

## **About the artist Lydia Mandel, her circle, Vera Rochlina, Katya Granoff and some other well known personalities**

I met Lydia Mandel in Paris in the summer of 1975. The memory of our friendship will remain with me forever because of its wonderful beginning and an unbelievably sad end.

In the summer of 1973 we immigrated to Israel from Soviet Union. When I say “we” I refer to myself (a math professor), my wife Lyudmila and our daughter Larisa. Immediately after coming to Israel I began teaching in the Mathematics Department of Tel-Aviv University. In the summer of 1975 all of us set out for Europe (I was supposed to attend several professional conferences, while my family wanted to see Europe). We took our car on a boat to Greece and drove to Paris from there. We were fortunate to have a large vehicle, a Mercedes. It had nothing to do with wealth: at that time in Israel new immigrants could buy cars tax free. Besides, I was quite lucky – but this is another story altogether.

And so we reached Paris. We used to stay in motels because we did not have money for hotels. In Paris we arranged to meet Valya Shapiro, a young artist who like me immigrated to Israel from Moscow, and after some time moved to Paris in search of success and happiness. I believe that she was about 25 years old at that time (I was 35). She was a wonderful artist but had a very difficult life. At the same time, she was quite pushy and already managed to acquire some connections in Parisian artistic circles. For example, she knew Katya Granoff (1895-1989) and she took my family and me to her gallery to meet her.

### **Katya Granoff**

Katya Granoff came to Paris from Russia as a young girl together with her sister. It happened before the Russian revolution. She was a poet and presented us with a collection of her poems. But it was her amazing taste for art that made her famous and rich. She understood and sensed art profoundly and was able to discover young artists and their works. In the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century she helped young Russian painters who at that time came in droves to Paris, this artistic Mecca of late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am not familiar with all details of her biography, but during our meeting in 1975 she told me one small story.

One summer (I don't know what year it was, but it can be easily found out), just prior to their traditional summer vacation in the southern French city of Nice, the sisters attended a new exhibition of young artists' works. Katya loved the paintings of one of the artists and decided to buy two of them. Her sister tried to reason with her: “Katya, this is the money that we need for our vacation”. “Then we are not going”, came the reply. She bought two pieces. This young painter was none other than Raoul Dufy! Her deep understanding and uncanny taste for art helped her to grow her business, and as of the time of our meeting she owned two galleries in Paris (one near the Presidential Palace in Champs-Elysees and the other one not far from the present day D'Orsay Museum). Besides, she owned galleries all over France (we came across one of them in Honfleur in Normandy).

Katya Granoff made quite an impression upon us. She was very stout and sat in her armchair, while several young women who worked for her were fussing around taking orders. Our visit had a certain purpose: Katya wanted to help Valya Shapiro (she still used to help young artists). The idea was that she would call her old artistic friends and ask them to give Valya old canvasses that they were not going to use anymore. Thus, Valya would get something to paint on for free. Of course, all of them featured some incomplete (and sometimes even finished) work, and Valya was supposed to paint over it. Cruel, isn't it?

Lydia Mandel was one of those friends. She immediately responded and invited Valya to come over. We took our car and drove there, while my wife and daughter stayed at Valya's and prepared lunch.

## Lydia Mandel

Lydia Mandel lived in one of those tall Parisian apartment buildings, somewhere near the Eiffel Tower. I believe that we met with her in the building courtyard, but maybe we actually went up to her apartment and then came down to the courtyard together. All those buildings have entrances to the catacombs. The access of course is blocked somewhere at a deeper level, but at the upper level there are cellars divided into small storage rooms, each belonging to one of the apartments. Lydia Mandel also owned a storage room. She held the key in her hand, but was reluctant to go. She was a slim old woman, very communicative and friendly, and she said to me directly: "I am afraid of going there". I was surprised and asked her why. She replied that she had not been there for 40 years(!). Sometime in mid-1930s she left for England with her husband (maybe to exhibit her works or due to her husband's business – she did not specify). The war broke out and they were unable to come back. During those years she lost her husband and later remarried to an Englishman. In any event, she came back years after the war and always delayed going down to the storage room because of the difficult memories. But now, since Katya Granoff asked her to look for old canvasses, she was prepared to go there. I tried unobtrusively to persuade her into going down and promised to be at her side. She agreed (actually, when she went down to the courtyard with us she already resolved to do so). She told us that she did not know exactly what was in the storage room because during the war, when she was in England, her housekeeper used to put there anything that she thought was worth preserving.

