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Kirill Chenkin: The BMC French Instructor Was a Soviet Operative

Chenkin's sudden appearance and abrupt departure in 1940 framed a mysterious interlude in a career that ended as a Soviet dissident and exile

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Figure 1. Kirill Chenkin, Black Mountain College faculty, 1939-1940. Courtesy Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

In January 1940, a young Russian expatriate named Kirill Chenkin applied for a teaching position at Black Mountain College.¹ He was hired, on excellent references, for the remainder of academic year 1939-1940, and by April—in appreciation for his work—his contract was extended through 1940-41. But in December 1940, he resigned on short notice and returned to the USSR, which he had left as a child.

As it later became clear, Chenkin was an operative of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police and intelligence agency. His stint at BMC remains one of the mysteries in a long career: Mary Emma Harris's definitive history of BMC lists Chenkin only as "a Russian who taught languages" as assistant instructor of comparative literature."² New light is shed by his hitherto unpublished faculty file and other documentation in North Carolina archives—as well as contemporary literature and press items. But these new sources also leave some key questions open, as do the varying and often conflicting accounts that Chenkin himself provided over his 92 years (1916-2008) as his constraints changed and his ideology developed. Not least, this essay can offer but a hypothesis, albeit on strong circumstantial evidence, as to why he came to America and the college in the first place, why he left—abruptly, in both cases—and why he gave only partial and sometimes misleading explanations.

On 31 January 1940, Kirill Chenkin, about to turn 24, wrote from New York to Frederick R. Mangold, the secretary of Black Mountain College, to inquire about a teaching position in French or Russian literature or conversational Spanish. He had spoken with John Evarts (who had taught music at Black Mountain College since its inception in 1933), and "the set-up at the college as Mr. Evarts described it appealed to me strongly."

One of the American references that Chenkin suggested was already "trying to get me placed with one of the colleges," but he did not seem in a position to be choosy. Evarts—who was active in fundraising for Black Mountain College—had told him it "is not able at the moment to offer much compensation," and Chenkin was willing to work "for the balance of the year for practically nothing." He provided little information about himself other than having lived in France since the age of nine and having graduated from the Sorbonne as *licencié ès lettres*; he had written about Pushkin and contemporary Russian authors for literary journals and had lectured about Russian

revolutionary poets before “a Russian society.” His Spanish had been “studied” while he was “resident in Spain for nearly two years.”³ He did not specify his present nationality status but stated that “it is certainly my intention to become an American citizen.”⁴ Chenkin told Joseph Martin, an English professor and another of Black Mountain College’s founders who interviewed him in New York on 9 February at Mangold’s request, that the only teaching experience he had, besides coaching fellow students in Paris, was gained from giving French lessons to “an eight-year old Russian kid during the month he’s been in this country.”⁵

Martin found Chenkin “a very pleasant chap, exceedingly courteous in nature and a good conversationalist,” in addition to his academic qualifications. Mangold had already heard favorably from Evarts and replied to Chenkin enthusiastically, pending responses from the references. This however seemed mostly a formality, as the BMC secretary’s “greatest need” was for someone to “relieve me for the rest of the year of two classes in French” (in which, he warned Chenkin, the students “read French with difficulty”). He indicated clearly that if the job, at bed and board only, appealed to Chenkin it was his.⁶ He did write, however, to the references that Chenkin listed. Chenkin apologized that his “financial problem must play so large a part in my life,” which made him ask for “a very small amount for personal expenditures” plus travel fare, as he “couldn’t get along on merely board and lodging.” Yet he eagerly accepted Mangold’s equally apologetic, improved offer of room and board plus \$10 a month. This, the BMC secretary assured him, would go a lot farther in rural North Carolina than in New York. Kirill could, for instance, get his laundry done for 50 cents a week. Most of the BMC faculty were making no more.⁷ Chenkin cabled to Mangold on February 16, even before he received the latter’s formal job offer which was sent the same day, that he was setting out on the overnight bus trip (for which evidently he had found the money). His employment was officially approved at a BMC Corporation faculty meeting only two days after his arrival.

The references were all connected with the Russian-theatrical careers, past and present, of Kirill’s parents. Comedienne Tamara Daykarkhanova was in the troupe—and by some accounts, was the *prima donna*—of the Moscow satiric cabaret The Bat (*Letuchaya Mysh*’, better known by its French name *Chauve-Souris*) when it opened in

1908, initially as an after-show club for the actors of Konstantin Stanislavsky's iconic Moscow Art Theater (MAT). Daykarkhanova was among the troupers who remained in America following the company's tour in 1923.

It was at *The Bat* that Kirill's parents met. They appeared together in productions both of *The Bat* and of its St. Petersburg counterpart, *The Crooked Mirror* (*Krivoie Zerkalo*).⁸ But otherwise they were an odd couple by Tsarist-Russian standards. Victor Chenkin (1882-1944) was one of eight children of a Jewish scrap-iron dealer, Yakov Chenkin, from a small town near Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia. Graduated from a school for railway drivers and working as one, Victor learned to act and sing in amateur drama groups. "My father," Kirill would recall, "sometimes said that acting in the theater is easier than driving a steam locomotive. I have never heard empty words from him about serving great art, though he was a wonderful artist." Having made it onto the professional stage, his talent brought him as far as Stanislavsky's august circle.

Elizaveta Nelidova (1881-1963) was the daughter of a general and the scion of an ancient Russian aristocratic dynasty; her forebears included powerful mistresses of Tsars.⁹ She had already been married to a Polish revolutionary, and had a son, Alexei, named after her father.¹⁰ How she could wed Victor under Tsarist law that barred interfaith marriage and conversion of Christians to Judaism is unclear. He might have been baptized *pro forma*, though much of his subsequent career relied on Yiddish lore and he was warmly received by Jewish audiences worldwide. Such conversion might explain how their son Kirill, born in 1916 in St. Petersburg, was entered in his papers as "Pravoslavnic" (Russian Orthodox)—a registration that would figure significantly in his life story, including BMC.

Kirill's parents were integrated enough into the Russian elite that after the Bolsheviks' "October" Revolution, deposed Prime Minister Aleksandr Kerensky was sheltered "in the Moscow apartment of Elizaveta Nelidova-Khenkina."¹¹ Like Daykarkhanova, Victor Chenkin was allowed in the mid-1920s to go on tour in western Europe with his family. They passed through Berlin and Prague before settling in Paris, but retained Soviet passports. He enjoyed great success, especially in America, as a "diseur" with a one-man show of wide variety in languages, costumes and makeup that went as high as Carnegie Hall and Los Angeles's Philharmonic Hall.¹² Half

a century later, back in the West, Kirill wrote “I constantly meet people who still remember my father.” When Daykarkhanova reported back to Mangold that she had known Kirill “for a long time, both in France and in this country,” she may have meant the half-year he had spent in the States as a boy in 1929-1930 when he and his mother accompanied his father on tour.¹³

Another referee that Kirill suggested was Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, who though meeting him for the first time had “an excellent impression of him... Mr. Chenkin’s personality is serious but pleasant. ... his reaction to what he has heard about BMC augurs well for his being an asset to your community.” She confirmed that “I have introduced him to a number of people” including BMC co-founder Ted Dreier. Mrs. Hapgood was like Kirill a graduate of the Sorbonne (in Russian) 20 years before him. She spent long periods in Russia since her youth before the revolution, when she became the darling of the intellectual and theatrical elite.

Elizabeth was recently widowed of her much older husband, the prominent journalist Norman Hapgood, who had covered Russia before and during the revolution. Like Elizabeth, he was captivated by Stanislavsky (the tours of whose company in the States they promoted and accompanied) and by the *Chauve-Souris*—where they must have met the Chenkins. Elizabeth herself, who pioneered Russian studies at Columbia and Dartmouth, is most remembered as the translator and editor of the MAT director’s writings; she last visited Stanislavsky in Moscow as late as 1937. Norman had accepted a diplomatic appointment in 1919 with the mission of contacting Russian revolutionary representatives, but was recalled after six months, as he was not confirmed by the Senate during the Red Scare due to reports about Bolshevik sympathies.¹⁴ Small wonder that the term “Russian” did not appear in the warm reference that his widow provided for Kirill; though this was clearly their main common denominator she preferred to highlight his French university training, which like others whom Mangold consulted she considered superior to the US equivalent.

