

ONE

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

1905 – 1917



If a life can have a theme song, and I believe every worthwhile one has, mine is a religion, an obsession, or a mania or all of these expressed in one word: individualism. I was born with that obsession and have never seen and do not know now a cause more worthy, more misunderstood, more seemingly hopeless and more tragically needed. Call it fate or irony, but I was born, of all countries on earth, in the one least suitable for a fanatic of individualism, Russia.

—Autobiographical Sketch, 1936

When the fierce and extraordinary Ayn Rand was fifty-two years old, about to become world famous, and more than thirty years removed from her birthplace in Russia, she summed up the meaning of her elaborate, invented, cerebral world this way: “My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.” It was a world in which no dictator, no deity, and no well-meaning sense of duty would ever take away the moral right of the gifted individual—Ayn Rand—to live according to her own high-wattage lights.

This was not the world she was born into. Ayn Rand was born Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum, a Russian Jew, on February, 2, 1905, in St. Peters-

burg, then the capital city of the most anti-Semitic and politically divided nation on the European continent. Later, she would say that she loathed everything Russian, and while this was not entirely true—she retained her appetite for Russian classical music and Russian sweets until the end of her life—she hated the passivity, brutality, and primitive religiosity of the Russia of her youth.

She had good reason for this. Her birth came barely three weeks after the brief but bloody uprising known as the 1905 Revolution, where, on a bright January Sunday morning, twelve thousand of Czar Nicholas II's cavalymen opened fire on thirty thousand factory workers, their wives and children, labor organizers, and students who had walked to the Winter Palace to petition for better working conditions and a role in the czar's all-powerful government. The protest was led by a Russian Orthodox priest named Father Gapon, and many marchers were said to be praying as they died. The slaughter gave rise to days of rioting throughout the city and set the stage for the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, which would end not in the quick and brutal suppression of the rebellion's leaders, as this one did, but in a revolutionary coup that would shake the world and mold Ayn Rand's worldview.

Rand's parents, who in January 1905 were thirty-four and twenty-five and had been married for just nine months, could hear the gunfire from the windows of their new apartment above a pharmacy on Zabalkanskii Prospekt—the street on which, later that evening, the popular writer Maxim Gorky would hold a meeting of the city's liberal intellectuals and announce, "The Russian Revolution has begun." Rand's father, born Zelman Wolf Zakharovich Rosenbaum but known outside the family by the non-Jewish variant of his name, Zinovy, was a pharmaceutical chemist and the manager of the shop downstairs. Her mother, a homely but self-consciously stylish woman named Khana Berkovna Kaplan, known as Anna, had been trained as a dentist but had stopped practicing after her marriage and pregnancy.

By the time Ayn Rand was born, Zabalkanskii Prospekt and the streets around it were calm again. It was an illusory calm: all over Russia and the vast Russian territories to the south and east, massive labor strikes, anti-czarist peasant insurrections, and anti-Jewish violence were erupting. This would continue, in waves, until 1914, when World War I briefly united the nation against the Germans, and would grow yet more explosive from 1915 to 1919, when the country was war torn and starv-

ing. Meanwhile, Marxist political organizations, their leaders in and out of exile in Siberia and Europe, gained a following.

In these years, it was dangerous to be a Jew. As the economy deteriorated and the czar grew more repressive, the brunt of popular anger often fell upon Russia's five million Jews. At Czar Nicholas II's court, as elsewhere in Europe, Jews had long been identified with the supposedly pagan notions of a money economy, urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism. Given traditional Russian fear of modernity and fierce anti-Semitism, Jews were ready-made scapegoats onto whom the czar, the landowners, and the police could easily shift workers' and peasants' resentment for their poverty and powerlessness.

For Jews outside the capital city, this period brought the worst anti-Semitic violence since the Middle Ages. In the fall of 1905 alone, when Rand was not quite a year old, there were 690 anti-Jewish pogroms and three thousand Jewish murders. In one pogrom in Odessa, in the Crimea, where Rand and her family would relocate in 1918, eight hundred Jews were killed and one hundred thousand were made homeless. The czar's police were said to have supplied the largely illiterate Russian Orthodox rioters with arms and vodka.

St. Petersburg was relatively safe from pogroms, which was one reason the Rosenbaums had migrated there. But it had its own complicated forms of official anti-Semitism. By 1914, the statutes circumscribing Jewish activities ran to nearly one thousand pages, and anything that wasn't explicitly permitted was a crime. For decades, Jews who didn't possess a trade or profession useful to the czar were barred from St. Petersburg; in most cases, unqualified Jews couldn't even visit for a night. By law, Jews made up no more than 2 percent of the city's population, and residency papers had to be renewed each year. Jews often changed their names to avoid detection. They and their homes were subject to police searches at all times. Rand's father, who was born in the poor and pogrom-ridden Russian Pale of Settlement—a vast checkerboard of Jewish ghettos encompassing much of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland—went variously by the names Zelman, Zalman, and Zinovy. He seems to have become a pharmacist, at least in part, because this was one of the professions that permitted Jews to enter the city relatively freely. But the laws were fickle and crafted to give the czar maximum flexibility, and arrest and/or exile were a constant danger.

