

# CHAPTER I

## Childhood and Youth, 1874–1893

The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it.

—Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*

In the fall of 1874, Alexander II, the emancipator of Russia's serfs thirteen years before, had been nearly two decades on his country's throne. His campaign of Great Reforms was nearing its end. The Russian countryside had undergone the so-called mad summer, as thousands of radical students attempted to preach socialism to the peasant masses, in an idealistic but futile campaign known as "going to the people." The army was hard at work incorporating the khanates of Central Asia into the empire's recently conquered territories in Turkestan, and the anti-Ottoman uprisings in Herzegovina and Bosnia that would draw Russia into the Balkan Crisis of 1875–1876 were only months away. Farther afield, gold had been unearthed in the Dakota Territory's Black Hills, and the journalist-adventurer Henry Morton Stanley was en route from England to Zanzibar, the

starting point for his monumental trans-Africa expedition. Karl Weyprecht and Julius Payer were nearing the completion of their Austro-Hungarian North Pole Expedition, which resulted in the discovery of the Franz Josef archipelago.

In the cultural sphere, Leo Tolstoy was at work on *Anna Karenina*, while Modest Mussorgsky completed *Pictures at an Exhibition* and *Boris Godunov*, the crown jewel of Russian operas. Earlier that year, the first Impressionist exhibition had set off a seismic shock in the Paris art world. Wagner finished the score of *Twilight of the Gods*, the fourth and final opera in his mammoth Ring cycle. Thomas Hardy published *Far from the Madding Crowd*, while Verdi composed his *Requiem*.

In the midst of all this, on September 27 (October 9, by the Gregorian calendar used in the West), a boy named Nicholas

was born to the Saint Petersburg family of Konstantin Fyodorovich Roerich and his wife, Maria Vasilievna. Other notable figures sharing the same year of birth include the authors Gertrude Stein and Robert Frost; the composers Arnold Schoenberg and Gustav Holst; and the politicians Herbert Hoover, William Mackenzie King, and Winston Churchill. The two men who would rule Russia as it entered the twentieth century—Nicholas II and Vladimir Ulyanov, better known as Lenin—were, respectively, six and four years old.



The Roerich family was respectably white-collar and comfortably well-off. Maria, née Korkunova-Kalashnikova, born in 1844, came from Ostrov, in the Pskov region, where her ancestors had settled in the tenth century. The Roerich clan originated on the Danish island of Sjælland (Zealand); a branch of the family migrated to the Baltic coast, abandoning its Lutheran faith for Eastern Orthodoxy and taking up citizenship in the Russian Empire. Over time, the surname, rendered variously as “Röhrig” or “Rörich” in the Latin script, came to be Cyrillicized as Рерих (Rerikh) and pronounced “REHR-ik” by most Russians.<sup>1</sup> As he grew up, Nicholas came to prize this Slavic-Scandinavian heritage.

The household patriarch, Konstantin Fyodorovich, was born in 1837, in Gazenpot (Aizpute, in present-day Latvia), on the coast of what was then the Russian province of Courland. Recent research suggests

that he may have been the illegitimate son of a local nobleman, Eduard von der Ropp, and a servant girl working on the family’s country estate. In this scenario, the infant Konstantin was handed over to Fyodor Ivanovich Roerich, a tailor’s son and future civil servant.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the truth, Konstantin relocated to Saint Petersburg, the imperial capital, to work as a notary public. A specialist in inheritance law, he built up a lucrative private practice and was appointed in 1872 to the Saint Petersburg Circuit Court. By the time of Nicholas’s birth, the elder Roerich was a man of means, easily able to support the family he had started with his marriage to Maria in 1860.