Given his theatrical pedigree, Kirill was naturally drawn to the stage. At 18, while still at the Sorbonne, he was reviewed favorably for a “touching” performance at the trendy fringe theater *la Petite Scène*.¹⁵ But if Kirill followed in his father’s theatrical footsteps, politically he was shaped by the mother who in effect raised him while Victor

Chenkin was away on long tours to earn the family's upkeep. Kirill remembered him as "a modest and diligent hard worker, the qualities of a Jewish father and a husband who knows that you can go to your death with a clear conscience if those who trust you are fed every day."

"Lida" Nelidova was more inclined to political activism. "This Russian aristocrat, descendant of a lady-in-waiting ... was of the opinion that the nobility and *intelligentsia* owe an unpayable debt to the long-suffering Russian people, who was now led by the wisest of the wise, Comrade Stalin."¹⁶ Among other Soviet fronts, she was enlisted to run the drama club of the "Union for Return to the Homeland," aimed at arranging repatriation of Russian exiles to the USSR (and obtaining their services abroad) in exchange for rehabilitation by the Soviet authorities. For this she was recruited by her friend, the former monarchist and eager new NKVD recruit Sergei Efron (this was another case of a Jewish intellectual who before the revolution converted to Christianity to marry the poetess Marina Tsvetaeva).¹⁷ Although Kirill was formally not a member of this Union, he would reminisce in his old age, "it took me to Spain and beyond ... everyone from this circle ... came under the care of Sergei Efron," who tasked them with various missions from assassinations to merely reporting the movements of "the Old Man," Stalin's former archrival and now, in exile, his obsessive quarry Leon Trotsky.

At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, as Kirill told Radio Liberty in 1993, "I was a member of the French Komsomol, or rather, the organization of French communist students. I considered myself a profound Marxist, of course, without really understanding anything about it. First of all, I was an anti-fascist, and at that moment it was psychologically difficult for a person of my age and my convictions not to go to Spain." He was turned away at the recruiting office of the International Brigade precisely because of his Soviet passport (Moscow was still feigning neutrality and "there were no Soviets in Spain"). The Chenkins turned to Efron, who set up Kirill's enlistment forthwith. However, "Sergei Yakovlevich told me that anyone can fight in the trenches, but I have to do something 'interesting.' What kind of 'interesting' work it would be, he did not say. My assignment was to get to Valencia, report at the Metropole Hotel, and ask for Comrade Orlov"—the fearsome NKVD chief in Spain.

Kirill postponed his departure until after completing his university courses (wisely, as it turned out, for his acceptance at BMC). Meanwhile he combined political and theatrical activity; having studied ballet, he also made a debut in dance as part of a “ballet trio” in a benefit “concert-ball” at the Palais d’Orsay for a society of expatriates from Odessa.¹⁸ In his latest recorded appearance, on 6 February 1937 for the royalist Union of Russian Pilots (under patronage of a Romanov princess), he shared top billing with the then-celebrated singer Nadezhda Plevitskaya. She had already been recruited as a Soviet agent for penetrating these circles.¹⁹ Such then was the “Russian society” where Chenkin claimed in his BMC application to have lectured; we have not found any of his purported writing in “literary magazines in Paris,” which may have been internal publications of these groups.



Figure 2. Kirill Chenkin in uniform during the Spanish Civil War, as shown by him in this screenshot from a Russian documentary film by Aleksei Shlianin, *White Emigrant International Brigades in Spain*, NTV-MediaMost, 2000.

Efron had stipulated that despite Kirill’s referral to the NKVD *rezidentura* in Spain, he “should cross the border like everyone else.” According to the most detailed of his widely varying versions, Chenkin hiked over the Pyrenees and arrived in Spain on 6 June 1937. He and a comrade he had met on the way were directed to the Dąbrowski Battalion of the International Brigade, which was made up largely of Polish miners and other laborers working in France and Belgium. After barely a day of training at the Brigade’s base at Albacete, they were thrown into battle in the Republicans’ great, failed Huesca offensive on June 12. His companion was killed by one of the first bullets; Chenkin would adopt his name, Benjamin, as his code appellation. With his Dąbrowski comrades he took part in

several more engagements, learning at least in retrospect that the heroic volunteers of the International Brigade were no match for Franco's professional soldiers, but demonstrating what Hapgood cautiously described to Mangold: "what I know of his acts certainly indicates great personal courage and integrity."

Like Kirill's initial caution in attributing his Spanish merely to "two years of residence" in Spain, this reserve could soon be relaxed. The ambience at BMC had been—to say the least—favorable to the Republican cause in the civil war, including its Soviet support. The student body had, after a debate, petitioned the US government to abandon its declared neutrality and aid the Spanish Republic.²⁰ Despite the college's constant financial difficulties, there was a fundraising drive in the Republicans' favor.²¹ The future poet and BMC teacher Robert Duncan was turned away the day after he arrived, a year before Chenkin, on a student scholarship. He wasn't sure whether his rejection was due to his homosexuality (which in fact was hardly unusual at BMC) or to an argument in which he criticized the Republican government from the Anarchist left, but the latter possibility illustrates the prevailing tendency at the college.²²

In the March 1940 number of the BMC Newsletter, the new instructor was introduced as "Mr. Chenkin [who] served for two years in the International Brigade with the Republican forces in Spain."²³ He never disclosed the final, NKVD chapter of his service there, and with good reason. As Mary Emma Harris, author of a foundational book in Black Mountain College studies writes, "its reputation as a Communist community was based solely on its experimental nature and unconventional lifestyle. Ironically, there was often as much Red-baiting going on within the college as outside." One of its leading lights at the time of Chenkin's arrival, BMC's resident artist Josef Albers, "was constantly on the lookout for a potential Communist," and others took care not to arouse suspicion.²⁴

Chenkin had been almost a year in Spain before he made his way to Orlov's headquarters; he would write that this was "not long before [Orlov's] defection to Canada, and from there to the United States"—which occurred in July-August 1938. Arriving in Valencia "dirty, unshaven and hungry," Kirill was struck by Orlov's profligate lifestyle as he interviewed the newcomer while consuming a luxurious breakfast, offering him none. But he was spotted there by Orlov's deputy, the equally redoubtable

Naum, aka Leonid, Eitingon (“General Kotov”) who would take command after Orlov absconded.

This was another of his mother’s connections: she was a close friend of Elizaveta (“Lela”), the Paris based sister-in-law of Naum’s cousin Dr. Max Eitingon, and of Lela’s husband Leonid Raigorodsky.²⁵ Max and his wife Mirra are the subject of our biographical study that led us to the Chenkins in the first place.²⁶ Dr. Eitingon was one of Sigmund Freud’s early followers, a leader and the main financial sponsor of the psychoanalytic movement through the 1920s. He was the singer Plevitskaya’s longtime patron, one of the reasons that Max himself was suspected of collaboration with Soviet intelligence.

Kirill knew about his parents’ connection with these other Eitingons, which probably began at the *Chauve-Souris* in 1908-9 when Mirra’s career peaked as an actress in MAT. It certainly continued in Berlin, where the Eitingons frequently hosted her former Russian colleagues at their posh salon.²⁷ After they moved to Jerusalem, Victor Chenkin wrote an inscription to “my dear Mirra Yakovlevna and Max Yefimovich ... with sincere love and sympathy” in their guestbook while he toured Palestine in February-March 1936.²⁸ The following year, when Mirra came to visit her sister in Paris, she was greeted by the Chenkins at the station and gave her mailing address at the home they had acquired in the upscale suburb of Meudon.²⁹ But Kirill was afraid to ask his boss whether these Eitingons were related to him. Naum/Leonid was, then personally acquainted with Kirill as well as his parents, despite their disparity in rank; “Kotov’s” entire outfit numbered no more than 30.