We opened the room, and the first thing that we noticed was a thick layer of dust mixed with rot. Nothing could be seen behind them. I lowered my hand into the dust and felt a chair leg. It was curved and probably beautiful, but before I could do anything it just crumbled under my hand. However it is not for nothing that people say that manuscripts do not burn and the art does not crumble! We began retrieving from under the dust old crumpled canvasses and numerous sketch notepads. The notepads had years written on them: 1921, 1920 and 1919 (the year when Lydia came to Paris). I did not inquire, but I think that she drew the sketches in Leger's studio. The style quite resembled Leger's and she knew him well.

It was in this cellar that I found a huge round painting from 1923. It was damaged, but my close friend, a famous Israeli artist Yan Rauchwerger, restored it for me and today it hangs in my house. Yan also helped me with a Vera Rochlina's painting that I also found under the dust. He carefully set it on an easel and told me to sprinkle it with water for several days while pulling it by breaking pegs behind the easel. It is a well known technique, but I was not familiar with it. The painting was thus completely restored by the early 1980s, and we are still enjoying it today. By the way, when I pulled it from the dust Lydia immediately said: "This is Verochka Rochlina". As I never heard this name before, she added: "Her husband was..." and she uttered the name of a very famous Russian avant-garde painter. I was sure that I would never forget it. However, I eventually remembered the name Rochlina because I knew well the great mathematician Rochlin from Leningrad and the name stayed with me, while her husband's name somehow slipped from my memory. Rochlina was completely forgotten by 1970s, and became famous again only in 2000s. Therefore, I thought that it would not be too hard to find out who was her husband in 1930s, just before her suicide. However, I was wrong. There must be some mystery behind it all. Lydia could not be mistaken as Vera was her closest friend, but none of Vera Rochlina's biographies mentions her second husband. Of course, it is possible that they were not married officially.

We found quite a few interesting works in the cellar. Valya took many canvasses (I felt sorry for each and every one of them). I might have reimbursed her for the price of the canvasses in compensation for the paintings that I took with me.

Next day we set out for UK to attend a conference, and when we came back to Paris the following week, I decided to phone Lydia to thank her once again. It was obvious that she was pleased to hear from me and invited us to come over. This time I came with my family but without Valya. It was an amazing evening, and I will relate some of the stories that she told us

below. Her husband did not speak Russian, and after greeting us departed to another room. I never saw him again (although I did speak to him several years later).

When we entered the house, Lydia asked me to return one of the paintings that we found in the cellar. It was a blue painting covered in dust and mud. I must say that my wife and I thought that it might be a Dufy, but nothing definite could be said because of the dust. I intended to clean and restore it once I am back in Israel. It was clear that Lydia was quite nervous about it. She told us that a friend of hers reminded her that in the beginning of 1930s she actually gave her this painting as a present and now she finally would like to have it.

Of course, I told her right away that the painting was in my car's trunk and that I would bring it back immediately. My wife and I did not believe her story about the friend and decided that we were right about Dufy. To Lydia's relief I brought the painting to her. She then took her own painting (a girl in a red hat) from the wall and asked: "What you like to have my girl instead?" We, of course, were happy to oblige.

## **Stories told to us by Lydia Mandel**

### **Mayakovski**

Mandel was very friendly with Vladimir Mayakovski. Her nephew once wrote to her from Moscow that he saw a photo of two of them in Mayakovski's Museum.

Once, Mayakovski came to Paris and of course met with Mandel. They walked along the Champs-Elysees and Mayakovski suggested having coffee in one of the cafes. Lydia remarked that this was a very expensive place and that they better go somewhere else – there were plenty of cafes around and the coffee was the same everywhere. But Mayakovski insisted. "I have the money", he said proudly. When the time had come to pay, Mayakovski handed the waiter a 100-frank bill. At that time, it was a huge sum. The waiter took the bill and left. Mayakovski went pale in the face: in Russia waiters would return the change on the spot without departing with the money. Mandel understood that Mayakovski thought that their coffee cost 100 francs. She decided to tease him and not to dispel his fears and continued chatting nonchalantly. In Paris, waiters do not hurry to bring the change back and usually allow the customers to continue with their conversation for some time. All this time Mandel watched Mayakovski and laughed to herself. Only when the waiter came back with the money, the color returned to Mayakovski's face.