Home life in Petersburg provided Nicholas—Kolya to his family and friends—with a rich childhood environment.<sup>3</sup> The family residence on Vasilievsky Island was a lively place. Konstantin ran his business from an office on the *bel étage*. Servants, siblings, and relatives filled the rooms with activity. Nicholas, the eldest son, had an older sister, Lydia, born in 1867, and two brothers, Vladimir and Boris, followed in 1882 and 1885. (Another brother, Leonid, had died as an infant, shortly after his birth in 1863.) Fyodor, Konstantin’s father, sometimes boarded with the family, surviving to his hundred and fifth year despite a smoking habit so strong that his grandchildren joked that he could serve as a “living advertisement for a tobacco factory.”<sup>4</sup> Maria Vasilievna prided herself on her homemaking skills. The furniture’s dark wood gleamed with polish, and the crystal and silver, all of good quality, sparkled. The

Roerichs lived on the Nikolaevsky (now University) Embankment, on the northern bank of the Neva River, at the foot of the Blagoveshchensky Bridge. Across the waterway, a grand tableau presented itself: the Winter Palace, the Admiralty, the dome of Saint Isaac's Cathedral. At the eastern tip of the island was the city's financial hub, the Bourse. Of greater interest to young Nicholas were the buildings of Saint Petersburg University and the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts.

One benefit of Konstantin's success was an impressive set of connections with the city's intellectual community. Liberal in his politics, Roerich senior belonged to the Free Economic Society, which supported the 1861 emancipation of Russian serfs, and he was likely a Freemason, a common affiliation among reformers and progressives in nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>5</sup> He counted among his acquaintances Dmitri Mendeleev, the renowned chemist who devised the periodic table of elements, as well as historians, legal experts, literary critics, and poets. Most exciting to Nicholas, who listened attentively as his father's guests conversed, were the orientalists and artists. He was enraptured by Konstantin Golstunsky and Alexei Pozdneyev, who conducted linguistic and ethnographic research in Central Asia and Mongolia. Even more important was the painter and sculptor Mikhail Mikeschin, a family friend for many years and a key influence as Kolya grew up.

The best-known photograph of the Roerichs shows the subjects stiff and unsmiling: a content, if slightly stuffy, bourgeois family (see Illustration 1). Portly and

bewhiskered, Konstantin sits in front, while a plump Maria cradles baby Vladimir in her lap. Lydia, tall and lithe, stands in the center, while Nicholas—bespectacled, blond, and wearing the same serious expression he would wear in every picture taken throughout his life—looks out from behind his father's left shoulder.



For a boy of Nicholas's standing, Saint Petersburg was a delightful place to grow up, but the countryside shaped him just as much. The family occasionally visited Maria's mother Tatyana, who lived near Pskov. There, Kolya gathered raspberries and, donning cardboard armor and a wooden sword, pretended to slay dragons and battle savage foes. There were trips to Gazenpot and Riga to see Grandpa Fyodor, whose home was full of dragon-carved chairs and other curiosities. On its way to the Baltic shore, the train passed through the fortress town of Narva and the Estonian city of Reval (now Tallinn). Peaceful and prosperous during Roerich's childhood, these regions had been fought over for centuries by Russians, Poles, Swedes, Balts, Finns, and Teutonic Knights, first with broadsword and axe, later with musket and cannon. With these combats raging in his imagination, a fascinated Kolya peered through his railcar window at the towers and castles that studded the landscape.<sup>6</sup>

The wellspring of Roerich's childhood happiness was the family estate of Isvara, some fifty miles southwest of Petersburg. In

later years, Roerich remembered that “everything special, everything pleasant and memorable about my early life, is connected with my summer months at Isvara.”<sup>7</sup> Country air gave him relief from the bronchitis he was prone to in river-soaked Petersburg, and Isvara was a wonderland in its own right. Owned originally by Count Semyon Vorontsov, a courtier during the reign of Catherine the Great, the estate, encompassing nearly four thousand acres, was acquired by the Roerichs in 1872. At the center stood a two-story manor house, flanked by slender spires. The grounds contained a thirty-horse stable, a barn with seventy-two head of cattle, a smithy, a watermill, a trout hatchery, and a distillery. For the elder Roerich, Isvara was both hobby and business venture. An amateur agriculturalist, Konstantin enjoyed overseeing the estate’s workings, and succeeded until near the end of his life in keeping it profitable. In 1890, the Northern Insurance Company valued the property at the sum of 70,000 rubles.<sup>8</sup>