Once Naum/Leonid Eitingon had taken Kirill Chenkin under his wing, he sent the young recruit for training as a saboteur in the “partisan” (guerilla) teams that the NKVD operated in Spain behind enemy lines.³⁰ Or Eitingon just put to use the training in sabotage that Chenkin had received in the International Brigade, where in other versions of his narrative he claimed to have been sent on such missions as blowing up bridges. Either way, Chenkin claimed a role in real fighting rather than the seamy side of NKVD activity: surveillance, and often grisly murders, of Stalin’s rivals within the Republican camp, including Anarchists and Trotskyites.

But Kirill, as he related in retrospect, knew enough about this by the end of the war to become disillusioned and embittered about the corruption—more than the cruelty—of the Soviet involvement. As he told Radio Liberty, “I came back emotionally greatly changed. For a long time I clung to the main slogans, templates of Marxist behavior. But I was shocked by the behavior of the majority - by no means all, but most - of the Soviet people who came to Spain ... such phenomena as terrible money-grubbing, self-seeking, grabbing things.” This is what he may have alluded to when, in December 1940, he confided in a farewell letter to the college Rector W. Robert Wunsch, “it was a tough moment of my life when I first came to BMC. I had much unorganized, undigested experience in me. I was in a kind of a mess.”³¹ As a former student, Phyllis Josephs Thomas, described shortly after Kirill came to BMC, “he paces around my study like a tiger; seems to be rather nervous and high-strung,” but still she was “talking with Kirill about Spain, Communism, etc. He’s ardently red! Doesn’t believe in too much theorizing but in ‘reality’ as he calls it—which to him, I’m afraid, means fighting.”³² An alternative explanation for Kirill’s “mess” was offered by another student who befriended him, Brewster Elledge, who told Harris that Chenkin was “an alcoholic when he got back [from Spain] and spent six months in a sanitarium before he came to the United States.”³³

The uncorroborated “sanitarium” version might have been a gloss on an internment camp in southern France to which Republican combatants were consigned after their defeat in Spain. Chenkin, however, had been back in Paris in late 1938 or early enough in 1939 to take his final exams at the Sorbonne (as he told Loic Damilaville, a researcher of Russian history who befriended him in his old age). Kirill thus got his degree before the political climate in France changed and it became inhospitable to Kirill’s mother as well as Spanish Republicans. After Efron was implicated in the murder of an NKVD defector in Switzerland, the offices of his Union for Return had been raided by French police in September 1937. But the left-leaning Popular Front government did not pursue the case. It was only after the Front’s collapse that the French attitude toward the USSR hardened. In September 1939 members of the Union and other suspected Soviet agents were rounded up for internment too.³⁴

This may explain why in November both Elizaveta and Kirill were issued immigration visas for the United States at the US consulate in Bordeaux rather than Paris.

At any rate, Chenkin's subsequent career indicates he retained his NKVD connection. His parents too remained committed to the Republican cause, and the Soviet one. In April 1938 Nelidova was still organizing a rally for the "Russian committee to aid the Spanish Republic."³⁵ Victor Chenkin spent most of the Spanish war years in America. His repertoire, originally folkloristic entertainment with a lot of costume and makeup changes, had been turning more and more political. He had already in April 1936 appeared at a Paris event for *Nash Soyuz* (our union), the journal of his wife's Union for Return to the Homeland.³⁶ In March 1938, his American performances in prestigious settings such as Los Angeles's Philharmonic Hall were still billed as "concerts" of "the singing actor, whose character cameos in eight languages have been delighting audiences from Vladivostok to Chicago."³⁷ But at more modest venues, he was lauded mainly by the Communist press for delivering "an intimate recital for the benefit of the friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade" that he gave in New York on 29 April.³⁸ Victor was briefly in Paris from June through September '38, when he held another benefit for families of Spanish Republican fighters.³⁹ By 5 November he was back in New York as a "People's Artist" performing songs of the Red Army, in its uniform, for "a dramatic scene called 'Spain.'"⁴⁰

In March 1939 Victor was still holding events in support of the Lincoln Brigade.⁴¹ Then he faded from media notices till December, when society columns in the Jewish press mentioned briefly that "Victor Chenkin, the great Jewish character singer and dancer, is a very sick man as a result of his automobile accident of last summer"—which had not been reported at the time.⁴² This did not, however, prevent him from booking an appearance in Rochester which was cancelled at the last minute after "it was learned that Victor Chenkin had been stricken with a serious illness."⁴³ That was on 10 December 1939—less than a month before Kirill arrived in New York and his parents' acquaintance Hapgood began "trying to get me placed with one of the colleges." But in applying to BMC he never mentioned that he was not alone in America. Remarkably in view of their records, the arriving-passenger list of the French Line steamer *de Grasse* on 8 January 1940 shows that "Kirille Henkine, student" and

“Elisabeth Henkine, housewife,” arrived on “quota immigrant visas” which had been issued on 29 November in Bordeaux. Whether or not Nelidova was homesick for Russia, as Kirill later claimed, they both declared intent to remain in the States permanently. Mother and son disavowed any intent to overthrow the US government and denied—quite truthfully—that they were anarchists; the list form had no rubric for Communists. With \$12 in his pocket and \$30 in hers, they were going to rejoin father and husband Victor—who had paid for their passage—at the Hotel Ansonia at West 73rd Street and Broadway. It was by then in steep decline from its glory days as the city’s “Palace for the Muses,” but still frequented by respectable musicians and entertainers.⁴⁴

By the time Kirill applied to BMC at the end of January, the Chenkins were settled in four blocks away, at the address that he gave: 315 West 76th St. This was by no means on skid row: the brownstone’s previous tenant was William H. Park, a leading immunologist and epidemiologist known as “the American Louis Pasteur” who had died the previous April. On 27 April 1940, a US census taker recorded both the elder Chenkins there. Victor is listed as a theater singer with a declared income of \$3000 for the previous year. That was more than double the US average and by far the highest among his neighbors, which hardly conforms with his son’s pretense of straitened circumstances (Kirill’s own census listing at BMC the same month gave his income for 1939 as zero).

The census list for Black Mountain Township is one of the few documentary fingerprints that Kirill left during his ten months at BMC. In the fragmentary and varying versions of his life story that he related after leaving the USSR as a dissident, he tended to elide this American interlude entirely. He referred to his family’s homecoming to Russia via the Pacific route as though it were a single, continuous journey and did not include BMC in any of his published or broadcast accounts that we have retrieved. He is not featured in any posed group photos and stayed out of the frame in all the casual pictures from 1940 that we have located in various collections. Kirill kept to himself two photos showing him—in statuesque poses reminiscent of Soviet “socialist realism”—working on BMC’s Lake Eden construction site; he shared them only decades later with Damilaville. No published contemporary memoir found to date so much as mentions Chenkin. But as could be expected, the handsome and debonair figure portrayed in his

file photo, and the allure of a combatant in the much-admired International Brigade, did not go unnoticed among the 20-odd faculty and 80-odd students.⁴⁵



Figure 3. Kirill Chenkin at BMC's Lake Eden construction site, 1940, collection of Loic Damilaville.

On the contrary, he seems to have made quite a splash by flaunting a rather lionized version of his service as well as his political opinions. Phyllis Josephs Thomas, then in her third year as a BMC student, heard from Kirill within a month of his arrival the embroidered version that “he volunteered in the International Brigade in the Polish division *and he was a captain* ... He also said that he fought with Spanish troops, only started off with the International Brigade.” BMC historian Harris confirms that there were rumors swirling about Chenkin, especially after his departure, among the former students that she consulted. These rumors were largely about a Soviet connection, which might explain why none of these stories got into print during the Cold War years. Soon after Chenkin left, BMC came under suspicion and surveillance by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, and in the 1950s prospective lecturers were denied visas because of their association with the Spanish Civil War.⁴⁶ But Chenkin appears to have successfully avoided any such scrutiny despite his openness about Russian contacts—when they were above suspicion.