### **Picasso and Leger**

Mandel was surprised that we knew the art of Russian avant-garde well and were familiar with the names of many artists who used to be her friends or acquaintances. Prior to coming to France in 1919 she studied with Ilya Mashkov. In Paris she was especially close to Rochlina (until her death in 1933) and to Robert (1885-1941) and Sonia (1885-1979) Delaunay. Robert Delaunay died quite young, but Sonia was still alive at the time of our conversation. She actually outlived Mandel though she was much older.

I do not remember the stories that she told us about an extremely pushy Sonia. It was a usual tale of someone who tries hard to promote her husband's career (and herself). However, our chat brought us closer. At some point, we touched upon Picasso. I allowed myself to criticize gently his approach to art. Needless to say, Picasso was a great master who possessed astonishing taste, technique and productivity. But I am a scientist, and for me the question of primacy and authorship of ideas and discoveries is important. I have no doubt whatsoever that Picasso borrowed all his main ideas and discoveries from other artists. Among tens or hundreds of styles that he used I know only one style that in my opinion was truly his own, a fruit of his labor and soul. I told her that as gently as I could trying not to spell out the words of sacrilege.

And... to my amazement she agreed with me! I had an impression that she too was afraid of uttering these words, but she told me the following story.

Once during 1920s, she was in a café with Picasso and Leger. Picasso asked Leger when for the last time he walked around Montparnasse. "A very long time ago", answered Leger. "With my school, students and work I don't have much time to hang around". "You are wrong", replied Picasso. "Yesterday, I went on a stroll there, and there were plenty of ideas that you can pick up."

Mandel added that she was shocked. It was clear that he would quickly paint tens of works in the styles that he "picked up" and thus destroy these young artists who had not acquired reputation as yet. She remembered this story after 50 years and shared it with me.

Let me now leave Mandel for a moment and get back to Picasso. Many years later, the Picasso Museum was opened in Paris. There, his personal collection that was kept at his house was put on display for the first time. Among these works, there were no blue or pink paintings or paintings in other styles that he was famous for. What he set aside for himself were works executed in just one style, the same one that I described as his own during my conversation with Mandel.

Besides artists we also talked about other cultural figures. At some point it became clear that she never heard of Bulgakov. His fame had yet to reach France. I promised to send her Master and Margarita and did so once I came back to Israel. She was thrilled and in return sent us a New Year greeting card that she painted by hand.

That was the end of my personal communication with Lydia Mandel. I came back to Paris after two years, in 1978. I phoned Mandel and her husband told me that Lydia had died. She was run over by a car in Nice where they spent their vacation the previous summer. She was in hospital for quite a long time and even painted there a picture for him. She was buried in Nice. I was upset to such extent that I could barely speak. Later, I called him again and asked if I could see her paintings and buy some of them. He remembered me from my previous visit but told me that he did not have her works anymore. I found this explanation odd and thought that I probably misunderstood him due to language problems. I then asked a mathematician friend of mine, Gilles Pisier, to call Mandel's husband once more, explain to him that my English wasn't good enough and inquire about the paintings. In fact, I simply misunderstood the French realities. Apparently, Mandel signed a life care contract with someone (which is quite a common thing in France). This person paid Lydia a fixed sum of money as long as she was alive in exchange for receiving her apartment after her death. Lydia's husband was given one week to vacate the apartment. The new owner treated him well and let him live in a small room for servants for the rest of his life. However, he had to get rid of all her paintings (I think that he never understood what a wonderful artist she was). He called several galleries but the answers were not promising: "No one remembers Lydia Mandel today" or "We'll call London, maybe someone is interested there" (they apparently just tried to bring down the price). However, Lydia's husband could not wait. He loaded all her paintings into a car and took them to the artists' market on Montparnasse. He was "lucky", as he explained to me on the phone: someone passed by, saw the paintings and bought all of them. The paintings were numerous. I remember that they were all over the apartment, not just on the walls. This person probably knew art and could not believe his luck. I think that her husband sold them cheap. Next day he began receiving calls from galleries that were interested in her works and were shocked to find out that they missed out on them.

I wept when I heard this story.

Vitali Milman.