It was in this volatile and often frightening atmosphere that Rand

grew up. She was the eldest of three daughters of this upwardly mobile pharmacist and his religiously observant, socially ambitious wife; Anna would later appear in her daughter's novels as a series of superficial or spiteful characters. When Rand was two and a half, her sister Natasha was born; when she was five, her youngest and favorite sister, Eleanor, called Nora, entered the family.

By the time Nora was born, in 1910, Zinovy had advanced to become the manager of a larger, more centrally located pharmacy. The Zambalkanskii drugstore, along with one a few streets away, in which the young chemist had worked before his marriage, were owned by Anna Rosenbaum's sister Dobrulia Kaplan and her husband, Iezekiil Konheim; the new store, called Aleksandrovskaia, belonged to an affluent and professionally distinguished German Lutheran merchant named Aleksandr Klinge. Klinge's shop faced Znamenskaya Square on the Nevsky Prospekt, the city's resplendent main thoroughfare, built extra wide by Peter the Great to accommodate his cavalry and cannons against the insurrections of the eighteenth century. Zinovy, now newly established among the Jewish bourgeoisie, moved his wife and daughters into a large, comfortable apartment on the second floor, adjoining the pharmacy. Another one of Anna's sisters and her husband, a prosperous medical doctor named Isaac Guzarchik, settled with their two daughters on the floor above. There the family lived until they fled the starving city for the Crimea in the wake of the October 1917 Revolution.

Intelligent, self-directed, and solitary from an early age, Rand must have been a difficult child to raise in the first decade of the twentieth century. In spite of the era's violence and turmoil, the ambience was Victorian: the fashions were for frills, family loyalty, and the feminine arts, all of which went utterly against her grain. Some of her earliest memories were of being unreasonably treated in such matters by her mother, who was the dominating personality in the household and even at times "a tyrant." In one memory, during the family's move to the Nevsky Prospekt apartment, Rand and her younger sisters were sent to stay with a neighboring aunt and uncle, perhaps the Konheims. When they returned to Rand's new home, she asked her mother for a midi blouse like the ones she'd seen her cousins wearing. Anna Rosenbaum refused. She didn't approve of midi blouses or other fashionable garments for children, Rand recalled fifty years later. Anna was serving tea

at the time, and—perhaps as an experiment—Rand asked for a cup of tea. Again her mother refused; children didn't drink tea. Rand refrained from arguing, although even then the budding logician might have won the argument on points. Instead, she asked herself, Why won't they let me have what I want? and made a resolution: Someday I will have it. She was four and a half or five years old, although all her life she thought that she had been three. The elaborate and controversial philosophical system she went on to create in her forties and fifties was, at its heart, an answer to this question and a memorialization of this project. Its most famous expression was a phrase that became the title of her second nonfiction book, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, in 1962.

Rand's first memory is worth describing here. The future author of *Atlas Shrugged*, a novel whose pulse is set by the rhythms of a great American railroad, recalled sitting at a window by her father's side, aged two and a half, gazing at Russia's first electric streetcars lighting the boulevard below. Her father was explaining the way the streetcars worked, she told a friend in 1960, and she was pleased that she could understand his explanation. Although she did not know it then, the American company Westinghouse had built the streetcar line, in a gesture to the city's workers from the embattled czar. Such seeming coincidences—this one suggesting that even as a young child she showed an affinity for the bright beacon of American capitalism—abound in Rand's life, and later became the threads from which she and her followers would spin her legend.

While the czar's regime grew more unpopular, and the Marxist Mensheviks and Bolsheviks competed for the allegiance of the nation's workers, the Rosenbaums prospered. In 1912, Rand's father became the co-owner of Klinge's pharmacy, a thriving business that employed not only Klinge and Zinovy, but also six assistant pharmacists, three apprentices, and a number of clerks. In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Klinge transferred full ownership of the drugstore to Zinovy, presumably because, as the Russian troops advanced against the German army to the west, anyone bearing a German name was even more at risk than a Jew in the streets and government offices of St. Petersburg. As Zinovy's income grew, he bought the deed to the building that housed both the store and the family apartment. Anna hired a cook, a maid, a nurse for her daughters, and even a Belgian governess to help the three girls im-

prove their French before they entered school, French being the language of the Russian educated classes. The girls also took music and drawing lessons.

Rand respected her father and strongly disliked her mother, whom, oddly, she called by the Russian variant of her patronymic, Borisovna. From the beginning, she and Anna Rosenbaum did not get along. The daughter viewed her mother as capricious, nagging, and a social climber, and she was painfully convinced that Anna disapproved of her. Anna considered her eldest daughter to be “difficult,” Rand recalled. It’s easy to imagine that she was. Although formal photographs from the time show a beautifully dressed, long-haired little girl with an arresting composure and huge, dark, intelligent eyes, her face is square and her features are slightly pudgy; when animated, they assume the stubborn, hawkish look of her adulthood. She had few friends and little inclination to make new ones, and she was physically inert in an era of passionate belief in physical exercise. Her mother nagged at her to be nicer to her cousins and more outgoing and athletic (“Make motions, Alice, make motions!” Anna would cry)* and was exasperated by her penchant for becoming violently enthusiastic about the things she liked—certain European children’s stories and songs, for example—and immovably indifferent, even hostile, to the things she didn’t. But Anna also articulated many of the values that Rand would later become famous for expressing. In a letter from the 1930s, for example, Anna wrote to Rand, “Every man is an architect of his own fortune” and “Every person is the maker of his own happiness.” Anna liked the idea of America and wanted to visit; she even named the family cats after American states and cities.