As Phyllis related,

On our Civic Concert ticket, we went to Asheville to see the Monte Carlo Ballet Russe. Practically the whole College went. Anyhow, it turned out that Kirill knew six or seven members of the company from Paris, and he went backstage and had a rip-rousing time seeing them again and talking Russian a mile a minute [...] Just before the last dance he brought one of his dancer friends and sat down with him right next to the rest of us. They were very much excited about things and talked vociferously in Russian about who such and such was, etc. Kirill introduced us to his friend who was extremely gallant and kept pointing out people to me. Some of these people Kirill hadn't seen for a couple of years and they were much astonished and pleased to see him. It turned out (as he later told me) that he had taken ballet in France, knew a good bit about it, and so got to know these people.⁴⁷

A rare testimony by Chenkin himself to his time at BMC is also an unusual sample of his handwriting and his competent but imperfectly spelled written English. This is an emotional, at times self-contradictory, 4-page personal letter to Wunsch “to tell you, as to my friend, how I feel about everything—you, BMC and the BMC folks.” Kirill added it to a brief, typewritten formal resignation notice on 18 and 19 December 1940, and the rector filed them both in Chenkin's personnel dossier.⁴⁸ “You and Fred [Mangold] are the only ones on the Faculty I really am very fond of and care about,” Kirill wrote to “Bob,” asking him to show the letter to Mangold as “I am not shure [sic] I will write to him a separate letter—two long ones in English is hard for me.” Mangold had—as Martin warned—needed to coach Chenkin on his French instruction, but their association became personal too as Kirill sent “regard” [sic] to Mangold's wife Anne. But he singled out Wunsch to thank him for his “friendship,” as “you, personally, helped me very much. You have been swell”—one of the contemporary slang terms that the linguistically observant Kirill did his obvious if somewhat awkward best to adopt.

This friendship is hardly surprising, as Wunsch was the college's drama guru, who inspired some notable student productions such as—in 1940—a widely acclaimed staging of *Macbeth*. The theatrically experienced Chenkin is conspicuously absent from

this show's program, but did some extracurricular coaching: Brewster Elledge recalled that Kirill encouraged him to put on a clown act at a competition in Black Mountain township. He studied an hour a day with Chenkin for two months to prepare for this four-minute routine, with Kirill preaching that "a clown act is like a symphony orchestra with themes, subthemes, modulations, tempo changes [shades of Stanislavsky?]. You've got to be able to get off before the audience wants you to get off or before the audience realizes that you're through." It worked: Elledge's act was a huge success and he was kept on stage for 20 minutes. After the performance "Kirill and I got drunk, and while we celebrated, we critiqued the whole thing"—so much for the version about rehabilitation from alcoholism.

To Wunsch, though, Chenkin wrote that classroom teaching, even on the informal BMC model, "sometimes almost killed me with acute boredom [sic], and I was mad and thought—to hell with it! I am not a born teacher." Another outlet that he found was practical jokes: after a party while everyone else slept, he and Elledge "took the doors off of every study and put them all in the girls' john. So, when the first people got up ... there wasn't a goddam door in the whole place."

Overall, he confided to Wunsch an ambivalent evaluation of his BMC experience—or rather, a somewhat jaundiced view which he tried to mitigate in parting. "During my being in the college I have been often mad, or annoyed, sometimes bored. Now that I am leaving ... Some people annoyed me strongly. ... I don't want to bother thinking of what has been bad (and there was so little of it) and I think of the wonderful experience I had and the fine people I have met—and feel sad leaving all this behind. I can see clearly and realize how much the positive part of my life in college overbalances the negative moments. I always loved the place.⁴⁹ I disliked a very few people and I liked many of them a lot."

"Overbalance" was another term that Chenkin may have picked up from his mentors. BMC had welcomed a number of Jewish teachers, including European refugees from the Nazis, but as in other sensitive racial and political matters the college was wary of going too far. Coincidentally or otherwise, Wunsch had in 1938 opposed the hiring of an additional Jewish couple and supported the opinion of co-founder Dreier who was "strongly against" taking them in as it would create "an overbalance" of Jews in

the faculty.⁵⁰ In Kirill's case the matter never came up. The only exception throughout his US sojourn was his entry on the passenger list of the *de Grasse*: under "race or nationality," the typewritten "Russian" was crossed out and "Hebrew" was written in. There's no indication that anyone at BMC was aware of his Jewish background at all.

Born teacher or not, Kirill's performance was deemed satisfactory enough—or Mangold needed him enough—for his appointment to be extended, on 11 April, through the rest of the '40-'41 academic year. Mangold also tried to set him up for graduate studies at the prestigious summer French School of Middlebury College, Vermont, which offered him \$75 and upkeep in exchange for waiting on table. On 20 May, though, Chenkin withdrew his application as he could not make "the necessary financial arrangements," while still hoping for a scholarship to attend Middlebury in the summer of 1941—yet another indication (or pretense) that he intended to stay in the States. He appears to have taught instead at BMC's own first summer "institute" in 1940 before continuing in the fall.

As he wrote to Wunsch, Chenkin cherished in particular taking part in the college's major project in 1940, the construction with almost Soviet-style student and faculty labor of its new campus. He described a memorable event in early December:

A sad day for me was the celebration at L[ake] E[den] when we were raising the goddam tree on the roof. I was looking at the BMC folks and how happy they were and I was happy with all of you, but knowing almost for sure that I will never, never see the building achieved, with Schindler and the telescope on top of it, and all the rest of it, all the things I shall never see—I felt badly and knew how much I lived the place and the people in it.⁵¹

Chenkin, then, knew by early December that he was about to leave. His letter conveyed on the one hand eagerness to return to Russia:

A number of things happened during the last week or so and big news awaited me here. But I better tell you the story from the very beginning. About a month ago my parents received a letter from my uncle in Moscow telling that our visas were sent to us and that we could go home to Russia.

The uncle was Vladimir Chenkin, Victor's younger brother (by a year) who had also acted at the *Chauve-Souris* and, having stayed in Russia, became an acclaimed People's Artist on stage and screen. Kirill continued:

I think I have told you that it was the dream of my life to live in my own country with a lot of Russian folk around and all the possibilities offered to a man who lives at home. My folks rushed to the consulate—and the consulate knew nothing about it. A confirmation came from my uncle, and the Russian consulate still knew nothing. So it went on like this for a while. Meanwhile, at BMC I was getting nuts with all the daily [sic] contradictory news from home, trying to keep sane by sticking to my job and not telling anybody about it, as I knew nothing myself. My family did not write to me during the last week of school, waiting for me to come [to New York]. When I was back, I learned that the visas had arrived officially and that we were leaving for Russia on December 27th.

Elsewhere in the same letter, though, he was much less optimistic about returning to the USSR:

Now that I am leaving ... this departure has for me all [the] solemn and final character [sic] of death (as all of my present life is finished and there is no way back).

Stalin's purges were at their height and for many overseas agents a recall was a one-way ticket. The Chenkins must have known that their friend Efron, who had arranged Kirill's NKVD service in Spain, had been summoned to Moscow soon after, following his exposure in the assassination of a defector in Switzerland and was not heard from since. They may have not yet found out that Efron had been arrested.

Whether or not Victor Chenkin was really "very sick"—the students' rumors collected by Harris referred to Kirill's *mother* having been ill—they and Kirill hosted Elledge (who had left BMC after the spring semester) for Christmas in New York. Two days later all three Chenkins were well enough to set out on an arduous rail-sea-rail voyage more than halfway around the globe. At 11 a.m. on 11 January 1941, Kirill cabled to Wunsch from San Pedro, California (the port of Los Angeles): "thanks for friendship. Good luck to you and BMC. Shall write from home." There is no evidence

that he ever did; the telegram is the last document in his personnel file. It was only late in life that he confided to Damilaville that in retrospect, BMC was one of the happiest chapters in his story and a missed opportunity to change course.

