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Pell Correspondence (1985-1992): Memorandum 02

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M E M O R A N D U M

November 7, 1985

TO: Senator
FROM: ADC
RE: Request from friend of Michael Werboff

The attached letter is from a friend of Michael Werboff who is asking that you join a committee to promote an exhibit of Werboff paintings in Washington.

Mr. Sotirovich called today for your reply. I was unable to learn much more about his project except that there is no committee yet. You are the first person being approached. He said he may also ask Senator Goldwater.

Since his letter clearly says that the committee will promote an exhibition, I doubt that your involvement would end by lending your name only.

I recommend steering clear of this one but if you want to do Werboff another favor you should lend NAME ONLY.

Werboff has called a number of times recently to ask if you have received a reply from John Brademas. You wrote him asking a favor for a friend of Werboff's who wants to live in NYU faculty housing. I have not seen a reply come in.

Decline committee role _____

Lend name only _____

Discuss further _____



Spoke to Sotirovich on phone - said I'd
pls do a note to him to this effect.

*MR. William V. Sotirovich
4 WASHINGTON Sq. Village
NY NY 10012*

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of America

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No. 96

Senate

MICHAEL A. WERBOFF: PAINTER OF KINGS

Mr. PELL. Mr. President, a recent article in the New York Times profiled the life and career of a very dear and longtime friend, Michael A. Werboff. Much of his life has been devoted to the fine art of portrait painting and, at the age of 88, he is as active and prolific as ever. In fact, just last year he traveled to India at the invitation of the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to paint a very distinctive full-length portrait of her. This work has been added to a long list of fine Werboff portraits of presidents, performing artists and royalty including many maharajahs.

His style of painting is in the classical mode and he can capture the characters of his subjects with startling clarity and insight. I have been a great admirer of Michael Werboff's work for many years and value his friendship immensely. The story of his rich life is a fascinating one which began in Russia in the last century. I would respectfully urge my colleagues to read of Michael Werboff's long career as a "painter of kings" and ask unanimous consent that the article from the New York Times of Sunday, July 14, 1985, be printed in full in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the article was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the New York Times, July 14, 1985]

AT 88, PAINTER OF KINGS IS STILL BUSY

When Michael Alexander Werboff sits down in his rent-stabilized apartment in upper Manhattan, kings, queens and maharajahs surround him.

Perhaps the most imposing in the gatherings is Athenagoras I, an ecumenical patriarch of Istanbul, with his jeweled cross and flowing white beard. But all around him in the living room of the Cathedral Parkway apartment some of the most prominent, political, cultural and religious figures of the century vie for attention.

Athenagoras and most of the others are long dead, but Mr. Werboff, an 88-year-old Russian-born artist, continues his career, surrounded by the oil portraits that are his life's work.

"That is the Grand Duke Dmitri, one of the killers of Rasputin," he said, pointing to a drawing in the corner with a steady finger.

"He was wonderful. One of the nicest, most simple, most amusing men."

WORKS IN MANY MUSEUMS

Mr. Werboff's dark, cluttered apartment, where he does most of his work, is across the street from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The apartment is stuffed with canvases, tubes of paint and the relics of a lifetime spent painting an electric range of people in Europe, Asia and the United States.

Mr. Werboff said he was the only living artist who has a painting hanging in the Prado museum in Madrid, his portrait of the 17th Duke of Alba. He also has paintings in the permanent collections of such museums as the Metropolitan Museums of Art, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington and the Tretyakoff Gallery in Moscow.

Mr. Werboff has painted five kings, as well as poets, priests, presidents, opera singers, other artists, a maharajah of Patiala and every signer of the Declaration of Independence. The signers were his only portraits not done from life.

"They are the only complete set of drawings of the signers scientifically researched and classically drawn," the artist said proudly, "and I read every biography ever written about them." The project took him four years and was completed in time for the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations.

A VISIT TO INDIA

Perhaps the most notable of his recent projects is a full-length portrait of Indira Gandhi, which he completed in New Delhi last year, six months before her assassination. "I was treated not like a prince, but like a king," he said of his visit.

"I stayed for two and a half months," he added. "I liked her very much. She had two completely different parts in her face. Enormous black eyes, very strong, and a very feminine mouth. I told her, 'It's just like having Caesar and Cleopatra in the same face.'"

He resists the term émigré, preferring to be called simply an American artist. "I fell in love with this country right away," he said, recalling his 1933 arrival in New York. He recently received an award from the U.S.O. for 100 portraits of servicemen drawn for their mothers during World War II.

"I only did it for the mothers," the artist, who has never married, said with a chuckle. "Wives and sweethearts are a passing fancy, sometimes."

RUSSIAN REVOLUTION RECALLED

Mr. Werboff is the last surviving pupil of the renowned Russian realist painter Ilya Repin, and he still paints in the classical tradition of the Russian Silver Age, that final flowering of the arts before the Revolution. In 1917, he was 20 years old and a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. He was at a party, he recalled, when the Bolsheviks gained control.

"We were having a celebration," he said. "A big party for the students. And suddenly, we were told that we could not leave, because the bridges were separated and there was shooting in the streets. And so, for three days, we stayed inside, having a wonderful time. Then, when we got out, we saw the proclamations of the Soviet Government taking over."

As the first vice president of the American Artists Professional League, a nationwide organization with almost a thousand members, for more than 20 years, he has been

conducting what he called a "very friendly, but very persistent fight" with the National Endowment for the Arts.

According to Mr. Werboff, the endowment "has become a private welfare fund for the avante-garde contingency of American art" at the expense of other artists. He contended that "all branches of art should be judged on an equal footing" and financed by the endowment accordingly.

He is a man of many talents. "My father wanted me to be an opera singer," he said, "and I enrolled in the conservatory in Petersburg. Later, I studied voice with Titta Ruffo in Florence in 1948," referring to the Italian baritone.

He is also "guilty of a movie," as he put it, in playing a role in a 1938 film from Paramount, "Hotel Imperial." He played a Russian Cossack. "The one thing I have in common with President Reagan," he said, "is a voluntary suspension from the Screen Actors Guild."