

Chapter One

1874 – 1916

What could prevent an adventuresome young Russian boy from digging among the long-abandoned battlefields and ancient burial grounds scattered throughout the forest beyond his family's estate? By the summer that the slim, blond, blue-eyed Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich was ten years old, the answer was nothing.

Early one morning, in 1884, when the lure of those mysterious moss-covered *kurgans* or mounds and intriguing piles of stone, called *tumuli*, became irresistible, he began exploring. When he unearthed a tenth century bronze ornament, it was the encouragement he needed to continue. Before long, he had a collection of burial urns, charred bones, double-headed axes, spears, bronze and iron swords, threadbare scraps of embroidered cloth woven from the hair of horses, reins, belts, brooches, and other relics that needed to be concealed from his parents.

Some days, visions of campfire smoke seemed to float in the mists around him. He could almost hear the horses neighing or glimpse the young warriors racing or brawling. Armed with short javelins, drinking horse's milk, these were the dark-eyed Avars who had been buried alongside their horses. They had traded with the Greeks on the shores of the Black Sea before being driven off by the fierce Iranian-Mongolians, who armored themselves and their horses in finely woven bronze chain mail. "With each swing of the shovel, each stroke of the spade, an alluring kingdom emerged," Nikolai later wrote in an article on archeology.

As he dug, the ancient record that sifted through his hands gave life to the tribes he studied in school: the Scythians, who depicted animals in their art; the Sarmatians, who reigned supreme across Southern Russia until about 150 A.D.; the Celts, the Huns, and Attila, who crossed Asia in 375 A.D., on the way into Europe. He also studied the Goths, whose tribes had dominated Russia's waterways long enough to multiply and divide into the Ostrogoths, the Visigoths, and the brutal

Teutonic Goths, who clasped their tunics at the shoulder with the distinctive *fibula*. “My very first burial finds coincided not only with my beloved history lessons, but with my geography and Gogol’s fantastic fiction as well,” Nikolai wrote in his diary. At age eleven, he presented his school with a collection of his archaeological treasures.

History and tales of the olden days had always fascinated him. Especially the legend of Rurik, the Viking prince from Jutland whose blood was believed to run in Roerich veins. The story went back to 862 A.D., when the Varengians and the Pechenegs threatened to invade the settlements of the Slavs, from the Carpathian Mountains, who were cultivating land and forming hill-fort communities. All along the Oka, the Don, and even the Lower Volga River, Vikings were protecting villages in exchange for tribute. Prince Rurik had visited their land earlier, so the Slavs sent him a delegation to request that he establish a dynasty and become their protector.

Though he failed to stave off the waves of invasions, which continued long after his death, Prince Rurik did succeed in fortifying the rivers and installing deputies in the outlying villages. As time went on, others of his line instituted Christianity, built churches and monasteries, opened the waterways for commerce, established trade routes, codified Russian law, and developed the alphabet. Since the Vikings had been called the “Russ,” some believe Russia’s name came from them.

Nikolai’s mother, Maria Vasilevna Kalashnikova, traced her lineage back to the early Slavs who had invited Rurik and his tribe to rule. She was considered, therefore, to have an eastern heritage that was regarded as “Pure Russian.” Since the Slavs actually belong to the vast family of Indo-Europeans who entered European history as a unit in the sixth century, she could have been a mixture of many things. It was known, however, that in the tenth century, her forefathers had been merchants in Pskov, one of Russia’s earliest cities.

Wealthy and politically influential, Nikolai’s father, Konstantin Fedorovitch Roerich, was a prominent notary and attorney born in Riga, Latvia. Throughout the centuries, many of the Roerich men had devoted their lives to service as political leaders, military figures, and members in secret societies like the Knights Templar and the Masons. Nikolai’s parents were considered as “the

intelligentsia,” the class of educated and liberal thinkers who mingled with royalty and worked actively to improve conditions in their country. When the Roerichs “received” on Wednesday nights, there were often archaeologists and Orientalists among the group. The family viewed an excellent education as having the same value as military valor.

The blood that ran in young Roerich’s veins mingled a Byzantine heritage with Eastern European tribes and races, and his Viking ancestry. This colorful lineage produced in him a love for beauty and music, an unquenchable desire to travel, and a fervor to preach that was evident even when he was young. Nikolai Konstantinovich was born in St. Petersburg on 9 October 1874 (27 September by the Old Russian-style, Julian calendar). His birth coincided with the short epoch of reform in 1861, which resulted from the Tsar’s decision to abolish serfdom and liberate 23,000,000 people.

The Roerich family occupied a gracious building immediately across from the prestigious Admiralty on the Neva River, in St. Petersburg. Konstantin Roerich’s office was downstairs and the family lived in the rooms above it. Much of their leisure time was spent watching the boats and ships coming up from the Gulf of Finland. The walls shook and the glassware rattled with each booming salute of an in-coming military vessel.

