian-language edition of *Hip Hop Dog*, a children’s book created with writer-artist Chris Raschka. In Russian stores, the book was sold packaged with a CD containing a song composed and performed by Russian pop star Vova Kristovsky.

For the 2017 production of the ballet *Don Quixote* at Rome’s Teatro dell’Opera, Radunsky was tapped to design both set and costumes. Here was a completely new realm of artistic expression. Not only would it mean working in three dimensions, but in an immersive, monumental format and for dancers in motion. Radunsky described the experience this way:

This production to a great extent was influenced by the renowned ballet dancer and choreographer, Mikhail Baryshnikov, who in his time (at the end of the '70s) created his own version of this great ballet for the American Ballet Theatre. This is my one and only experience as a set and costume designer for the theatre. Although I have seen countless classical versions of *Don Quixote* and was inspired by many of them, I mainly sensed in the classical libretto, originally created in the middle of the XIX century by the French choreographer Marius Petipa, the familiar overtones of a children's book and imagined the set as a huge toy – an enormous pop-up book. I saw an opportunity to make a life-size toy paper theatre and fill it with live dancers, dressed in grotesque costumes, as is typical of children's books characters, while always keeping to a fairly accurate historical perspective.<sup>53</sup>

After decades of solitary studio work, it must have been strange for Radunsky to occupy the special laboratory set up for him in the attic of the Teatro dell'Opera – all arranged to his specifications with tables, paints, brushes, and ceramic bowls.<sup>54</sup> Strange, and thrilling, to see his colourful set designs towering over the dancers, and to see his bright costume designs leaping and pirouetting across the stage in “an explosion of colours and patterns.”<sup>55</sup>

Regrettably, Radunsky did not live to further explore theatrical set design or costume design as the next frontier for his talent and imagination. He was already ill while working on *Don Quixote*. According to artist-architect friend Alexander Brodsky, the ballet was a culminating moment and a happy one, during what was a difficult time for Radunsky:

(. . .) you see, there are these artists who work on a huge scale – who paint on enormous canvases, ten by ten metres, while he (Radunsky) always drew with a fine pen on a tiny piece of paper. Not that he had ever wanted to paint monumental works, but when he saw what it meant to work on a large scale, he was really happy. He said it many times, that he was sorry that he had not discovered it earlier.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusions

A ground-breaking artist and thinker, Vladimir Radunsky was one human being on the great wave of humanity that flowed from the USSR at the end of the twentieth century. Discriminated against, imprisoned, and finally released by their government, nearly two million Jews emigrated from the former Soviet Union between 1970 and 2019.<sup>57</sup> On average, these were cultured, educated, sometimes even brilliant individuals. Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky, Google founder Sergei Brin, WhatsApp founder Yan Koum, and mathematician-politician Natan Sharansky were some of the superstars, but virtually all of this émigré cohort went on to lead productive lives in their new countries.

It is unlikely that Brin would have built Google had he stayed in Russia, and it seems even less likely that Vladimir Radunsky would have produced his unique and abundant body of work had he not emigrated. One need only turn the pages of his 33 children's books – or watch a videorecording of the 2017 production of *Don Quixote* – to understand that.

Radunsky may have left Russia with only a duffel bag, but he also carried his Soviet Russian cultural baggage. Attracted to beauty in many forms, he acquired more such heritage wherever he went – in hard-edged New York, in elegant Paris where he was granted a special French “talent passport,”<sup>58</sup> and in the eternal palimpsest that is Rome. Drawing upon this storehouse of

aesthetic acquisitions he created mad mashups, working in genres that offered him maximum freedom and outlets for his thoughtful humour.

Many of the actual protagonists in the Soviet Jewish migratory wave had – and still have – little idea of the coordinated campaign among American Jews that led to their rescue. Like his peers, Radunsky may have been unaware of the full backdrop to his own arrival and subsequent flourishing in the West. The movement's activists, after all, never asked anything in return for their efforts. It was satisfaction enough to see people like Radunsky settle successfully and go on to contribute their talents and energies in the USA, Israel, or another destination.

As much as he brought to the table by virtue of his own international peregrinations, Radunsky also continuously rummaged in history for inspiration. He seems to have been in continuous dialogue with figures from the past – Albert Einstein, Edward Lear, Ludwig Bemelmans, Piero della Francesca, Pablo Picasso, to name just a few – as if they were his contemporaries, neighbours, and everyday companions.

This feature of Radunsky's consciousness is delicately captured in a soon-to-be-released documentary film: *Dudunya: the Art and Many Hats of Vladimir Radunsky*. Directed by Andrei Zagdansky and executive produced by Mikhail Baryshnikov, Lissa Rinehart, and David Saylor, the one-hour film includes footage of the artist speaking on camera, as well as thoughtful and moving interviews with colleagues and friends, in Russian, English and Italian. The film's Italian debut took place in 2024, in connection with a new exhibition of Radunsky's work at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome.