Anna came from a more privileged background than Zinovy did. She seems to have been born and raised in St. Petersburg, which was a marked advantage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this gave her an air of sophistication and social polish that her husband lacked. Anna’s father, Rand’s maternal grandfather, was a prosperous St. Petersburg tailor named Berko (or Boris) Itskovitch Kaplan who owned a factory that made military uniforms for the czar’s guards, an occupation that would have afforded the family some protection in times of trouble. Anna’s mother, Rand’s grandmother, named Rozalia Pavlovna

*After coming to the United States, Rand referred to herself as Alice, the English equivalent of her name Alissa.

Kaplan, was a pharmacist, just as Zinovy and Anna's sister Dobrulia's husband were. All lived within a few streets of one another, including the Konheims, the Guzarchiks, and two of Anna's brothers, Josel and Moisha, called Mikhail. Since many members of Anna's extended family also lived nearby, and at least a few of Zinovy's eight brothers and sisters eventually joined him in St. Petersburg, Rand grew up surrounded by a sizable Jewish clan.

Anna was also more broadly, and proudly, educated than her husband was. She read and spoke English, French, and German, and until the Belgian governess arrived she taught Rand and Natasha to read and write in French. Though Rand made good use of these advantages as she grew older, she viewed her mother as hypocritical and shallow, an opinion not entirely borne out by the evidence. She once characterized Anna as an aspiring member of the St. Petersburg intelligentsia whose main interest in life was giving parties, and she suspected that Anna enjoyed books and plays less than she enjoyed the appearance of talking about them at her frequent gatherings of family and friends. Anna subscribed to foreign magazines, including children's magazines, which Rand read and was strongly influenced by as she began to write her own early stories. Still, until the 1917 Revolution changed everything, Anna seems to have been an artistic social climber (though a remarkably intelligent and resourceful one, as we shall see) who wanted her daughters to rise in the city's Jewish social hierarchy—a project for which Ayn Rand was particularly unsuited.

In *We the Living*, Rand's autobiographical first novel, written when she was in her twenties, the heroine, Kira Argounova, views her mother as an unprincipled conformist. Rand's childhood clashes with Anna were often focused on her refusal to play with other children and her solitary, even antisocial nature. But Anna seems to have had a cruel streak, too. She told her eldest daughter that she had never wanted children, that she looked after them only from a sense of duty, and pointed out how much she sacrificed for them. Once, she got angry and broke the leg of a doll that Rand was fond of. When Rand was five or so, she recalled, her mother came into the children's playroom and found the floor littered with toys. She announced to Rand and Rand's two-and-a-half-year-old sister, Natasha, that they would have to choose some of their toys to put away and some to keep and play with now; in a year, she told them, they could trade the toys they had kept for those they had put away. Natasha

held on to the toys she liked best, but Rand, imagining the pleasure she would get from having her favorite toys returned to her later, handed over her best-loved playthings, including a painted mechanical wind-up chicken she could describe vividly fifty years later. When the time came to make the swap and Rand asked for her toys back, her mother looked amused, Rand recalled. Anna explained that she had given everything to an orphanage, on the premise that if her daughters had really wanted their toys they wouldn't have relinquished them in the first place. This may have been Rand's first encounter with injustice masquerading as what she would later acidly call "altruism." Her understanding of how power can be acquired by a pretense of loving kindness would grow only more acute with time.

Perhaps it's little wonder, then, that from the age of four or five onward, Rand developed a keen sense that anything she liked had to be *hers*, not her mother's, the family's, or society's, an attitude that readers of her 1943 novel *The Fountainhead* will recognize in the perverse and complicated character of Dominique Francon. As a corollary, she claimed not to care about being approved of or accepted by her family and peers. Since she generally *wasn't* accepted, the proud, intelligent child appears to have learned early to make a virtue of necessity. In her twenties and thirties, she would construct a universe of moral principles built largely on the scaffolding of some of these defensive childhood virtues.

One of the things Rand claimed fiercely as her own was a certain kind of turn-of-the-century music heard in popular theaters and park bandstands, music that included light Viennese waltzes, Western military marches, and "The Drinking Song" from Verdi's *La Traviata*. She remembered pleading with her grandmother Kaplan to play this music on the grandmother's brand-new Victrola, one of the first in St. Petersburg, Rand later said. Her mother and aunts disapproved of her musical taste, but this made the music all the more alluring. She would pick out songs at first hearing and immediately decide, That's mine, or That's *not* mine. For the rest of her life, in moments of happiness, she would dance around the room to period recordings of this music, which she called her "tiddlywink" music.

She also collected popular postcards of famous Western paintings that were sold in dry-goods stores. But she chose only the ones with human forms; she wouldn't touch the landscapes or the still lifes. Some

of these postcards were found after her death, along with newspaper clippings and sketches of clothes she liked, in a file folder marked "Pictures I Like." "I always collected things," she said, adding that her mother regularly complained about how much rubbish she acquired. Happily, her grandmother Kaplan "retaliated" against her mother's complaints by buying Rand a chest of drawers in which to store her collections.