Every summer and during the winter holidays, the family vacationed at the estate, and Roerich fondly recalled the journey from city to countryside. First, a train to Volosovo, with a transfer at Gatchina. Waiting patiently at the station with a four-horse carriage would be the family coachman, Selifan, who jokingly referred to Konstantin as “Baron Roerich.” The “younger baron,” as the old servitor called Kolya, could scarcely contain himself as servants loaded the luggage, the family clambered into the coach, and the final miles melted away under the horses’ trotting hooves.

To the children, the manor house seemed a fairy-tale castle. Bookish at an early age, Nicholas was drawn to the library, where he devoured a large collection of historical volumes—full of princes, warriors, and long-suffering monks and saints—written and illustrated for young readers. One of these, Gaston Tissandier’s *Martyrs of Science*, made a lifelong impression. (In his old age, Roerich repeatedly identified himself with the persecuted figures described in this book.<sup>9</sup>) Nicholas also admired the house’s collection of paintings. Dutch landscapes, a genre he collected avidly as an adult, were displayed on the walls, but most intriguing was an untitled canvas, hanging in the living room and depicting a snow-covered peak under the rays of the setting sun. Kolya learned that this was Kanchenjunga—a Himalayan giant, rising up from the Nepal-Sikkim borderland—but had no way of knowing that he would one day paint it himself. The estate’s very name foreshadowed his later career: *isvara* means “lord” or “supreme being” in Sanskrit, an appellation Count Vorontsov decided on after a visit to India. As his own interest in the East deepened, Roerich attached much significance to this coincidence.

If Isvara the manor was enticing, Isvara the country preserve provided a magnificent bucolic escape. Cornflower and rye grew in the pastures, and cold springs bubbled in the nearby lake. Best of all was the outlying woodland, which lay adjacent to an imperial hunting ground and teemed with fox, sable, and elk, and even lynx and the

occasional bear. Kolya and his brothers rambled through this sylvan domain of fir and birch, enjoying all the outdoor adventures youngsters can invent for themselves. From this, he gained happy memories, a deep love of the environment, and an instinctual feel for the Russian landscape. As the painter David Burliuk later wrote, “it was here that he taught himself to see and understand nature: the gloomy sighing of the pensive northern woods and the icy tranquility of winter.”<sup>10</sup>



As much as he treasured his Isvara idylls, Nicholas, an excellent student, also valued the education he received in Petersburg. Until he was almost nine, he had private tutors, like most children of his class. Then, in 1883, Konstantin sent him to the May Gymnasium, which offered a general education for boys with gentlemanly aspirations and plans to attend university. During the 1880s and 1890s, the gymnasium, named after its headmaster, Karl von May, a Russianized German, was among Petersburg’s most prestigious. A long-standing biographical anecdote has it that Nicholas scored high enough on the school’s entrance exams that von May identified him as “a future professor.”<sup>11</sup>

Many noteworthy Russians testify to having been happy at von May’s school. An irrepressible popinjay, von May wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses, took snuff, and sported red and yellow handkerchiefs in the breast pocket of his frock coat. Madame von May,

who liked to be called “Aunt Agnes,” distributed chocolate and other treats to the boys. The headmaster’s motto was “First love, then teach,” and he acted on it, the first thing every morning, by greeting each of his students with a handshake.