# Captions for collages

## Collage 1

- *The Telephone*, by Korney Chukovsky, translated by Jamie Gambrell, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky
- *Because*, by Mikhail Baryshnikov and Vladimir Radunsky
- *An Edward Lear Alphabet*, written by Edward Lear, made up and colored by Vladimir Radunsky
- *Table Manners*, a collaboration of Chris Raschka and Vladimir Radunsky

## Collage 2

- *Manneken Pis: A Simple Story of a Boy Who Peed on a War*, as told by Vladimir Radunsky, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky
- *The Maestro Plays*, text by Bill Martin, Jr., illustrations by Vladimir Radunsky
- *Hail to Mail*, text by Samuel Marshak, translated by Richard Pevear, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky
- *I Love You, Dude*, author and illustrator Vladimir Radunsky
- *The Telephone*, by Korney Chukovsky, translated by Jamie Gambrell, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky
- *An Edward Lear Alphabet*, written by Edward Lear, made up and colored by Vladimir Radunsky

## Collage 3

- *The Maestro Plays*, text by Bill Martin, Jr., illustrations by Vladimir Radunsky
- *The Mighty Asparagus*, adapted from the Russian story, *Penka*, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky
- *I Love You, Dude*, author and illustrator Vladimir Radunsky
- *#1 (one)*, written and illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky.
- *An Edward Lear Alphabet*, written by Edward Lear, made up and colored by Vladimir Radunsky
- *Manneken Pis: A Simple Story of a Boy Who Peed on a War*, as told by Vladimir Radunsky, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky
- *Hail to Mail*, text by Samuel Marshak, translated by Richard Pevear, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky

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Exhibition view of the exhibition *Vladimir Radunsky*,  
Palazzo Esposizioni Roma, 2024,  
Photo © Azienda Speciale Palaexpo / Claudia Gori







## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Adam Lake, “Jewish Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union: the Formation of New Social Networks, Integration, and Activity Spaces.” Dissertation presented to the Department of Geography and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, June 2012, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Polina Baitsym, “Navigating through the History of Ukrainian Art,” public lecture, Meeting 3, Bibliotheca Hertziana / Max Planck Institute, Rome, 21 February 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Hyla Whittaker, “Catherine the Great and the Art of Collecting: Acquiring the Paintings that Founded the Hermitage,” in *Word and Image in Russian History: Essays in Honor of Gary Marker* (Boston, USA: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 148.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Yelchin, “Vladimir Radunsky and the Russian Avant-garde,” *The Horn Book Magazine*, January-February 2019, 62.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times* “Best Illustrated Children’s Books of 2004,” accessed Dec. 18, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/books/arts/childrens-books-best-illustrated-books.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Beinus, “The Experience and Emigration of Soviet Jews: 1970-2000,” Senior Thesis, Department of History, Barnard College, Columbia University, April 8, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Lake, “Jewish Immigrants,” 59.

<sup>8</sup> Beinus, “The Experience and Emigration of Soviet Jews,” 62.

<sup>9</sup> Dorit Grossman Perry, interviewed via remote connection on 12 November 2023, San Francisco, USA, and in subsequent correspondence, with Sharon Lee Cowan. Active from a very young age in the campaign to free Soviet Jews, Grossman Perry went on to practice law in Northern California’s Bay Area. In the late 1980s she was tapped to head the legal appeals team for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in Rome, Italy. Today she serves on the HIAS board of directors.

<sup>10</sup> Grossman Perry, interviewed.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Bialis, director, *Refusenik*, A Foundation for Documentary Projects Production, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRkdhUgEIQm>.

<sup>12</sup> Grossman Perry, interviewed.

<sup>13</sup> Lake, “Jewish Immigrants,” 34.

<sup>14</sup> Grossman Perry, interviewed.

<sup>15</sup> “Annual Report,” Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Tolts, “A Half Century of Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union: Demographic Aspects,” paper presented at the Project for Russian and Eurasian Jewry, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, on 20 November 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Beinus, “The Experience and Emigration of Soviet Jews,” 27.

<sup>18</sup> “Annual Report,” HIAS, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Tolts, “A Half Century of Jewish Emigration,” 2.

<sup>20</sup> Beinus, “The Experience and Emigration of Soviet Jews,” 40.

<sup>21</sup> Beinus, “The experience and Emigration of Soviet Jews,” 40.

<sup>22</sup> “Annual Report,” HIAS, 1982.

<sup>23</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.

<sup>24</sup> “Annual Report,” HIAS, 1982.

<sup>25</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.

<sup>26</sup> Lake, “Jewish Immigrants,” 80-81.

<sup>27</sup> Grossman Perry, interviewed.

<sup>28</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.

