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"The Amazing Music of Truth": Nabokov's Sources for Godunov's Central Asian Travels in *The Gift*

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Abstract

In Chapter 2 of his novel *Dar/The Gift* (1933-38), Nabokov had the protagonist's father undertake the explorative journey to Central Asia that he in his youth would have liked to undertake himself. It now can safely be said that none of the colorful and evocative detail of this imaginary travelogue is invented. To compose it, Nabokov must have closely and carefully studied more than twenty historical sources. Up to now, about 34 percent of the roughly 105 "items" that make up his text and that range from single facts to whole paragraphs had been traced to specific sources. This article brings the count up to 92 percent.

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**"The Amazing Music of Truth": Nabokov's Sources
for Godunov's Central Asian Travels in *The Gift***

In the course of the entomohistorical research for his *Guide to Nabokov's Butterflies and Moths 2001*, one of us (DEZ) happened upon an old and obscure travel book by a nineteenth-century English explorer and naturalist (Pratt 1892; Fig. 10).¹ To his surprise, he found that it not only answered some of his current questions about the town of Tetsienka and its missionaries and insects, which play an important role in *The Gift* and "The Aurelian," but also a number of questions he had long despaired of asking: What is this place where Konstantin Kimlovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev vanishes in 1917, and is it situated on any map? Why is the Berlin room where Fyodor meets his dead father in his dream decorated with the butterfly *Thecla bieta*? And most tantalizing of all: What is that remarkable species of chubark whose cocoon mimics a caterpillar?

Going on from butterflies to his book on *Nabokov's Berlin* (2001), DEZ arrived at the conclusion that Nabokov here had not invented anything: all the information on Berlin so generously interwoven into his novels and stories between 1924 and 1938 has some basis in fact and observation, even such seemingly fantastic items as the "Museum of Crime" of King, Queen, Knave.

From there it was but a small step to a further question: could it be that the whole account of Godunov's Central Asian travels in our opinion some of the finest, most evocative prose Nabokov ever wrote—is not based in imagination but in fact? That all its rich detail can be traced to some matter-of-fact source?

If you ponder it, it cannot be otherwise. Nabokov never dealt in generalities. The high art of evocation and visualization he developed was based on the selection of observable unique detail. He would never have constructed a semblance of "Central Asia" on the basis of fuzzy general information the way James Hilton did when, at about the same time Nabokov was at work on Chapter 2 of *Das*, he invented his Tibetan Shangri-La out of a few attributes like "mountainous," "empty," "forbidding weather," and

1. The illustrations accompanying this article begin on p. 71.



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