Nicholas was a “May Bug,” as the students named themselves, for almost a full decade. Each morning, he walked to school. The day began with a dual prayer service, led by a Lutheran pastor and an Orthodox deacon. Then, off to the classroom. Roerich did well in all subjects, but was most enthusiastic about literature, history, and geography. He enjoyed foreign languages, learning Latin and rudimentary Greek. His German became fluent; much of the school’s instruction was in that tongue. He also picked up French and some English, though real aptitude in those came later, during his European travels.

Kolya’s artistic and literary tastes showed early.<sup>12</sup> Until age eight or nine, his favorite toy was a miniature theater; as a teenager, he accompanied his parents to the opera. He dog-eared the family copy of Scott’s *Ivanhoe* with repeated readings and moved on at school to Ruskin, Blake, and Carlyle. The German Romantics “occupied honored places on my desk,” and he wrote term papers on Schiller’s “Undine” and Goethe’s “Elf-King.” Shakespeare interested him, as did Poe and Twain. He spent his teenage years infatuated with Gogol’s tales and, at seventeen, made his first foray into student theatricals by appearing as the sailor Zhevankin in Gogol’s *The Wedding*. As for music, Roerich gravitated to Russian composers: for him,

Glinka, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov trumped most Westerners, although he appreciated the “oriental” splendor of Verdi’s *Aida* and Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine*. The one exception was Richard Wagner, for whose works Roerich conceived a lifelong passion. In 1889, Nicholas had the good luck to attend Saint Petersburg’s first staging of the Ring cycle, by Angelo Neumann, director of the German opera in Prague, an event that profoundly affected many Russian artists and composers, including Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov.<sup>13</sup>

That Nicholas blossomed at the May Gymnasium is not surprising. University life in Russia was stultified by the reactionary politics of the 1880s and 1890s—the reign of the bullheaded Alexander III—but secondary schools proved safer havens for young minds wishing to push beyond the confines set by state censors. In 1889, for exactly this reason, a number of von May’s students, led by the artist Alexandre Benois and including Konstantin Somov, Dmitri Filosofov, and Walter Nouvel, formed the Society for Self-Education, known in lighter moments as the “Nevsky Pickwickians.” The Pickwickians read journals from Western Europe, debated the merits of foreign composers, and smuggled banned literary works to each other, reveling in the poetic decadence offered by Verlaine and Baudelaire. Benois graduated in 1890, and his friends soon after, but before the decade was out, this same group, joined by Léon Bakst and the enterprising Sergei Diaghilev, reconstituted itself as the famed World of Art Society.

This circle left an indelible mark on Russian culture, and because Roerich involved himself with its activities during the 1900s, the question of whether he did so earlier naturally arises. He did not.<sup>14</sup> He knew the Pickwickians and shared many of their views. But while Benois later remembered him as a “handsome” and “affectionate” classmate, he also described him as “bashful before his elders.”<sup>15</sup> The Pickwickians were on average four to five years older than Nicholas, and he had few boyhood ties with them. To the extent the May Gymnasium shaped his teenage views on art, it was the school’s general ethos that mattered.



Nicholas was drawn like iron to a magnet by geography, history, and archaeology. Von May taught the first two subjects with skill, as did one of the school’s youngest instructors, Alexander Lipovsky, who remained friends with Roerich after his graduation. With spellbinding stories of far-off realms echoing in his ears, Kolya drafted maps and molded mountain ranges out of clay, daydreaming about future travels. Nor was he immune to the sense of excitement stirred up by the explorers of the day, who spent the century’s waning decades racing to the North and South Poles, plunging into the jungles of the Amazon, or braving the depths of Africa. Among the spaces remaining blank on the world map were the steppes and deserts of Central Asia, and the Himalayan peaks that lay beyond.