The great exception in her somewhat alienated childhood affections was her handsome father, Zinovy, known to the family as Z.Z. and to Rand as Zakharovich. Presenting him as Kira's Uncle Vasili in *We the Living*, Rand noted his "thick hair, powerful body, [and] sunken eyes[,] like a fireplace of blazing coals." Like Vasili, Zinovy was, for the most part, silent, but he was immensely proud of his accomplishments as a self-made businessman. He admired his eldest daughter's proud spirit and original, razor-sharp mind. An avid reader of Russian literature, he encouraged her efforts to write her first stories and, later, her drive to craft a fiction of ideas.

Zinovy had once wanted to be a writer, too, but took the more practical, if difficult, route of getting a degree in pharmaceutical chemistry from the University of Warsaw in 1899. Warsaw, 120 miles east of Zinovy's hometown of Brest-Litovsk in the Russian Pale, was popular with the Jewish residents of the region because it had a relatively lenient admissions policy for Jews. Since non-Christians couldn't matriculate but were confined to being "listeners," or auditors, however, Zinovy's degree was a two-year certificate rather than a baccalaureate. Rand believed that he had chosen the field of chemistry because there had been an opening in that department for a Jew. Since he didn't begin his course of study until age twenty-seven, it seems likely that his parents couldn't afford to pay his tuition and that he worked and saved for years to pay his own way. Later, Rand recalled, he helped all but one of his eight brothers and sisters to get training in the medical trades and leave the Pale. Those who moved to St. Petersburg became physician's assistants, dentists, midwives, and masseurs.

Zinovy's father's extended family were tradesmen and professionals in Brest. Exactly how his parents earned their living is not known, but they were probably medical practitioners, too, since, like Zinovy and his siblings, Zinovy's paternal uncle Aron Rosenbaum and a number of Aron's children were physicians, midwives, pharmacists, and dentists

in and around Brest and in St. Petersburg. Anna's family originally came from Brest, too, and dozens of her Kaplan relatives remained behind there. Factory owners, community leaders, and tradesmen, some lived or worked on the same streets where Rosenbaums lived and worked and would certainly have known and been known to Zinovy's parents. Indeed, it is possible that Anna and Zinovy were engaged to be married *before* Zinovy reached St. Petersburg—that is, that Rand's parents' marriage was arranged. One clue: On Zinovy's arrival in St. Petersburg in 1902, he immediately took a managerial job with Anna's sister Dobrulia Konheim and her husband, Iezekiil. That a newly licensed pharmacist was hired not as an apprentice or assistant but as a manager suggests that his position was preferential and prearranged.

In any case, up to the years of the revolution, Anna and Zinovy's marriage was peaceable and conventional rather than ardent. He worked long hours and didn't spend much time in the apartment; she managed the girls' social activities, education, health regimens, and religious training until they entered school at eight or nine—since, like most boys and girls from the Russian middle and upper classes, the Rosenbaum sisters were educated at home until relatively late in childhood. According to Rand, her father, who wasn't religious, tolerated her mother's Sabbath and holiday celebrations with a "better safe than sorry" shrug. Rand herself, later a strict atheist who rarely spoke about her Jewish ancestry, believed in God and accepted her mother's religious observances as a natural part of life—until she made a conscious decision to become a nonbeliever during the second year of the revolution, at the traditional male bar mitzvah age of thirteen.

Rand's first conscious memory of experimenting with the idea of God took place at age six, she recalled, when she and a maternal cousin decided to pray for a little white kitten belonging to their grandmother Kaplan. The kitten was sick and dying, and Rand's cousin proposed that if they "prayed sincerely" God would hear their prayers and save the kitten. They retreated to a corner of the room and prayed, but the kitten died, and though Rand still halfheartedly believed in God, she wasn't surprised by the ineffectuality of prayer; she hadn't really believed that it would work, she said. Later, in the terrifying year of 1918, she must often have heard the kind of fatalistic Russian Orthodox talk of God's will and the necessity to follow Christ's example of suffering that would infuriate her all her life. She decided to cast her lot with man—that is,

with her own observations and sense of entitlement and justice—rather than with an oppressive, inscrutable, unjust, and alien deity.

Although her parents tried to protect her from the political and ethnic strife all around her during childhood, they could hardly have been successful. From the age of five or six, Ayn Rand took everything in, including the ugly and nonsensical pieties and prejudices of neighbors and official spokesmen who treated Jews as, at best, second-class human beings. Often, their pretext for such treatment was that the Jews were the greedy entrepreneurs, rabid industrialists, and ruthless bankers who were spoiling Russia's "pure" Slavic traditions and fomenting labor unrest. In such circumstances, Rand's love for her self-made father was strongly roused. The results would be seen in her pro-individualist, pro-industrial novels, which more than one commentator has also viewed as an impassioned defense of gifted, productive Jews.

