

**Vladimir Rosing**  
*Memoirs of a Social, Political and Artistic Life*

**Transcribed, Edited & Annotated**  
**by Richard Rosing**

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*To G.L. with all my love and gratitude<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> The identity of “G.L.” is a mystery. The dedication exists in one of the earliest manuscript books, written in the 1930s. Because it is the only dedication Val ever made, it has been retained here.

## Prologue Without an End, Without Beginning

One never knows what lies beyond the instant; one never knows when and where began the chain that brought this instant or the next. Our finest intellect vainly tries to grasp, to understand what lies beyond its scope — the infinite — the endless space and time, without an end, without beginning.

As I write this very instant, and as you read this line, somewhere a new life is born, and somewhere a life has ended. To understand the reason for and the purpose of our lives, to understand the cruelty of nature — when God who has created all and rules is a God of *love* — is a vain effort. We must accept that it exists beyond our understanding, yet the human brain in all its arrogance and conceit refuses to accept defeat, and carries on the struggle to conquer nature, space, and maybe time; but it cannot conquer time, that goes relentlessly forward, forward, bringing in its course the endless joys, misery and suffering of human minds and bodies.

In any case, here on this Earth some say *true* life only begins unhampered by the body — [the] bones, flesh, nerves and senses that bring to us mortals such joy and such cruel suffering. Who knows? Some of us think we do. We build such castles, such paradise in our imagination. The flesh may rot, but we — the souls — we live forever as part of the infinite and all its glory. But do we?

Why do I write all this? It's not my subject, but I just saw a *happy* man. He was walking either to his work or maybe to join his lover. I envied him. He was young. Life must have seemed beautiful to him — his thoughts gay. His clothes were immaculate, with a flower in his buttonhole. In his thoughts of romance, with the anticipation of its joy, the fate in his future was eradicated from every movement of his body.

Oh, joy of love, the blessing of mankind: this glorious power to re-create our lives through others, to procreate our self into the future — new life, with its never ending chain of cells and atoms. I followed him, to bask a little in his happiness.

He stopped, looked at his watch; smiled, seemed undecided; made up his mind, changed it again, and started to cross the street. On the pavement (still wet from a passing April shower) a Ford came gaily down the street, bouncing like a lightweight champion on her springs. A banana peel was innocently lying useless, discarded — thrown by a passerby into the street. The innocent happy foot of our unknown friend stepped on it. He slipped and fell. The brakes of the Ford squealed and skidded. There was a cry — the end.

How terrible, how unexpected, how strange. How true it really is that *one never knows what waits beyond the instant...* Perhaps it is a ridiculous unwanted banana peel, a stupid Ford, and the many tears of those that are left behind.

What was the *force* that brought about that instant which ended all his mortal hopes? Was it in the instant when he decided to cross the street? Or previous to that, when the banana peel fell on the pavement, thrown by a passerby? Or, was it because the owner of the car was late for his appointment, and he hurried? (Had he not been late, he would have

passed the spot a few minutes earlier.) Oh no, the chain of circumstances starts earlier. You can trace it backward to when our friend met the girl he was to see today and fell in love with her — that instant was his doom, yet he did not know it; he was glad about it; he fell in love; he called to see her, and called again. They were to marry.

Had he not met her, he would not have been there today crossing that street. But it goes even *further* back, to his *parents*, who decided to come live in London instead of Manchester. It was *their* fault. His father was doing well in Manchester. His mother wanted to live in London, so they changed their residence; it doomed their one beloved son — but they did not know.

Or, perhaps [it was even] before that, to the first *meeting* of his parents and *their* love — yes, you can even trace it to *their* parents for having met and married — and so on, back and back, until we can't go any further into the infinite of the past ages, because there are only atoms, swirling and floating (seemingly aimlessly, but not really aimlessly) in their perpetual motion in the infinite of space, creating life that is ever-changing in its form — new species forming, shaping different kinds of bodies, always forging ahead to accommodate the strange thing we call *soul, concentration of mind, ego or consciousness*.

What does it matter what it is called? It's there, enthroned within our body, which is its instrument and slave — if we only but *know*. Instead, the body pretends it is *our* master, enslaving us through our senses, creating desires, greed, hate, wars, and struggle — with rare glimpses of peace, happiness, and contentment. My life had all of this...