During the winter holidays, or when mosquitoes and cholera began to cloud the stifling hot, long “white nights” of summer, the family happily moved to their country estate. Named Isvara by the previous owner, which means “Lord” or “sacred spirit” in Sanskrit, their house was located inland, fifty-five miles to the southwest. Prolonged bronchitis and weak lungs plagued Nikolai until about age eleven, when his doctor prescribed the fresh, cold air of the winter and spring to strengthen him. This radical treatment allowed him to roam across Isvara’s three thousand acres, frequently in the company of the estate manager, who imbued him with a love of the woods. It was here that young Roerich’s happiest childhood memories were made.

He loved being in nature and, as he learned to ride, trap, and shoot, he became a passionate hunter. Entire days were spent silently watching the birds or tracking deer, bears, and the tiny

woodland animals. At twilight, he hunted the giant trolls and pixies hiding in the green and violet shadows cast by massive rocks and trees. The stones and clouds and the nature Devas and spirits on other planes of reality seemed to speak to him. Once the snows fell, he could be found on his skis, gulping great breaths of invigorating air while gliding down the sparkling, white hills. His explorations eventually expanded to the serenity of the vast forests near the Imperial Hunting Grounds and the neighboring villages. The peasants greatly interested Nikolai and they responded to his seriousness and curiosity by telling him their stories and explaining their customs and traditions.

Most Russians were devoutly Christian and belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. Wise old holy men of great spiritual authority, called Startsy, and pilgrims wandered throughout the countryside. Many chose lives of poverty and asceticism so that they could guide others through times of anguish and turmoil. Large monasteries were located everywhere. Hundreds of priests and monks staffed the plentiful churches filled with brilliantly colored, miracle-working icons. The icons were looked to for healing, protection, and inspiration. There was also a rich tradition of the supernatural. Russia's immense landscapes, with its dark forests and moonless nights, combined with the general lack of education to become a breeding ground for superstition and legend. Children's heads brimmed with stories of fairies, fire-breathing serpents, and dangerous water sprites, as well as the legends of Christ, the apostles, and the saints.

Nikolai was a serious, sensitive, highly creative, and imaginative child. He spent much of his time alone and was aware of "other-world" influences. People noticed that, despite his friendly smile, he somehow managed to remain aloof. He learned to read early and enjoyed stories of Russian heroes and historical events. He collected plants, minerals, and ancient coins, and wrote poetry and liberal commentaries on his views. Drama, science, and geography were his favorite subjects.

Many years later, while traveling through the very lands he had mapped in childhood, he recalled his love for the area when he had colored the sands of the Gobi with the side of a soft pencil and the Altai Mountains and the glaciers of the Himalayas, white. At age sixteen, he had learned scientific procedures and methods of excavation by accompanying a noted archaeologist throughout

the summer. As a result, he bestowed an important collection of twelfth century artifacts upon the Imperial Archaeological Committee.

The Vikings, Genghis Khan's army, and Marco Polo crossing the great unknown into China all marched through the nursery in the little plays and dramas he created to be staged by his older sister, Lydia, and his two younger brothers, Boris and Vladimir. Roerich's lifelong habit of writing essays on subjects of importance to him began in childhood. Some of his hunting adventures were published while he was still in middle school. His earliest drawings were efforts to illustrate things that could be explained better with pictures. When a family friend discovered Nikolai had received no formal drawing instruction, he gave him lessons. Before long, the top floor of Isvara was converted into a studio. Long years later, Nikolai confided to a reporter: "Between the time I began my first painting and completed it, an inner urgency for artistic creation took such complete possession of my entire being that it convinced me that I would perish unless I devoted my life to art."

Obtaining his father's approval of his decision to devote his life to art, however, was another matter. Not only was "graphic artist" considered an unsuitable profession for him, but because Nikolai was the oldest son, he was expected to either serve in the military or join his father in his law practice. Of course, young Roerich could agree that a paintbrush would not help his country or bring about change, as a sword or a political career might, but he believed he could help his country more with his art than with a degree in law.

This belief had arisen from his excavations. Through them, he had discovered a richness of the Russian spirit too significant to be denied. From the time when Peter the Great had first built St. Petersburg as "the window on the West," and demanded that people drop their traditional ways, the Russians had been taught to look to Western Europe as the model of everything desirable. Many regarded their ancient eastern heritage and bloodlines as savage, ignorant, and subhuman. Roerich wanted to give his countrymen national pride. He believed his paintings could supply them with the same dignity he had found in the legacy of their remarkable past.