In his published account, he wrote only that “we boarded a Swedish steamer somewhere in California and sailed off. 21 days by sea.” The cable’s dateline and the ship’s flag indicate that the Chenkins sailed the same afternoon, 11 January, on the 4,900-ton liner-cum-freighter *Annie Johnson*.⁵² The January issue of the BMC Newsletter reported his resignation “with regret,” noting only that he had lived and studied in France from 1924 to 1939 and dropping the previous mention of Spain. The brief item said he had taught at BMC since “shortly after his *immigration* to the United States,” but “unexpected family reasons necessitated his going to Russia and he is now en route via Vladivostok.”⁵³

Was he a sleeper?

As a ranking officer of MI5, the British counterintelligence agency, put it:

All a counterespionage officer usually has when he confronts his suspect is a background, a trail, a set of coincidences which are open to a variety of interpretations, but which ... lead to the epiphany—that moment when all the facts add up to only one conclusion.⁵⁴

In our inquiry, such a moment was the discovery of an offhand remark about Kirill Chenkin in Phyllis Josephs Thomas’s letter of 10 March 1940: “what he’ll be doing next year he has no idea! He wants to go to Mexico this summer but he has no money.” This was shortly before the ring led by Kirill’s family friend and his former commander in Spain made its first attempt on Trotsky’s life in Mexico. Chenkin is not known to have repeated this disclosure anytime later.

On its own, his yet-indefinite future and the prospect of a trip to Mexico might indeed be interpreted as coincidental—perhaps an opportunity to refresh his Spanish in an inexpensive setting. But this was just the most explicit clue in a series of potential answers to the questions posed by the many inconsistencies in his narrative, as well as the parts he left out. Other interpretations are still possible; Damilaville, who had a first-hand acquaintance with Chenkin, disagrees with our interpretation—which only

increases our appreciation of his collegial sharing of his invaluable factual information. But we find no other plausible explanation for the preponderance of circumstantial evidence.

In his old age Chenkin held that

Our family returned [to the Soviet Union] because my mother insisted on it. There are some special psychological types of people. My mother belonged to an old noble family [and had] a very strong sense of guilt toward, as they say, the common people. I had heard from my mother from early childhood so much nonsense of all sorts about how we, the aristocrats; we, the intelligentsia, were guilty before the Russian people... And she lived with this dream of returning to her homeland: "Let's go there and help."

In 1939, such a voluntary homecoming would have been foolhardy at best for Elizaveta, as she must have known from Efron's example and many others. There may have been an overriding motivation: concern for her first son Alexei, the half-brother whom Kirill never included in his published versions but mentioned to Damilaville. For us, this had special resonance: we found that such services as Max and Mirra Eitingon performed for the Soviets were rendered in tacit or explicit return for the safety and progress of *her* son by a previous marriage. This was the physicist Yuli Borisovich Khariton, who not only survived the purges but went on to become "the father of the Soviet atomic bomb."

Alexei was less fortunate; he had already been sent to the Gulag, which the Chenkins may not have known. Nelidova's association with Efron ostensibly put her and her family in special jeopardy. If she decided to risk it regardless, why did the Chenkins return to the USSR via the United States, spending an entire year there in the process as supposed immigrants? When they left France at the end of 1939, there were much shorter and easier routes still open. The Soviet Union was at peace—and trading briskly—with Nazi Germany, having just carved up Poland between them under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact; the Western front was still a dormant "phony war." Once Victor's wife and son joined him in America, why did he stop his lucrative stage appearances—but stay put for another year? If the purpose of their trip was from the

outset repatriation, why did Kirill tuck himself away in rural North Carolina, claiming as late as mid-October (on a sworn certificate, which was apparently required to permit his continued employment at BMC) that he intended to stay and naturalize in America?⁵⁵



Figure 4. Kirill Chenkin at about age 84. Screenshot of an interview in a Russian documentary film by Aleksei Shlianin, *White Emigrant International Brigades in Spain*, NTV-MediaMost, 2000.

Another key to our hypothesis comes from the American story's end, and here readers must excuse a convoluted digression. San Pedro's shipping-oriented local newspaper ran an exclusive report that the *Annie Johnson* was inaugurating a new cargo route to Sweden via Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway; the shorter Baltic route had been blocked when Germany attacked and conquered Denmark and Norway. The ship's passengers were—or included—"31 Russians ... All have been employees in the United States of Amtorg. ... Reports that more of the men were high executives of Amtorg could not be verified."⁵⁶

Amtorg (short, in Russian, for American trading) was the Soviet commercial agency based in New York. According to Naum/Leonid Eitingon's longtime colleague in NKVD "special operations," then-future Gen. Pavel Sudoplatov, he reported to Stalin that Amtorg provided the cover for the elaborate network that Kirill's former boss in Spain set up for his next and best-known exploit: the Trotsky assassination.⁵⁷ The Chenkins' rendezvous with Amtorg ties them in with this scheme.

In addition to "machinery," Amtorg had in 1940 been buying market-busting quantities of shoe-quality leather—one of the commodities traded by the Eitingon clan's international firm, better known for the fortune it made from its near-monopoly on Soviet fur exports. Its New York-based head Motty Eitingon—a cousin and sometime brother-in-law of "our" Dr. Max—has cropped up in Soviet intelligence records in connection with a passport-forging ring.⁵⁸ Naum/Leonid Eitingon would have needed new papers when after the Trotsky assassination and a decent interval in Cuba, he returned to New York. But we are getting ahead of the story.

"General Kotov" had been recalled, after Spain, to Moscow but was *not* purged (that would happen only after Stalin's death, but he survived in jail and was ultimately rehabilitated). On the contrary, he was entrusted with developing and implementing the Trotsky plan. As Kirill Chenkin learned (almost certainly long after the fact), preparations had begun under Orlov in Spain. Eitingon inherited the project from him there, and recruited the two central figures in the plot: his reputed Catalan mistress, Caridad Mercader, and her son Ramón, who would ultimately dispatch Trotsky with an ice pick.

According to Sudoplatov, Eitingon's elaborate blueprint required a huge budget of \$300,000, which NKVD boss Lavrenty Beria told him "not to worry about." He was authorized to use his family connections in America, which is where Motty Eitingon fitted in. He had long been involved in overt, as well as covert, pro-Soviet activities, and in some of them had already crossed paths with the Chenkins. Thus Victor Chenkin's Carnegie Hall appearances included as early as 1929 a benefit for "Jewish Colonization in Soviet Russia," a cause to which Motty had already subscribed.⁵⁹ Now, Naum/Leonid needed his cousin Motty's expertise and contacts to set up a legally registered export-import company in Brooklyn, which would employ Ramón Mercader as its agent in Mexico and enable him to move to and from meetings with Naum/Leonid in New York.

General Eitingon was also given *carte blanche* to enlist and preposition anyone who might be useful for the operation. This appears to explain a strange episode in our research about Max Eitingon, and also indicates Kirill Chenkin's involvement.

In July 1939, Naum/Leonid was sent back to Paris to reconnect with the Mercaders and proceed with them to America. Caridad and Ramón did sail in August, but a problem arose with the false Polish papers that Eitingon had traveled on: on 1 September Germany invaded Poland, France declared war, and Polish citizens living there were either interned or recruited for Polish-exile units in the French army. Until Eitingon could switch identities, he was committed, as a mentally ill Syrian Jew unfit for military service, to a psychiatric hospital where the chief doctor was a Russia émigré. Bribery got him a French passport on this Syrian identity and shady Swiss connections secured a US visa, with a photo showing a genuine beard and mustache that Eitingon had grown. This got him into New York in October 1939, where he connected with Motty—and presumably, with Victor Chenkin as he had in Paris with Elizaveta; the following month, she and Kirill were issued their US visas in Bordeaux.