Rand received attention and praise from her family and later, from her teachers and classmates, primarily, if not only, for being a startlingly intelligent child. (Judging by her lightning-quick logic and depth of insight as an adult, she must have been *frighteningly* intelligent, observed Rand acquaintance Robert Bidinotto.) Yet her actual ideas and feelings were of little interest to anyone, including her extended family, except her youngest sister, Nora. The household was busy with her father's growing business and her mother's and middle sister's comings and goings, and the women, especially, had little patience with Rand's odd musings. In her first novel, *We the Living*, she writes that Kira's family "shrugged impatiently at what they called Kira's feelings. . . . They were not *feelings* to [Kira's sister Lydia] but only *Kira's feelings* [*italics added*]." When Rand entered school, the same was true of her classmates. The intensely thoughtful child was not only solitary, but she was also awkward and offbeat. She remembered being aware that her extreme shyness and violent intensity put people off, but she was sure that such social awkwardness was merely a technical fault and that other people were wrong not to understand and appreciate her. She was self-consciously different from others, as if by choice. But she was painfully lonely.

Little Nora trailed after her eldest sister, providing a worshipful chorus for Rand's enthusiasms and dislikes. Because they favored the same books and pictures, Rand thought Nora was *like* her, with an almost identical natural bravery, sensibility, and style. In this, she mistook Nora's

imitation of her for the girl's authentic inner self. Eighty years later, the sister would say bitterly that she was merely Rand's "shadow and yes-man." In all of her most crucial relationships, Rand would see others favorably largely to the degree that they mirrored her unusual self.

That's where stories—both those she read and those she was beginning to write—came in. At the age of eight or nine, just before creating her own first stories, she read two children's books that electrified her hopes and helped to set her course; one of them would become a kind of template for some of her most famous work. The first, a mini-biography belonging to her sister Natasha, recounted the lonely girlhood of Catherine the Great, the late-eighteenth-century czarina who, half a century after the reign of Peter, brought the ideas of the European Enlightenment to Russia. It presented Catherine as an unusually bright little girl who was overlooked and underestimated by her aristocratic family and friends because she was odd and homely: "something between a misfit and an ugly duckling," as Rand remembered the character. Yet Catherine was destined to outshine all her prettier rivals and bring a culturally backward Russia closer to the industrially advancing West. In the story, a fortune-teller at a party sees Catherine's future greatness in the shape of an invisible crown engraved on her brow, much to the envy and disbelief of the other girls and their mothers. Young Rand was sure that she, too, was meant for an exceptional fate, and wished that, like the fortune-teller in the story, someone would notice the special mark on her brow. She was a child of destiny, she told herself. Nobody knew it yet, but everybody would find out. Like many of Rand's predictions about her future, this one would come true.

Later in the same year, 1914, she encountered a boys' serial adventure story called *The Mysterious Valley* in one of the French children's magazines her mother subscribed to. Written by Maurice Champagne, an author of children's books, and illustrated by René Giffey, it was set in British-ruled India in 1911—contemporaneous with Rand's time, but set in an exotic place, so the story's heart-stopping action may have seemed plausible to her. As the tale opens, a dashing British infantry captain named Cyrus Paltons and four of his fellow officers have been snatched from the field by trained Bengali tigers and carried to a clique of blood-thirsty Hindu shamans in a hidden valley in the Himalayan Mountains of West Bengal—a beautiful valley with noticeable resemblances to the

hiding place of the striking businessmen in Rand's 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. Cyrus, imprisoned with his peers deep in a cave beneath the valley floor, is brave, purposeful, and, according to Bill Bucko's translation, "arrogant," a characteristic that will become a marker for Ayn Rand's future heroes. He is also handsome. The original pen-and-ink illustrations show him as, in Rand's words many years later, "my present kind of hero: tall, long-legged, wearing soldier's leggings but no jacket, just . . . an open-collared shirt, torn in front, open very low, sleeves rolled at the elbows and hair falling down over one eye." Gripping the bars of a bamboo cage, he shouts defiant threats at the death-goddess-worshipping Hindus who surround him, while his friends cower in a corner. Meanwhile, a rescue team made up of two junior officers and a supremely rational French archaeologist track Cyrus and the others to the cave. After many brushes with gruesome forms of sacrificial death, Cyrus escapes and leads his friends, rescuers, and a beautiful young British woman (soon to be his wife) safely out of the valley. As they stand looking back from above, fires and a flood consume the valley and erase its blood-thirsty inhabitants from existence.

There are some remarkable things about *The Mysterious Valley*. Like Rudyard Kipling's stories of the same period, it is a romance about civilization and its adversaries. But these are specifically death-worshipping adversaries, a theme Rand was to visit again and again. In her mature fiction and essays, death worship, or "whim-worship," as she sometimes called it, is associated with antirationalism, anti-individualism, fascism, and collectivism of all kinds—most pointedly, in *We the Living*, with soul-destroying Russian Communism. The tale can also be read as subtly (but, to a Jewish child, compellingly) anti-Christian, since Kali, the death-dealing Hindu deity the shamans worship, demands a grisly and pointless living sacrifice of noble men. That these men, the story's heroes, are members of the British upper class would have made it all the more enthralling to Rand. All things British were in fashion with Russians at the time, and Rand had additional reasons for admiring England. On vacation near the Crimean Black Sea a year or two before, she had found the perfect model for her lissome future heroines in a tall, fair, slender, tennis-playing older British girl she developed a crush on from afar. She never forgot this girl, whose name was Daisy, or lost her admiration for the girl's type of long-legged beauty and fair-haired Anglo-Saxon glamour, which

she later compared to that of a movie star. In the years before she had yet learned much about America, Britain came to symbolize the heroic virtues of her inner universe. It was her “ideal country” at the time, she later said.