So he compromised with his father and attended both the law faculty of the Imperial University and the Imperial Academy of Art. Rigidly, he held himself to the following schedule: 9:00 Rise; 10:00-1:00 Academy; 1:00-3:00 University; 3:00-5:00 work on sketches; 5:00-9:00 evening classes and practical training at the Academy; 9:00-midnight reading literary works, meeting friends and acquaintances, and participating in student circles. Holidays and vacations were devoted to nature trips, archaeological excavations, and hunting. After his first year at the Art Academy, he wrote in his diary, “Still far from my goal, it is now time to begin preparation for it — the pouring out of light, illustrations of my own history. Why is it that our history is usually made to look coarse and violent? Why don’t the paintings ever show any signs of joy in the eye? Isn’t it possible that even emaciated peasants could have attractive qualities?”

Although the current artistic trend was toward realism, Roerich had no desire to merely illustrate actual historical events. He wanted to depict the lives of the ancient Slavs and Vikings colored with the feeling of the times in which they had lived. Using vivid primary colors, he portrayed them developing new lands, building towns, battling and hunting, and gave them titles such as *Guests from Foreign Lands*; *Building a Town*, and *The Slavs on the Dnieper*.

He illustrated everything as enormous. Strong, sturdy ships with heavy sails, hills and mountains and humans who seemed to be carved out of stone. His smooth unbroken contours and calm rhythm of forms created an impression of clarity and monumentality. In his paintings, Nikolai transmitted the feeling of harmony and beauty of the distant past that he had unearthed with the graves. “The whole district is akin to my soul,” he wrote in his diary. “The horizons, hills, moss, lakes, rivers, and clouds — all of it is mine...all of it is me.”

The financial burden of enrollment in two universities, however, came at a time when the elder Roerich was having crippling financial misfortunes. In order to pay for art supplies and books, acquisitions to his stamp, mineral, and archeological collections, and also to have money for the theater, concerts, and his out-of-town trips, Nikolai began an assortment of jobs that included

painting icons for churches and writing short stories for magazines. Although his heart was at the Art Academy, he did manage to complete both courses of study.

By twenty-three, he had conducted archaeological expeditions throughout Russia and had presented scientific papers discussing Slavic and Finnish archaeology from the eleventh through fourteenth centuries. After having several articles published in *Art and Archaeology* and other journals, and receiving praise from the Archaeological Society of Prussia for his discovery of amber ornaments near the Baltic Sea, Roerich was elected to the prestigious Imperial Archaeological Society. He was their youngest member, a distinction that was conferred as acknowledgement for work performed in the field.

In 1899, the Imperial Archaeological Society sent Roerich east to the provinces of Pskov, Tversk, and Novgorod to study Russia's oldest monuments. The home of Prince Putyatin, another archaeologist, was on his route and Roerich hoped to spend the night there. Not only did he find a night's accommodations, he found his future wife as well. When young Roerich arrived, Elena Ivanovna Shaposhnikova and her mother were visiting Prince Putyatin's wife, her mother's sister, as they did most summers.

Born on 12 February 1879 (31 January, by the old style) Elena was five years Nikolai's junior, extremely intelligent, beautiful, and gifted. Descended from an aristocratic family, the famous composer Moussorgsky had been her uncle, and Mikhail Kutusov, who had commanded the victorious Russian forces against Napoleon in the War of 1812 and been portrayed by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, had been her great-uncle.

Cultured and protected, wise, mature, exceptionally sensitive, and an excellent pianist, Elena was a comfort and solace to all. Even the birds and animals benefited from her skills of healing. Despite frequent illness and delicacy as a child, as soon as she could carry the family's two large volumes of the *Doré Illustrated Bible*, she had taught herself to read. By age seven, she was able to both read and write in French, German, and Russian. She had been six years old when she first met the "tall figure, dressed in white" she came to know as a "Teacher of Light, who lived somewhere far

away.” Shortly afterward, she had begun having the numerous dreams and visions that would allow her access to deeper realms of reality and gave her the ability to predict future events.

By the time she and Nikolai met, Elena had read the entire collection of books in her grandfather’s library and had progressed to studying the philosophies and traditions of the East, such as the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Mahabharata*, and the three *Vedas*, the oldest works of literature still in existence. Although they quickly discovered that, except for Nikolai’s love of hunting, they had much in common and shared all interests, her family was adverse to the young couple’s desire to marry. But after Elena’s third dream that the marriage was the wish of her deceased father, it was allowed.