The Russians, living in proximity to these regions, were instrumental in exploring them. The Russian Geographical Society was founded in 1845. Three decades later, by the time of Roerich's infancy, it had sponsored or assisted expeditions to Turkestan; the Ussuri and Amur basins; the Pamir, Tien Shan, and Karakoram ranges; and Mongolia and the Gobi Desert. Most alluring of all to Roerich's mind were the hidden mysteries of Tibet and the Himalayas. Like others of his generation, Kolya read about his compatriots' exploits in magazines such as the *Illustrated World*, the *Global Traveler*, and *Nature and People*, across whose pages the names of Nikolai Muraviev-Amursky, Pyotr Semyonov-Tien-Shansky, and Grigori Potanin marched as intrepidly as their real-life owners did across the mountains and expanses of Asia. The visual appeal of Vasily Vereshchagin's celebrated paintings of Turkestan, Sikkim, and Kashmir added to the public's (and Nicholas's) enthusiasm. Most heroic was the officer-geographer Nikolai Przhevalsky, who logged tens of thousands of miles in Mongolia, Turkestan, and Tibet during the 1870s and 1880s, and brought into Western scientific classification the wild steppe horse that bears his name. Przhevalsky's celebrity status was at its height when Kolya was at his most impressionable. Forty years later, an older Roerich, walking paths that Przhevalsky had walked, had a sense of following in an idol's footsteps.

For now, Nicholas contented himself with adventures closer to home. When not at the gymnasium, he spent as much time as possible at Isvara. Puberty did nothing to

cure his bronchial ailments, and Petersburg's autumn dampness caused him distress every year. As with Teddy Roosevelt half a world away, Nicholas's doctors suggested that he toughen his lungs by spending time outdoors and away from the city, especially during the winter. He took up horseback riding and hunting, as well as natural history. He compiled collections of plants and minerals, classified butterflies and beetles, and completed ornithological studies competent enough that, in 1892, the Forestry Department granted him a license to collect eggs from nests in state-owned woods for scholarly purposes. As he neared graduation, he wrote magazine articles on outdoorsmanship.

Roerich's fascination with archaeology began around the time he entered the May Gymnasium and grew into a cherished avocation.<sup>16</sup> When he was nine, one of his father's acquaintances, the archaeologist Lev Ivanovsky, excavating nearby burial mounds, or kurgans, paid a visit to Isvara. Noting Kolya's inquisitive nature, he invited the boy to see what had been unearthed. The sight of the age-old weapons, broken pottery, and jewelry transported him to the Stone Age, where, it can safely be said, his soul remained for decades to come. He filled his library with every book about archaeology and prehistory he could lay his hands on. He read about the Altamira cave paintings, the carvings of winged bulls in the palaces of Nineveh, and Heinrich Schliemann's triumphant uncovering of the ruins of Troy.<sup>17</sup>

To gain his own field experience, Nicholas, at about age fourteen, explored

tumulus tombs in the Isvara area, helped by the village deacon's sons, who kept their role secret because their father considered it impious to show such curiosity about pagan sites. His first finds included gold and silver coins from the tenth and eleventh centuries. The thrill of success spurred him to read Count Alexei Uvarov's standard text, *The Archaeology of Russia*, and essays by Alexander Spitsyn and Prince Pavel Putiatin, whose niece he would later marry. In 1892, Nicholas took his pastime to a more scholarly level by establishing contact with the Imperial Archaeological Commission (IAK).

That year, Roerich received permission from the IAK to conduct surveys around Isvara and Volosovo, where Ivanovsky had worked. He entered into correspondence with Spitsyn, who eventually involved him in various research ventures and supported his application for membership in the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society (IRAO). Given different circumstances, Roerich might easily have made archaeology, rather than painting, his career.



Roerich's artistic gifts became apparent when he was a teenager. For school assignments and for himself, he wrote poetry, principally historical ballads like "The Battle of Roncesvalles" and "The Sea Pirate." From 1890 to 1892, he penned "Winter Sketches," a series of prose tales about life outdoors. These were capable narratives, and some were published in periodicals like *Russian*

*Hunter, The World's Echoes, and Nature and Hunting*. Roerich concealed his identity, using the pseudonyms Molodoi ("the young one") and, more frequently, Izgoi, meaning "the outcast" or "the exile."