Having a compliant psychiatrist on hand in case of need to maintain the “Syrian” patient's status might explain a bizarre incident in March-April 1940. High-powered lobbyists were brought to bear on the US State Department to issue a “non-immigrant” visa for Max Eitingon, ostensibly in order to lecture to American psychoanalytic audiences. His “family of considerable means” in the States—that is, Motty—would ensure Max's “care and support.” The US consul in Jerusalem was surprised by the pressure, as he had already issued the visa—but finally Dr. Eitingon did not go, pleading suddenly that he could not interrupt his work; his utility for the Trotsky plot had evidently expired.⁶⁰

Likewise, Kirill Chenkin's expertise in explosives and his underground experience appears to have been put in readiness by his former commander. In both cases these stand-by reservists certainly were uninformed of the purpose; elements of the anti-Trotsky network were strictly compartmentalized, from one another as well as from the NKVD's other operatives, up to the *rezidents* themselves. This can explain how even after Vladimir Chenkin was prompted to inform his brother Victor of the family's invitation back to Moscow, the consulate in New York did not know about it.

In May, a first attempt on Trotsky—a drive-by machinegunning—failed. Mercader’s second try, in August, succeeded. Ramón was caught, interrogated at length and jailed; as he maintained his false identity, his mother and Eitingon could escape to Cuba and then to New York. Naum/Leonid then began a gradual and cautious withdrawal, at intervals, of his network members who had not been activated or exposed, such as the Amtorg personnel. It was only at this stage, we consider, that the Chenkins were in early December put on alert to leave (hence Kirill’s silent forebodings at the roof-raising party). At the middle of the month, while he was on semester break in New York, they were instructed to pull up stakes and go west. Neither illness nor nostalgia was more than a cover story, as had been the immigration pretense that was now ditched. The ringleader, Naum/Leonid, brought up the rear with Caridad; they too traveled across the continent and, a month after the Chenkins, sailed from the West Coast to Shanghai, successfully using the new papers they got in New York. By May all were in Moscow. In June Germany attacked the Soviet Union, and the *Annie Johnson’s* route to Vladivostok was ended.⁶¹

From operative to dissident

Ironically, Kirill’s first job in the USSR bore the same title that he held at BMC: instructor in French.

Arriving in Moscow by rail from Vladivostok in the “desperate, post-California cold” of February 1941, Kirill learned from former comrades in Spain that Efron had been shot. His own family, however, was not affected (though his mother was ultimately induced to sign over the house in Meudon to the Soviet state). Eitingon went on to other assignments in the Middle and Far East, but evidently saw to the safety of his recruits. Kirill was drafted into one of the hastily assembled army brigades. But at the height of the German offensive that began in June, Kirill was recognized by a former NKVD overseer of the arts as “the nephew of the favorite of the Soviet public, the famous comedian, People’s Artist of the Republic Vladimir Yakovlevich Khenkin” (Victor Chenkin, now overshadowed by his illustrious brother, was sent with morale-boosting entertainment troupes to soldiers at the front. He died before the war’s end).

Kirill was coopted to assist in preparing safe houses, weapons caches and sabotage charges for “partisan” resistance in Moscow when, as by October was expected, it would be abandoned and captured. Now included in the NKVD’s Special Motorized Rifle Brigade that was intended to stay behind in the city, on 9 November he marched in the historic Revolution Day parade in Red Square; most of the units went straight to the front in the outskirts of the city. But his outfit stayed to defend the center and the Kremlin.

Moscow held out, and in January-February Kirill was sent to a radio operators’ course. Most of the graduates went to “partisan” groups in the German-occupied areas. But his ability to pass for a Frenchman got him assigned to an elite cadre of agents destined for service “in the very deep rear” of the Germans. Here his comrades and mentors were named Willy Fischer and Rudolf Abel. In 1957 a top Soviet spy who identified himself as Abel was arrested in New York, and three years later was famously exchanged for U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers who had been shot down over the USSR. Chenkin would make his best-remembered contribution to intelligence history years later in a book that revealed this was actually Fischer who had assumed Abel’s identity.

There are conflicting versions as to why Kirill did not go with his intended assignment, a team that was sent to reinforce Tito’s partisans in occupied Yugoslavia (and were all captured and executed). Kirill attributed this “miracle” to both an intervention by his powerful uncle with the military commander of Moscow and a recommendation from his mother’s neighbor, a teacher of Portuguese at the newly created Military Institute of Foreign Languages. Either way, as at BMC, “I was enrolled as a first-year student at the Institute with the duties of a French language instructor.” This led, soon after the war’s end, to employment as a translator and commentator on the French service of Radio Moscow, “shoveling,” as he later put it, “s*** from one language to another,” as well as part-time work for *New Times* magazine in foreign languages. Kirill thought his relationship with the NKVD was over.

However, at the height of Stalin’s final anti-Semitic paroxysm in 1952, when “the country was being prepared for the case of ‘killers in white coats’ [the “doctors’ plot,” in which Jewish physicians were accused of conspiring to murder Stalin] and an all-Union

pogrom,” he was again summoned for an interview, apparently to enlist him as an informer. He consulted his mother how to handle this situation, and their plan worked.

The interviewer knew all about his service in Spain, down to his alias Benjamin, but Kirill surprised him by volunteering that he was Jewish. He realized only 20 years later that had he been not such “a clearly assimilated Jew,” he might have been suitable for undercover posting to Israel. But the recruitment attempt was not repeated. After 20-odd years at the radio, during which he married his colleague Irina Kanevskaya, he was in 1965 still trusted enough to be posted in Czechoslovakia for work with the magazine *Problems of Peace and Socialism*. The departure from Moscow was eased by the death of Kirill’s mother two years before.

Whether or not his resentment of the Soviet system had begun to accumulate in Spain, the open break came after the Warsaw Pact’s armed intervention to suppress the “Prague Spring” in 1968:

On the fifth day of the occupation, for [displaying] the wrong attitude to this gesture of “fraternal help” and for behavior unworthy of the Soviet people, my wife and I were given two hours to get ready and sent home. We hardly spoke in flight. We sat holding hands. ‘I swear we will leave this damned country.’ I had no idea how we would get out of the Soviet Union. But ... after Prague, I realized that even as a simple translator, though highly regarded and highly paid, I was an accomplice. I didn't want to be one anymore.

Using his rediscovered Jewish identity, Kirill and Irina applied for authorization to leave for Israel. The visas were twice granted and revoked at the last minute. Writing later for a Russian-language Israeli journal, Kirill asserted that 60 percent of immigrants from the USSR had previously signed commitments “to work honestly with Soviet intelligence”—presumably based on his own experience of being pressed to make such a pledge.⁶² Meanwhile he became active both in Jewish “refusenik” circles and dissident human rights activism.⁶³ Chenkin’s proficiency in English and French made him a natural spokesman and liaison for both groups with the foreign press and visiting Western dignitaries.⁶⁴ He and Irina were among the Jews who signed a petition to the US Congress to support the exit of Soviet Jews, which Kirill helped to transmit.⁶⁵ Nobel

laureate and leading dissident Andrei Sakharov's memoir mentions him favorably as the first to arouse the great physicist's skepticism about the Soviet role in Spain.⁶⁶

The Chenkins were finally allowed to leave, on two days' notice, in September 1973. The arrival on 4 October of this "Radio Moscow Commentator for 20 years" was noted only briefly in the Israeli media.⁶⁷ Two days later, as they began to attend an *ulpan* (Hebrew language course) in Tel Aviv, Egypt and Syria launched the Yom Kippur War against Israel with Soviet support. This would be the subject for one of Chenkin's first commentaries as a correspondent for the US-sponsored Radio Liberty. Having naturalized in Israel upon arrival, in February 1974 he was invited by the American Union of Councils for Soviet Jews for a speaking tour in America, where he was billed as "formerly one of the Soviet Union's most prominent Jews."⁶⁸ But the Israeli/Jewish chapter did not last long. In 1975 the Chenkins moved to Radio Liberty's base in Munich, where both worked full-time till retirement in the 1980s and continued guest appearances afterward.⁶⁹ Damilaville, who had long talks with Kirill during this period, reports that he was close to an Orthodox priest, especially after Irina died. Kirill himself died at age 92, in 2008 in Munich. In a eulogy, while rebroadcasting some of Chenkin's commentaries, a Radio Liberty editor said: "he wrote and uttered so many harsh and unpleasant things for some people, gave such impartial characterizations, did not regret offending so many sensitive souls, that he himself was rejected by many."