Then, too, the British officers and the French archaeologist in *The Mysterious Valley* are unusually analytical for characters in a boy’s adventure story. At every impasse—in the face of terrifying perils—they pause to ask themselves and one another what is the most logical way to proceed. Their insistence on examining every alternative before unerringly deciding on the right one slows down the action comically at times. But the result is swashbuckling punctuated by practical puzzles, which the reader solves alongside the captives and their friends. It is unusual, and one can imagine the nine-year-old Rand—the person who would later describe reason as “one’s only source of knowledge” and “one’s only guide to action”—being as much engrossed by the logical conundrums as by the action itself.

But it was the sexually charged character of Cyrus who fixed the story permanently in her mind. She probably spent hundreds of hours poring over the drawings and descriptions of the dashing hero who for her became the equivalent of an adolescent heartthrob. He was her “exclusive love,” she said, from the age of nine until the age of twelve—that is, until the horrors of the October 1917 Revolution put an end to everyone’s daydreams. He provided an aspirational remedy for her sense of isolation. With Cyrus as her secret lover and perfect soul mate, she successfully moved outside the circle of others’ conventional reality. The parties and social successes that preoccupied her mother, sisters, and cousins were no longer a concern of hers, she later said. She had something better, something higher, something that none of them could see or share. In homage, she would name Kira Argounova, the protagonist of *We the Living*, for Cyrus, “Kira” being the feminine version of “Kirill,” which is the Russian variant of “Cyrus.” As a mature writer, she patterned her most explicitly erotic male characters after Cyrus, including Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* and John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*. In 1929, working at odd jobs in Hollywood, she married a studio actor who looked almost exactly as Cyrus did in the 1914 illustrations she remembered. As she approached adolescence, started school, and began to write, her feeling for Cyrus was of “unbearable intensity” and practically all-consuming. She worshipped Cyrus—and she also identified with

him, just as she did with Catherine the Great. Her tendency to identify with men and male characters would have interesting implications for the adult Rand's ability to write more persuasively from a male point of view than any female writer since George Eliot.

It appears to be no coincidence then that, like Catherine and Cyrus—and like Rand's father during the impending revolution and like Jews throughout Russian history—her most famous fictional characters would be ostracized and even hunted down and punished, not for their faults but for their virtues.

In the summer of 1914, when Ayn Rand was nine and still reading *The Mysterious Valley*, a series of momentous events occurred, for her, for Russia, and for the European continent. As she and her family set out on their very first trip “abroad”—a word that soon would stir an echo of longing in middle-class Russians trapped by the revolution—the Austro-Hungarian emperor-in-waiting, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was about to ride into an assassin's sights. His politically motivated murder would propel Europe into World War I. His killer was a Serbian nationalist who, maddened by the Austrian empire's annexation of parts of the Slavic Balkans, ambushed and shot the archduke in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Russia was closely allied with its fellow ethnic Slavs in Serbia, and by the end of July 1914, Germany, Austria's ally, had declared war on Serbia and Russia. Russia reciprocated. France and England entered the conflict on Russia's side, and Turkey, Russia's ancient enemy, eventually joined with Austria and Germany. Europe quickly became impassable, and, before the year was out, would be the scene of slaughter such as the world had never seen.

Of course, the Rosenbaums knew none of this in late May or early June, when they set off. With their governess in tow, they embarked on the kind of six-week idyll that every St. Petersburg family who could afford it took: the European tour. They traveled first to what was then the intellectual capital of Europe, Vienna. There, as it happened, they might have glimpsed some of the giants of the age who were in residence that summer: Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rainer Maria Rilke, Arnold Schönberg—and also Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the architects of the coming revolution. Even Archduke Ferdinand was on hand, conducting official business before he headed off to

Sarajevo. From Austria the Rosenbaums moved on to Switzerland and Paris. In a resort in the Swiss Alps, Rand found a rare playmate, an intelligent boy whose family was staying in the same hotel. Setting aside her aversion to exercise, she climbed hills with the boy, picked wild berries, and generally discovered a freedom in the outdoors that forty years later she would commemorate in her descriptions of the happy childhood of Dagny Taggart in *Atlas Shrugged*. As with everything Rand responded to passionately as a child, she remembered this boy; he later contributed to the character of Dagny's childhood playmate, the copper scion Francisco d'Anconia. In Paris, Rand and her mother and sisters probably shopped for the season's fashions, including clothes for Rand's approaching first school term. Later, she would remember this summer abroad before the war as being what she had always thought existence would be like. This was where real people, intelligent people, lived. The trip confirmed her childish hatred of Russia.

While still on the Continent, the Rosenbaums learned that Russia was at war. They made a dash for London, where, since land travel had now become impossible, they and thousands of other stranded European travelers waited for ships to take them home.