Oh, how many times events, emotions, or actions of great magnitude inspired me to write [the story of] my life: the life of a rebel who fought against injustice, cruelty, and selfishness, against outlived traditions — stupider politics — and art. How many times I began to write [about] the amazing kaleidoscope of people, from Kings to starving peasants, who have crossed my path — and on rereading tore up the pages. There was no sense to it. No focus. Every time I began to work, I felt that I had not yet achieved the *purpose* of my life.

My life had a *dual* interest: that of an *artist* and that of a *politician* — both to me of equal vital interest and importance. In the artistic world I was recognized, and some of my influence was accepted. But in the political world — where I could have had an influence to the point of changing the history of the world and saving countless lives — my advice was ignored. To the great leaders, I was only an artist — and what does an artist understand or know in politics! It seems that all the monstrous gigantic blunders, which have cost millions of lives, are a prerogative only for state secretaries, presidents, and prime ministers. My often-lonely voice in the political marshes and quicksand was lost.

It was a tragedy for me to see how so many of my predictions came true and plunged the world into a great catastrophe which still threatens us today. At that time it could have been so easily avoided — and at a minute cost in comparison to what we have paid, and what we may yet be called to pay. We are living on borrowed time. There is very little that we can do now, but that little may yet bring reason to the world — and to those who believe in the finest and the most beautiful thoughts, and the great ideals of the great masters, and not of the wild beast.

This is not just the story of my life. It is the story of the utmost fantastic period of human history — and my small part in it. It is also the story of the music and art which I have served faithfully all my love and of many great ones with whom I worked and had contact — and it is the story of those wonderful women who helped to shape my life, inspired me to achievement and progress.

Now I can look back and find meaning and reasons for some of the things I did, lessons I learned, privations and hurt I endured. I must give a prayer of gratitude to the hand of Providence which guided me and saved my life in many instances. Now I feel I can intelligently write of what my life has been, of the successes and mistakes I made, of those people I loved, and friends who helped me make my life this great adventure it has been — and still is.

## 1890 — The Twilight of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

I was born in the twilight of the 19th century as the world was entering a new era.<sup>2</sup> There were people whose memories were still fresh with the horrors of the Franco-Prussian war, the American Civil War, and who took part in the Crimean war against England and France (who were now stout allies of the Russian bear). There were even people still living who had taken part in defending the sacred soil of Russia against Napoleon. There was still a messy situation over the liberated serfs, as no doubt there was in America.

Russia was firmly ruled by the autocracy of Nicholas II, whose ruling house would celebrate its 300 years in 1913. Nothing could change this... A few stupid students tried to organize little worthless strikes and were thrown into prison and sent into exile in Siberia. They created mutinies in prison, went on hunger strikes, sang forbidden revolutionary songs — but it all seemed like a musical comedy and no one took it seriously. It was utterly futile. The aristocracy ruled the country. They held the land. They looked down on the merchant class — which was servile and licked their boots — while the peasants and workers were considered as little better than animals. Only the intelligentsia — doctors, lawyers, and artists — longed for liberty, and a constitution, and improved conditions for the lower classes.

### My Ancestors

I wish I knew more of my ancestors, of one officer on my father's side who was born to the Swedish name of Rösing. I know he was left seriously wounded on the field of Poltava, where the Swedish armies of Karl the 12th were decimated by the Tsar Peter. This officer was taken prisoner, and after the Russo-Swedish peace married the girl who nursed him back to life, and settled down about 150 miles west of the field of battle.<sup>3</sup>

My mother was born in Rovno. Her father was a wealthy Jewish merchant. Her mother was the daughter of a Russian Baltic baron whose ancestor settled there after one of the crusades. Originally they were German knights that settled and ruled the Baltic provinces, then in their turn they were conquered by Alexander Nevsky and became Russian vassals.

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Sergeivitch Rosing was born on January 23, 1890 in St. Petersburg, Russia. At the time of Val's birth Russia used the Julian calendar, which was twelve days behind the Gregorian Calendar used in the rest of the world. This would put his Russian birthday on January 11, 1890 assuming his biographical birth date was changed when he moved to the west, or when Russia adopted the Gregorian calendar on Jan 31, 1918.

<sup>3</sup> The battle of Poltava, the culmination of the Great Northern War, changed the political landscape in Europe forever and resulted in Russia emerging finally as a major European power. The Swedes, who had been the aggressors, were vanquished once and for all, and set about reinventing themselves as a nation of peace. Everything about the Swedish "surprise" attack at Poltava went wrong. Half the Swedish fighting force were either killed or wounded. Of the 23,000 Swedes taken captive, including 983 officers, only about 4,000 ever made it back to Sweden. The rest either perished enroute or decided to stay in Russia, as Rosing's ancestor did.