In December of 1899, Roerich wrote in his diary, “The evening of the 30th I told E.I. (author’s note: Elena Ivanovna) all that was in my soul. Strange, when for the first time, you consider another person in addition to yourself. It is now a new year. In it I must be much newer.” Many other challenges, however, also came with the new century. Roerich’s father, disillusioned and depressed, died in the spring, leaving the family to face the debts that resulted from his poor financial decisions and investments. After the estate of Isvara was sold, Roerich’s share of the inheritance allowed him to study in Germany and France, as all rising artists were expected to do. The young couple thought of combining their honeymoon with Roerich’s year abroad, but it seemed wiser to postpone the wedding.

Finally, in the fall of 1901, they were married and moved in with Nikolai’s mother. Roerich began working as Secretary of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, organizing exhibitions and lectures and appointing new, more broad-minded teachers. Shortly thereafter, he also took on the job of assistant editor of *Art & Artistic Industry*, a magazine for which he had been writing. He continued with his excavations and, becoming especially interested in the Stone Age, started a collection of relics that grew in time to 75,000. The collection included 100 pieces of amber ornaments that were accepted as being 4,000 years old.

Spiritual philosophy permeated their home and their hearts as the couple studied Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Buddha, and the work of India's poet Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. Their two sons were born within the first three years of their marriage. With his work, travels, the paintings, excavations, and their studies, the next fifteen years (1901-1916) passed quickly.

In 1891, delegates from China, Japan, Ceylon, Burma and India had convened in India for the first International Buddhist Conference. At this time, groups which had scarcely had any previous contact, united themselves in the common cause of restoring Bodh Gaya, the sacred place where Buddha had received Enlightenment. This gathering began a Buddhist revival that rippled throughout the Orient, southeast and central Asia, Hawaii, America and Russia.

When mighty Russia received a humiliating defeat from tiny Japan, an obscure Buddhist island nation, in the Russo-Japanese War, Tsar Nicholas II saw the importance of courting the alliance of the Buriats, the Kalmyk and other Mongolian/Buddhist tribes living in the eastern parts of Russia. In 1907, Kambo Laramba Agvan Dorzhiev, a Buriat from Siberia, convinced the Tsar of the importance of having a Buddhist (or perhaps a Theosophic-Buddhist) temple in St. Petersburg. An important figure in Russian Far Eastern politics, Dorzhiev raised most of the construction money, laid the cornerstone and dedicated the temple to the thirteenth Dalai Lama, who blessed the undertaking. Fiercely loyal to St. Petersburg, Dorzhiev believed his purpose was to create a Tibetan-Mongolian federation with Russia, a spiritual empire of Mongolians and Tibetans led by the Dalai Lama but under the protection of the Tsar.

Young Roerich, who enthusiastically supported the construction and designed the stained glass for the second story, had never met anyone with the charisma and authority of this lama priest, diplomat and trusted advisor to the Dalai Lama. Captivated by Dorzhiev's ideas of peace, brotherhood, and enlightenment, when Roerich heard from him the prophecy of the dawn of Shambhala, it ignited a flame that never burned out.

The prophecy involved the Panchen Lama who is believed to hold the office of King of Shambhala. The prophecy was identified with the Second Coming of Christ and the Maitreya or

Buddha to come. The prophecy was that “should the Panchen Lama ever leave Tibet, that would herald the final battle which would usher in the New Era.” Dorzhiev saw himself as Tibet’s emissary to the White Tsar (Tsar Nicholas II). The lama spread the word of the mythical Shambhala that was said to be located in Russian territory — north of Tibet; its Emperor was the White Tsar, the Bodhisattva Tsar.

Despite the Tsar’s involvement and sanction of the building of the Buddhist temple, feelings ran high among St. Petersburg’s many Christians and caused great controversy. By the time it was completed in 1915, some people were so disturbed by the active role that Nikolai had taken during the years of construction that they called for an investigation into his racial background.

The inference that liberal amounts of Mongolian blood ran in his veins was intended to discredit him, for in the thirteenth century, the Mongols (including the Tartars) had invaded Russia and controlled it for centuries. Had they been able to prove Nikolai was part Mongolian, it would have been a heritage of which he would have been proud.

Years later he wrote, “The Mongol invasions have left such hatred behind them that their artistic elements are always neglected. It is forgotten that the mysterious Cradle of Asia has produced these people, and has wrapped them in the gorgeous veils of China, Tibet, and Hindustan... The Mongol manuscripts and the annals of the foreign envoys of those days tell us unaccountable mixtures of both cruelty and refinement... yet the best artists and masters were found in the headquarters of the Tartar Khans.”

Roerich’s extensive research, discoveries, and unique knowledge of the restless, shifting natures of the tribal migrations throughout the centuries gave him a rare understanding of the quantities of good and evil that all humans possess. Had he been asked in those early years, like Dorzhiev, he would have said, “Brotherhood” and “Unity” were the hope for the world. In time, “Beauty” would be added to that list. Many times over, in the years that followed, those philosophies would be severely tested.