In the few days Rand spent in the city on the Thames, the small, dark Jewish child glimpsed other willowy, fair-haired girls like Daisy, and one day, the story goes, strolling in the West End with her governess, she saw a poster for a theatrical production featuring a chorus of blond girls in plucky English pageboy haircuts. By her account, she went back to her hotel and began to write adventure stories about the girls—her first endeavor at writing. That evening, pencil to paper, she decided to become a writer. Although this memory may be apocryphal, in the service of the adult Rand's legend, it has the ring of truth. The girls, pictured as bold, modern, beautiful, and vaguely Aryan, were the female counterparts of Cyrus, and his proper consorts. At the time, of course, wanting to be a writer wasn't unusual for a girl of nine—especially a girl from St. Petersburg, where poets, novelists, and polemicists were celebrated. Whatever the timing, Rand's decision lasted a lifetime; she very rarely changed her mind about anything important to her.

From the moment she began to regard herself as a future writer, Rand's life had a purpose. Writing became an *idée fixe* that would see her through the next tumultuous years in Russia and feed a growing and

finally passionate determination to escape and emigrate to America—like Britain, a free society that historically tolerated Jews.

The Rosenbaums sailed on a packed ship through the North Sea, but their fate would have been kinder had no ship been found to take them home. After 1914, the war created unimagined hardships for all Russians, but especially Russian Jews, and its toll in lives and penury led directly to the revolution. Among her family members on both sides, with a very few exceptions, only Rand would ever again leave Russia. By the time she did, she and those closest to her would be battered and starving. “The war marked the end of the world,” she told a friend much later.

By early August the family was safely home. But their home was in an altered city renamed Petrograd. The czar, mistakenly believing that St. Petersburg was a Germanic name, had ordered the official change to an eastward-looking Slavic variation, ending two centuries of proud, and productive, openness to the developing West.

That fall, as the imperial regime was hastily mobilizing its huge but badly prepared army to go to war against the modern, well-trained Germans, Rand entered school. Natasha and Nora stayed at home with the governess, while Rand began a classical course of study at a famous private girls’ gymnasium, or primary school, called Stoiunin. The choice of Stoiunin has all the earmarks of Rand’s mother’s preferences. It was fashionable with the city’s elite families, and its curriculum promised to encourage both intellectual and athletic development in girls. Off and on, for the next three and a half years, Rand profited from it and hated it.

The school was progressive and well run. Founded in 1889 by Madame M. N. Stoiunina, a renowned educational thinker and a friend of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s wife, and by her husband, V. J. Stoiunin, a noted teacher of Russian and a member of the scholars committee of the Ministry of Public Education, it was conceived as an exemplary school for the Stoiunins’ daughters and the daughters of their literary friends. Its purpose was to balance academic, artistic, and hygienic development. The tuition was steep, but money wasn’t enough to secure entry. Applicants had to pass rigorous entrance exams, and so the small student body was alert, well connected, and affluent—typically, better connected and more affluent than Rand’s family. The school had an ex-

traordinary faculty, including, during Rand's years there, the well-known literary critic V. V. Gippius, who had earlier been the headmaster of the Tenishev boys' school, where Vladimir Nabokov was a student, and the famous philosophy professor N. O. Lossky, with whom Rand would later take a memorable class at the University of Petrograd. They tended to be prominent liberals who favored a democratic middle way between the czar and the burgeoning revolutionaries. The school was liberal, too, in its admission policies: Thanks to the Stoiunin's government contacts, it sidestepped official quotas on Jewish students. Almost a third of Rand's second-year class of thirty-nine girls was Jewish at a time when most Russian secondary schools were legally constrained to limit Jews to no more than 2 to 5 percent of students. By a decree of the academy's governing council, each year two or three bright girls from very poor families were admitted and allowed to study at the expense of the trustees, though Rand wasn't among them.

Stoiunin was renowned for an equally high level of teaching in the humanitarian disciplines and in the natural and mathematical sciences, which Rand was good at and liked. She remained a student there from 1914 until 1918, and she received a general education such as few American middle school students today can dream of. She studied French and German, mathematics, natural and physical science, European history, Russian language and literature, drawing and painting, and possibly music, medical hygiene, jurisprudence, gymnastics, and needlework. Russian Orthodox religion classes were mandatory and conducted by a priest; Jewish girls had to attend but didn't have to participate. Although sitting through lessons in this "revoltingly dark," "secret, superstitious, and unhealthy" doctrine must have been torture for her—especially in light of the horrific anti-Semitic violence that was then occurring throughout Russia, avidly supported by the church—in middle age she could still amaze her friends by correcting a mistaken recitation of a well-known Russian Orthodox prayer.

In 1958, while discussing the eponymous hero of Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, she wrote, "Any man [who has] a serious central ambition is more of an outsider in his youth than in later years. It is particularly in his youth that he will be misunderstood and resented by others." A poignant remark, considering how much of an outsider Rand would remain.

By the time she entered Stoiunin, she was proudly and painfully conscious of her difference. She recalled having "a tremendous sense of

intellectual power,” a conviction that she “could handle any [idea or task] I wanted to.” In one early experience at school, she remembered taking a field trip to the city’s zoological museum, a dusty repository of stuffed animals, snakes, and birds. The teacher asked the class of girls to choose a bird or an animal about which to write a story. Rand chose a stork perched on a sliver of rooftop with a hint of a chimney poking through and wrote her story about a girl who lived in a house that just happened to have a stork on top, “merely mentioning the stork.” The teacher was tickled, Rand recalled, and gave her a high grade. Later, the teacher confided to Rand that she had created the assignment because she thought the girls were too young to write convincingly about people. But as evidenced by her postcard collection, Rand’s eye was always focused on her fellow man.