At Radio Liberty Kirill was doing well enough to have a retirement home in Monaco.⁷⁰ An interview he gave there in 1985 was a rare published instance in which he mentioned BMC, when it turned out that the interviewer was studying Thomas Wolfe, a native of Asheville who had died shortly before Chenkin's arrival there.⁷¹ His reticence about a life chapter that for many others was a matter of pride might have been due to regrets about his NKVD service—for which BMC apparently provided a haven while awaiting orders.

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The account of Kirill Chenkin's biography, except where otherwise attributed, is assembled from statements in his book *Hunter Upside Down* (Russian, *Okhotnik vverkh nogami*, Frankfurt/Main: Posev, 1980; French, *L'espionnage sovietique : le cas Rudolf Abel*, Paris: Fayard, 1982) and programs in the Radio Liberty archive (list at <https://www.svoboda.org/s?k=%D0%A5%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD&tab=all&pi=1&r=any&pp=10>), especially an interview from 1993 that was rebroadcast on Chenkin's 100th birthday, 22 February 2016: Recording at <https://soundcloud.com/radio-svoboda/dsxstfqsbdog>, transcription at <https://e11enai.livejournal.com/40739.html>.

- ¹ There are several spelling variants of the surname in Latin characters, e.g., Khenkin, Henkine. "Chenkin" is used here, except in direct quotations, because Kirill used it at BMC.
- ² Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987, pp. 53, 266.
- ³ Mangold was presumably unaware that *rezident* is the Soviet term for an intelligence bureau chief, but Chenkin's use of the term, though rich, was probably accidental as he never held this title.
- ⁴ Kirill Chenkin (KC) to Mangold, 31 January 1940. All letters to and from BMC, unless otherwise noted, are in KC's faculty file at WRA/SANC.
- ⁵ "Joe" (Joseph Martin) to "Fred" (Mangold), 10 February 1940.
- ⁶ Mangold to KC, 5 February 1940. Mangold, whose PhD was in Spanish, was in addition to his work as instructor in Romance Languages, serving as Secretary of the BMC Corporation and member of its Board of Fellows. Abstract, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Rogers Mangold Papers, PC.1520, NC Western Regional Archives, https://axaem.archives.ncdcr.gov/findingaids/PC_1520_Mr_and_Mrs_Frederick_.html
- ⁷ Room and board alone was then the normal compensation for BMC instructors. Anne Chesky Smith and Heather South, *Black Mountain College*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2014, p. 8.
- ⁸ John E. Bowlt *et al.*, "Cabaret," *Experiment* vol. 12. Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp. 10n, 12n, 289n.
- ⁹ Simon Sebag *The Romanovs: 1613-1918*. New York: Vintage, 2016, *passim*.
- ¹⁰ As told to Loic Damilaville. Kirill rarely if ever mentioned this publicly.
- ¹¹ Richard Abraham, *Alexander Kerensky : the first love of the revolution*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 337.
- ¹² "3 Musicians Appear in Benefit Concert: Toscha Seidel, Victor Chenkin and Mischa Levitzki Heard in Carnegie Hall," *New York Times*, 5 November 1934; "Stellar Events on Philharmonic's List," *San Bernardino Sun*, 1 March 1938.
- ¹³ Valleri J. Hohman, *Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America, 1891-1933*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 94. The US census of 1930 listed the three Chenkins as living in Manhattan.
- ¹⁴ Norman E. Saul, "Zenaida Ragozina and Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood: Two remarkable Russian-American women," in *Russian/Soviet Studies in the United States, Amerikanistika in Russia*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 35-37.
- ¹⁵ Reviews of a double one-acter program, in which "Henkine" acted Kalekairi (a young, female Turkish slave, who "was not born for the mean place she fills") in Alfred de Musset's comedy *Barberine*, alongside the company's co-founder Marie-Ange Rivain. *La Comoedia* (Paris), 26 May 1934.
- ¹⁶ "Khenkin, Kirill Viktorovich," in Viktor Fain and Sergey Vershinin, *Taganrogsskie Sabsovichi I ikh potomki: Opyt genealogicheskogo issleddovaniya*. Moscow: Triumf, 2013, pp. 171-172.
- ¹⁷ Ariadna Efron, *No Love Without Poetry: The Memoirs of Marina Tsvetaeva's Daughter*. Northwestern University Press, 2009, pp. 15, 274-275.
- ¹⁸ Josephs Thomas letter: "he... told me that he had taken ballet in France [and] knew a good bit about it." His appearance was on 12 December 1936. Lev Mnuhkin, ed., *L'Emigration Russe: Chronique de la vie scientifique, culturelle et sociale, 1920-1940, France*. Paris: YMCA-Press, 1995, v. 3, pp. 257-8.
- ¹⁹ *L'Emigration Russe*, v. 3, p. 280. Plevitskaya and her husband, a former White general in the Russian Civil War, were tasked to penetrate the Paris-based White officer's organization. In September they would be implicated in the abduction to the USSR of the organization's head; Plevitskaya's husband disappeared and she was sentenced to prison, where she would die in 1940. The affair was immortalized in Vladimir Nabokov's novella *The Assistant Producer*.
- ²⁰ Harold B. Raymond (then a new student, who was in attendance throughout Chenkin's tenure), "The other Black Mountain" in Mervin Lane, ed., *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds: An Anthology of Personal Accounts*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991, p. 77.

- ²¹ Leaflet found in Ted Dreier's file. Western Regional Archives, North Carolina State Archives, Asheville, North Carolina (hereinafter WRA/SANC), Private Collections, Theodore and Barbara Dreier, BMC Project Collection 1925-1988, series. BMC Oversize materials: Scrapbook 1937-1938, Pc. 1956.78. Oversize); quoted in Ana Gilsanz, José Parra, María Elia Gutiérrez, "Black Mountain College: An Irresistible Agenda," <https://archives.cl/en/black-mountain-college-an-irresistible-agenda/#1552458316592-55b3c07a-90505e53-2390>
- ²² There are several versions of this episode, all referring to the Spanish context. Robert Duncan, "Black Mountain College," *Appalachian Journal* 44:3-4-45:1-2 (2017/2018), pp. 266-270; *idem*, "Black Mountain College, March 1955," Robert Duncan Papers, quoted in Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: "The Poetry of Politics, The Politics of Poetry," in Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf, eds., *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, Stanford University Press, 2003. p. 7; "Robert Duncan at Black Mountain College," *Black Mountain Research*, <https://black-mountain-research.com/2015/02/27/robert-duncan-at-black-mountain-college/>. One version specifies that Duncan defended a guest couple's criticism of the "Stalinist betrayal." Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan*. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1984, p. 63.
- ²³ BMC Newsletter #7, March 1940, p. 4, <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p249901coll44/id/565/>
- ²⁴ Harris, *Arts at BMC*, p. 54.
- ²⁵ Leonid Raigorodsky's father Nikolai, like the Chenkins from Rostov, owned an iron foundry. He thus must have known, and probably did business with, Kirill Chenkin's father, the scrap-iron dealer Yakov. In Paris, the Raigorodskys were neighbors of Plevitskaya and he sheltered her before her arrest.
- ²⁶ Ginor and Remez, "Her Son, the Atomic Scientist: Mirra Birens, Yuli Khariton, and Max Eitingon's Services for the Soviets," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 11:1, 2012.
- ²⁷ On 30 December 1926 they took Freud to see a performance of *Der Fledermaus*, as the visiting troupe was called in German. Chrisfried Tögel, *Freud und Berlin*. Berlin: Aufbau, 2006, p. 85.
- ²⁸ Victor Chenkin, inscription in Max Eitingon's guestbook, Jerusalem, 1 March 1936, photo in authors' collection.
- ²⁹ Telegram from Max to Mirra Eitingon, c/o Chenkin, 10ter rue *Hérault*, Meudon, 25 June 1937. Israel State Archive, file P-3234/3.
- ³⁰ Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*. London: Hachette UK, 2012, p. 230.
- ³¹ Handwritten letter, KC-Wunsch, 18 December 1940.
- ³² Letter from Josephs Thomas to her mother, 10 March 1940, WRA/SANC, kindly shared by Loic Damilaville..
- ³³ Brewster Elledge interviewed by Mary Emma Harris, Summer 1987, Merritt, North Carolina. By permission of Black Mountain College Project.
- ³⁴ John Glad, ed., *Conversations in exile: Russian writers abroad*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 282-283.
- ³⁵ *Le Peuple*, 7 May 1938; *L'Emigration Russe*, v. 3, p. 449.
- ³⁶ *L'Emigration Russe*, v. 3, p. 489.
- ³⁷ Alfred Price Quinn, "Music," *B'nai B'rith Messenger* (Los Angeles), 11 March 1938
- ³⁸ *New York Daily Worker*, 2 May 1938.
- ³⁹ *L'Emigration Russe*, v. 3 pp. 472, 476, 493.
- ⁴⁰ Martin McCall, "No pasaran! Victor Chenkin, Peoples' Artist, At Town Hall," *Daily Worker*, 12 November 1938.
- ⁴¹ *Daily Worker*, 9 March 1939.
- ⁴² Phineas J. Biron, "Strictly Confidential," *The Sentinel* (Chicago), 28 December and *B'nau B'rith Messenger* (Los Angeles), 29 December 1939.
- ⁴³ Rochester, NY *Democrat Chronicle*, 8 December 1939; Paula Peters, "Between you and me," *The Reform Advocate* (Chicago), 24 November 1939.
- ⁴⁴ New York, New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957, pp. 191-192, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-95F1-9VT8?i=191&cc=1923888>; Steven Gaines, "The Building of the Upper West Side," *New York Magazine*, 6 May 2005.