By the 19th century, many of those families had intermarried the Russians and became completely Russianized, and occupied important positions at the court of the Russian Tsars. They assimilated most of the Russian customs and habits, among them drink and women and gambling; especially the last was often tragic and ruined many families.

In the early 18th century it was not uncommon when an entire estate was staked on a card, and it has been known when the gambler — having lost everything — staked his wife or a daughter. Prince Potocki, the owner of the park in Ouman, won his wife at cards — a woman of extraordinary beauty. She belonged to a Russian general who captured her in Turkey and married her.<sup>4</sup>

My grandfather on my mother's side had acquired a fortune in real estate. He descended from a long line of Spanish Jews who settled in the Rovno province after the infamous edict of Torquemada against Jews in Spain.<sup>5</sup>

The legend handed down in my family was that the soldiers of the Inquisition were on their way to arrest my ancestor. Fortunately, the officer who commanded of the troop was in love with the daughter of my ancestor and warned them. They fled with a few belongings.

It was a long trek between Spain and the Baltic provinces — much suffering and privation endured — and it took them three generations to accomplish it. The long arm of the Inquisition followed the fleeing Spaniards through France, the Low Countries, and Germany. Finally they found comparative safety in the Baltics. That safety was constantly paid to the rulers through taxes and bribes, with no recourse to justice, and the only way to combat was to have enough money to bribe.

My grandfather had a large real estate and mortgage firm. He held a mortgage against Baron Sivert — a rake, a drunkard, and a gambler. Like it happens often, he had a lovely and charming daughter. My grandfather had to deal often with her over the mortgage payment, as her father was either drunk or away on a gambling spree. They both fell in love with each other, but the marriage seemed out of the question between a wealthy Jew and a poor daughter of a baron.

One day their romance was discovered. My grandfather escaped lynching by a pack of noble barons who were visiting Sivert for a gambling party. My grandfather offered to play Sivert a game of cards. The stakes were the mortgage he held on the Sivert estate against the permission to marry his daughter. The drunken company hilariously approved the sporting proposition and the stakes. My grandfather won, and as a wedding present he gave Sivert back his mortgage. Later, after my mother was born, they moved to St. Petersburg — where later she met my father, a young promising lawyer.

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4 Potocki was a Count, not a Prince; he named the park in Uman “Sofiyivka,” after his wife Sophia.

5 The Alhambra Decree, in 1492, immediately expelled the Jews from Spain.

### 1893-96 — The Film of Memory Begins

My memories are fragments, yet my emotions are so positive; some also nostalgic, some comic, some tragic; each marking a new realization and consciousness of life.

My life! In a flash of a second — years! What an amazing thing is memory; with what speed, clarity and exactness it brings back the past; like a film, it projects within my brain the places, people and events that made my life so full and rich, so interesting — all links in the endless chain of events.

The past... The film of memory begins. I am three years old, clutching the apron of my nurse. We are standing in a street in St. Petersburg — now Leningrad. I am crying — terrified. She is interested in watching a house on fire. I see flames, smoke, a fire engine, and people running. I hear shouts and yells.

That memory stops, and now I vaguely see a train journey. I see us driving in an open carriage through a town (it was Berlin); we pass by a monstrously high bridge. (When I saw it years later, it appeared quite ordinary.)

We are on a train again, arriving somewhere; there are mountains, a lake; Vevey, an adorable little town near Lausanne. Our villa had a charming garden right on the lake and little steps from which we bathed.

I had a beautiful mother. She was considered a great beauty, and a wonderful person with golden heart. Looking back I can't remember ever seeing her angry, or say something unkind or ugly. She was dignity itself, and everyone admired and loved her. I don't remember my father until I was seven, for when I was three years old my mother packed my two sisters and me and left for Switzerland and didn't return to Russia until I was seven.

As I found out later, my mother had become separated from my father on account of my father falling in love with someone; the skeleton did not come out of the closet until I was eight. The *skeleton* was a gorgeous sensuous blonde whom I saw when I was sent to stay with my father for a few months. I was quite impressed by her — the glamorous way she was dressed, the perfume that she radiated.