To illustrate his stories and record his archaeological activities, and to remind himself of Isvara during his months in the city, Nicholas sketched animals, views of the estate, and cross-sections of burial mounds. At the gymnasium, he drew portraits of teachers and friends, and designed sets for the student theater club. How far this budding talent would have taken him had it not been nurtured is impossible to say. At this juncture, though, one of his father's friends stepped in: Mikhail Mikeshin, a painter and sculptor whose best-known works, the *Russian Millennium* memorial in Novgorod and Kiev's statue of the Ukrainian hero Bogdan Khmel'nitsky, attract sightseers today. Ilya Repin's 1888 portrait of Mikeshin shows a confident man with dandyish mustaches, waxed and pointed.

In 1891, when Nicholas was seventeen, Mikeshin saw some of the young man's drawings and perceived in them a genuine charm and a keen power of observation. Knowing Konstantin to be indifferent to his son's artistic efforts, Mikeshin taught the eager youth the fundamentals of method, composition, and technique. He arranged for supplemental instruction from Ivan Kudrin, a well-known mosaicist. He wrote Nicholas often, referring to him fondly as "the son granted me by Apollo."<sup>18</sup>

These were not idle words, as evidenced by Mikeshin's role in determining the

direction of Roerich's postsecondary education. In 1893, Nicholas was eighteen and a half. In June, he would leave the May Gymnasium, and a long-suppressed conflict now rose to the surface. The family had always assumed that Nicholas, as the eldest son, would attend Saint Petersburg University, take a law degree, and follow his father's trade or pursue a career in civil service.

Konstantin and Maria were shocked, then, to hear that Nicholas, prompted by Mikeshin, had decided to enter the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. Roerich's parents were highly cultured, but also practical folk for whom art, music, and literature took second place to prosperity and comfort. They had not forbidden him to draw or write, but neither had they encouraged him. For their son to dedicate himself to the Muses instead of taking up gainful employment was not to be contemplated.

A difference in temperament added to these troubles. Konstantin, an unsentimental man, enjoyed his friendships and the finer things in life, but put work first; he has been aptly described as "a Petersburg bourgeois, all business and utterly unromantic."<sup>19</sup> Nicholas, nurtured more by his mother, had a polite relationship with his father, but not an affectionate one, and adolescence widened this emotional distance. As he grew more sensitive and introspective, Nicholas shut a vital part of himself away from his self-assured parent. Consciously or not, he sought in his art teachers—first Mikeshin, then, at the academy, Arkhip Kuinji—figures who could act as surrogate fathers.

As for the senior Roerich, he had viewed his son's artistic pretensions with a mixture of amusement and disdain. He could afford to be indulgent while Kolya was a boy, but now his patience ran out, and he unshakably opposed the notion that his eldest son might daub his life away with paints and pastels. Something besides pragmatism may have sharpened his feelings. During his own student days, Konstantin had tried his hand at playwriting. These attempts led nowhere, and he lost or destroyed whatever literary fragments he created.<sup>20</sup> Later, a successful professional, he entertained his friends by mocking the ambitions of his youth. But did the laughter hide regret? Did Konstantin seek to dissuade Nicholas from becoming an artist because he was jealous of his son's talent? Or did he wish, in his gruff way, to spare Nicholas the painful lesson that art is a fickle master, and that one's gifts are rarely adequate to the task of serving it?

However this debate played itself out—angry shouting, icy silence, or reasoned discussion—the Roerichs, with Mikeshin serving as referee, reached a compromise. As the family wished, Nicholas would study law at Saint Petersburg University. As long as he performed well there, he would also be permitted to take courses at the Academy of Fine Arts. At first, Konstantin consented only to let Nicholas attend the academy as an auditor. By June, he broke down and allowed him to enroll as a regular student.<sup>21</sup> It was an imposing challenge, but Nicholas gladly took up the burden.