In another school assignment, the girls were asked to write a few paragraphs about why being a child is such a joyous thing. Rand didn’t agree that it *was* joyous and shocked her classmates with “a scathing denunciation” of childhood, she recalled. At the top of the page, she copied quotations out of an encyclopedia from Descartes (“I think, therefore I am”) and Pascal (“I would prefer an intelligent hell to a stupid paradise”) to make her point, which was that children couldn’t think as clearly as they would be able to once they had grown up and learned more. And what use was it, she asked, to play boring games and read silly books while waiting? This memory formed the basis for a revealing flashback in her third novel, *The Fountainhead* (1943); there, a brilliant and exuberant little boy named Johnny Stokes humiliates the book’s archvillain, Ellsworth Toohey, by composing a masterly, rebellious grade-school essay on hating school, while Ellsworth sucks up to the teacher by pretending to love school. Toohey ends up envying and hating Stokes, as perhaps Rand felt that her fellow students envied her.

Rand was known as “the brain” of her class. But she had no friends. There was one girl, however, who struck her as interesting and whom she liked to observe. Self-confident, independent, and intelligent, the girl was a very good student and was also universally popular with the other girls. How did she do it? She didn’t seem to be making an effort to win people over. Rand imagined that she and the girl might become friends and was also curious to know what made the girl different from herself. Were social graces perhaps not a sign of shallowness or mediocrity? One day, she marched up to the girl and asked, awkwardly and

bluntly, "Would you tell me what is the most important thing in life to you?" The girl, startled but willing, answered, "My mother." Rand nodded and walked away. In her view, this was a ridiculous thing to say, and it disqualified the girl from further interest.

This was "the first most important event in my life socially, which made me see that it's not significant why some people, who seem to be individualistic, get along with the crowd, and I don't," she later said. "I had thought she was a serious girl and that she was after serious things, but she was just conventional and ordinary, a mediocrity, and she didn't mean anything as a person. It was really like a fallen idol."

Rand wasn't antisocial; she would have liked to have a friend. But her quick dismissals of people based on what she saw as fatal flaws in character or thinking would form a pattern in her life. In the face of disappointment, she was unable or unwilling to ask herself why a girl she had admired, for example, would give a silly or sentimental answer to a serious question. Could the girl have misunderstood what Rand was after? Could she simply have been startled? Could she have had an interesting reason for what she said? Rand did not ponder the context of the girl's response, nor did she dig deeper to see what she could learn. People were either exceptional or ordinary, her kind of people or nonentities. Later, she would call herself a hero-worshiper, and it's no accident that she spoke of this girl as "a fallen idol." Her romantic tendencies caused her to overestimate some people and underestimate others. She rarely reconsidered. Her readings of people who disappointed her would only harden and darken over time.

Her ambitions were set. By her tenth birthday, she was writing novels at home and in school. At Stoiunin, she sat in the back of the class, a book propped in front of her to disguise what she was doing, and wrote. She finished four novels by the age of eleven, each of which featured a heroine who was exactly her own age. The surface similarities stopped there. Foreshadowing Dagny Taggart and Dominique Francon, these first heroines were tall and long-legged, with bobbed hair and blue eyes. One was named Thunder ("Rpom"). Another, from the same year—1915, the gruesome second year of World War I, when Russian military losses had already exceeded a million men and England was in danger of being invaded by Germany—was an English girl who argued her way into the British Royal Navy and single-handedly machine-gunned down the entire German fleet. Such lone heroism and unflinch-

ing use of violence are more familiar in boys' stories than in girls', but this was to be Rand's pattern: to assume the preferences and prerogatives of the men of her time.

Cyrus's influence can be seen in this story, of course, but so, perhaps, can that of Joan of Arc, whom Rand considered the most heroic woman in history. Why? Because she "stood alone against everyone, even to the point of death," explained a longtime friend of Rand's. Whenever necessary, so would Ayn Rand.

The child was aware that these early stories were "just for her"; she didn't expect to publish anything until she was grown up, she said. But she did expect to publish. So by the age of ten she was pursuing what she already thought of as her future career. As her mother wrote to her many years later, "You [always] planned to be greater than Columbus."

If Anna hoped that young Rand would make friends among the hand-picked students at Stoiunin, she was for the most part disillusioned. Rand stood on the outside of her peer group, proudly, bitterly, self-consciously alone. She hated the stocky shape of her developing body, which she felt didn't accord with her essence, but she was proud of her mind. She told herself that she took life and ideas more seriously than the other girls and that her values, especially her all-consuming passion for Cyrus, were superior to theirs. She was "left strictly alone," she said. In spite of her proud defiance, she was again desperately lonely. She longed to find *her* kind of people, and, for now, to do so meant she had to make them up in stories. And so emerged the three-dimensional world of Ayn Rand, where idealized characters take the measure of reality and often find it needs correcting.