⁴⁵ This was BMC's second-highest population ever, before the draft almost emptied it of male students. Graph in Lucy Burns, "'Creative Writing [...] has a place in the curriculum': Robert Wunsch at Black Mountain College, 1933-43," JBMCS 11, <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume-11/>.

Another veteran of the Spanish Civil War, Fernando Leon, attended BMC in 1940 with his brother Francisco, but he had been a mechanic in the Republican Air Force.

⁴⁶ Philip Gerard, "Learning, the Black Mountain Way," decades series, <https://www.ourstate.com/learning-the-black-mountain-way/>; Harris, *Arts at BMC*, p. 168.

⁴⁷ The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, one of two competing successors of Diaghilev's iconic Ballets Russes, had relocated to America—where it had toured before—after the outbreak of war in September 1939. There were later objections to its use of Soviet-origin choreography, but none about the dancers personally. Jack Anderson, *The one and only: the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*. New York: Dance Horizons, 1981, p. 113. Asheville's new, 3200-seat auditorium, built with PWA funding and public subscription, had just been inaugurated with "huge ceremony" and was considered a model for towns of Asheville's population (50,000). Francis P. Kimball, "Asheville's Auditorium Shows Albany the Way," *Knickerbocker News*, 28 August 1940.

⁴⁸ Leaving this record appears to rule out any homosexual connection between them (much later, Wunsch had to resign after being exposed off campus). Indeed, Elledge told Harris that he and Chenkin "had in common their dislike of college homosexuals, particularly John Evarts"—despite the latter's role in hiring Chenkin. Kirill was later married—by all accounts, happily.

⁴⁹ Kirill's wording. We take it to mean "shared the life of BMC," a literal translation of a Russian expression.

⁵⁰ Stephen J. Whitfield, "Black Mountain and Brandeis: Two Experiments in Higher Education," *Southern Jewish History* 16 (2013), p. 141, quoting a letter from Wunsch to Anna Moellenhoff, July 27, 1938. Chenkin's Jewish heritage, which was not entered in any of his documents, does not appear to have been an issue or even mentioned at BMC despite his father's considerable renown for Yiddish repertoire.

⁵¹ This festivity to mark the completion of BMC's new building is dated in December; Harris, *Arts at BMC*, p. 60. As suggested by Carissa Pfeiffer, "Schindler" probably refers to Mark Schindler, who attended BMC briefly and became an aerospace engineer.

⁵² Shipping lists in the *San Pedro News Pilot*, 9 and 10 January 1941.

⁵³ "Chenkin Resigns," BMC Newsletter, January 1941, <https://blackmountaincollegeproject.org/PUBLICATIONS/BMCN/BMCN%2011%20JANUARY%201941/BMCN%2011%20JANUARY%201941.htm>.

⁵⁴ Peter Wright, *Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer*. New York: Viking, 1987, p. 300.

⁵⁵ North Carolina certificate #1431, sworn to on 15 October 1940, citing declaration of intent #470312, Southern District of New York. Kindly shared by Thomas Frank.

⁵⁶ "New Freight Traffic to Sweden Revealed," *San Pedro News Pilot*, 10 January 1941. The ship's accommodations were classy enough for Greta Garbo on a 1933 trip (same paper, 1 May 1933).

⁵⁷ The following account of the Trotsky assassination plot is based on Sudoplatov's memoir *Spetsoperatsii Lyubianka I Kreml 1930-1950*. Moscow: Olma-Press, 1998, pp. 112-120.

⁵⁸ John Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *The Vassiliev Notebooks Concordance*, pp. 47, 59, 84, citing KGB file 35112, vol. 9, p. 213. The Wilson Venter Digital Archive, 2009, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113863>

⁵⁹ "ICOR Concert: Famous International Balladist and singer," Advertisement in *The Daily Worker*, 17 May 1929; "Dinner to Consider Russian Colonization Plan," New York, 5 November 1927, Archives of The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). In 1936 Motty was on an American Committee for the Settlement of Jews in Biro-Bidzhan. Bulletin of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 31 July 1936, JDC Archives

⁶⁰ Correspondence 20 March-19 April 1940 in Eitingon collection, Israel State Archive, Jerusalem, file P-2974/4 and US National Archive, Washington, file 811.111: Max Eitingon.

⁶¹ Egon Breiner, "An Austrian in Exile." by Peter Breiner. Max Kade Center for German-American Studies, March 2004

<https://maxkade.ku.edu/sites/maxkade.drupal.ku.edu/files/images/general/Newsletters/MKC2004a.pdf>. In the theatrical context of this story, it bears mention that among the passengers on the ship's final eastward run was Bertolt Brecht, who threw his texts of Marx and Lenin overboard before disembarking at San Pedro. James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*. Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 314–338.

- ⁶² Igor Golomstock: *A Ransomed Dissident: A Life in Art under the Soviets*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018, ch. 20.
- ⁶³ Elizabeth de Mauny, "The Winter Years of Nadezhda Mandelstam," *New York Times*, 7 February 1982.
- ⁶⁴ In April 1973 he was in a refusenik group who met after midnight in a side street with US Senator Howard Cannon. *Davar* (Tel Aviv), 25 April 1973.
- ⁶⁵ US Congress, *The Role of the Export-Import Bank and Export Controls in U.S. International Economic Policy*, Washington, 1974, p. 566.
- ⁶⁶ Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs*. New York: Vintage, 1992, pp. 30, 389.
- ⁶⁷ *Maariv* (Tel Aviv), 26 and 30 September 1973.
- ⁶⁸ "Soviet Activist Khenkin In LA as a Spokesman," *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, 1 February 1974.
- ⁶⁹ Radio Liberty-Culture News, 26 February 2001, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24107235.html>
- ⁷⁰ Gaither Stewart, "Il Sogno di Gorbaciov Spacca Radio Liberty," *La Repubblica*, 23 August 1985, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1985/08/23/il-sogno-di-gorbaciov-spacca-radio-liberty.htm>
- ⁷¹ *Idem*, "Thomas Wolfe In Asheville: 'Surely he had a thing to tell us,'" *Southern Cross Review* 27, 2003, <https://southerncrossreview.org/27/wolfe.htm>