<sup>29</sup> These include: *If I Met Bemelmans* (2015); *Vestiario/Bestiario* (2011); *You?* (2009); *Le Grand Bazaar* (2006); *I Love You, Dude* (2005); *What Does Peace Feel Like?* (2004); *#1 (one)* (2003); *Mannekin Pis* (2002), *#10 (ten)* (2002); and *Square, Triangle, Round, Skinny* (2002).

<sup>30</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.

<sup>31</sup> Yuri Leving, “Leving, Yuri. Aatseel Keynote Speech: “The Pleasures of Philology,” Aatseel Keynote Speech, in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 159.

<sup>32</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.

<sup>33</sup> *Русская культура в изгнании – архив Русский Самовар* (trans., *Russian Culture in Exile, Russian Samovar Archive*) exhibition catalogue, Moscow, Antiquarium Publishing House, 2017, item 326.

- <sup>34</sup> Sally Lodge, "All Things Asparagus: A versatile vegetable sprouts in two venues," *Publisher's Weekly*, June 14, 2004, 32.
- <sup>35</sup> Anna Stoppa, "Picture This: I libri di Vladimir Radunsky," *relatrice Cornelia Lauf*, 2008-2009, 43.
- <sup>36</sup> Stoppa, "Picture This," 44.
- <sup>37</sup> Yelchin, "Vladimir Radunsky and the Russian Avant-garde," 62.
- <sup>38</sup> Yuri Leving, "Сидим, два гения ... Владимир Радунский об Иосифе Бродском Фильм Юрия Левинга," ("We sit, two geniuses . . . Vladimir Radunsky on Joseph Brodsky: a film by Yuri Leving"), Colta website, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/19175-sidim-dva-geniya>, accessed 18 December 2023. Original Russian text is as follows: "При всей моей старой привязанности к В. Лебедеву роднит нас только то, что мы с ним тезки, что я иногда тоже хожу в кепке, тоже иногда рисую пером и черной тушью и даже кистью, тоже сделал . . . пару книжек С.Я. Маршака . . . Что еще? А, мы оба любим бокс, балет и порядок в мастерской. Я бы с удовольствием нашел еще какие-нибудь черты сходства, но боюсь, что на этом наше сходство и заканчивается".
- <sup>39</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.
- <sup>40</sup> Stoppa, "Picture This!", 129.
- <sup>41</sup> Stoppa, "Picture This!", 130.
- <sup>42</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.
- <sup>43</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.
- <sup>44</sup> "A Tribute to Joseph Brodsky on Two Evenings," American Academy in Rome website, accessed Dec. 19, 2023, <https://www.aarome.org/news/features/tribute-joseph-brodsky-two-evenings>.
- <sup>45</sup> Yuri Leving, "Aatseel Keynote Speech: The Pleasures of Philology," in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 172.
- <sup>46</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.
- <sup>47</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.
- <sup>48</sup> Yuri Leving, "Сидим, два гения ... Владимир Радунский об Иосифе Бродском Фильм Юрия Левинга," ("We sit, two geniuses . . . Vladimir Radunsky on Joseph Brodsky: a film by Yuri Leving"), Colta website, accessed Dec.18, 2023. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/19175-sidim-dva-geniya>,
- <sup>49</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.
- <sup>50</sup> "Vladimir Radunsky – Civitella Ranieri Fellow, 2009," Civitella Ranieri website, accessed Dec. 19, 2023, <https://civitella.org/fellow/vladimir-radunsky/>.
- <sup>51</sup> "Vladimir Radunsky: Happy Days are Here Again!," Nina Due Galleria, accessed Dec. 18, 2023, <http://www.ninadue.com/vladimir-radunsky-happy-days-are-here-again/>.
- <sup>52</sup> "Vestiaro/Bestiario. Abito per animali dalla collezione di Vladimir Radunsky," Palazzo delle Esposizioni website. <https://www.palazzo.esposizioni.it/mostra/vestiariobestiario-abiti-per-animali-dalla-collezione-di-vladimir-radunsky>.
- <sup>53</sup> "Don Quixote – Set and Costumes: Teatro dell'Opera, Rome, 2017," Vladimir Radunsky website, accessed Nov. 28, 2023, <http://www.vladimirradunsky.com/theatre.html>.
- <sup>54</sup> Anna Biagiotti, speaking on camera in *Dudunya: the Art and Many Hats of Vladimir Radunsky*, Andrei Zagdansky, director, AZ Films, 2023.
- <sup>55</sup> Georgia Bettoja, speaking on camera in Zagdansky's film, *Dudunya*.
- <sup>56</sup> Zagdansky, *Dudunya*, 2023 (quotation drawn from English subtitling of Brodsky segment).
- <sup>57</sup> Tolts, "A Half Century of Jewish Emigration," 1.
- <sup>58</sup> Eugenia Radunsky, interviewed.

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