I could not understand why my governess did not allow me to be too friendly with this lovely creature. When I began to know a little more about life, I understood this glamorous lady came to my father as a client to settle some dispute. My father settled the legal dispute, but could not resist the charmer — which resulted in a triangle — and that new dispute was settled this time by my mother leaving father. She took us children, and left to live in Switzerland. I would not see my father again until I was seven.

I was born number three in the family. I had two elder sisters, with four years difference between each of us. Of my two sisters, I loved Liuba<sup>6</sup> the most. She was only four years older,

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<sup>6</sup> Liuba (1886-1954)



therefore still young enough to play games with me. She was sweet and generous, with a loving heart, and our childhood affection and closeness always remained with us. Vera<sup>7</sup> was already fifteen, too old to play with, at an age when she preferred to go about with grown-ups and with mother. Consequently, it was only when I grew up that we really became close friends, with my actions being a cause of great changes and influences in her life — but at that time I was only a playful nuisance. I have been told many times by my mother and others — when in later years I misbehaved myself in one way or the other — what a sweet adorable child I was, and strangely enough I remember myself as such. I wonder!

We had a Baltic German governess named Pauline. She was an attractive blonde, and was devoted to the family. A few months later, we were joined by my mother's elder sister, Aunt Matilda, with her husband and his two sons by a former marriage.

This began my childhood period, spent so happily among the majestic beauty of Lake Geneva. I doubt I realized then what a happy childhood I had: skating and bobsledding in the winter, bathing and boating on the lake in the summer, picnics in the mountains, helping friendly peasants gather grapes from the vineyards and later walnuts; staying during the hot weather in the mountains in Chexbres, Glion, or Caux.<sup>8</sup> I know I went to the kindergarten, but don't remember anything about it.

If you have never been in this little paradise on earth you have missed something very precious in your life. It has an inspirational beauty the equal of which I have never been able to find and duplicate. I am prejudiced — nostalgic, overemotional — but I feel so strongly that whatever appreciation of beauty I have within me has been developed and nursed in this Garden of Eden, in the Shangri La of one's imagination and one's soul.

There was the beauty of the scenery: Mont Blanc, like a sentinel of the world, proudly standing unconquered with its furry white robe, glittering with diamonds under the bright rays of the sun, that lovely healing sun of Switzerland — so bright, so cheerful, and so friendly.

Great thinkers, great writers, philosophers, artists, and politicians found their fountain of inspiration in the beauty of the vast emerald green Lake Lemman, surrounded on all sides by the majestic Alps who as if trying to please and woo the lake change their slopes each season.

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7 Vera (1882-1944)

8 Chexbres is a small town perched as on a balcony above the north shore of Lake Geneva, near Vevey. Nicknamed "balcon du Léman" it is noted for its incredible view of the lake below. Glion and Caux are similarly located above the town of Montreux at the east end of the lake. The Hotel Victoria in Glion, where the Rosings likely stayed, opened in the last quarter of the 19th century. Further up the mountain, in the small village of Caux, the Caux Palace Hotel opened in July 1902 and was frequented by the highest echelon of society, as well as celebrities from the world of the arts. Since 1946, it has become home to the annual "Initiatives of Change" conference.

In spring they are covered with flowers of all pastel shades. They are green in summer, turning golden yellow for the Fall, silvery white like a bridal veil in the winter, with little ancient cozy picturesque towns nestling at the foot of the mountains caressed by the waters of the emerald lake. At night the sparkling golden flickers of light in houses on the mountains beckon the travelers to warmth of a fire and hospitality.

It was a feast for one's eyes, filling one's soul with poetry, romance, and love of nature. The air was so pure, so fresh, and invigorating; it's not just a coincidence that so many people who have influenced the history of the world lived there: John Calvin, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Byron, Richard Wagner, Paderewski — and Lenin and his pack of future cutthroats. One has to be made from steel and concrete not to respond to this beauty — even in the case of the tragically misguided mind of Lenin. He wanted happiness of the underdog, but he brought misery instead.

The most powerful impression, one that filled me with terror, was a visit to Castle Chillon, with its torture chambers, and a well with knives at the bottom into which prisoners were thrown and cut to pieces. It was my first realization of the cruelty of human nature. How much more of it I would witness.

One day, my godfather and godmother came to visit us from Russia. The last time I'd met them was at my christening. I was deeply impressed by his uniform, long beard and decorations. General Stolypin<sup>9</sup> was Governor of the Kremlin: the ancient palace and stronghold of the Tsar in Moscow, the symbolic heart of Russia. I was thrilled to see him. He was tall and noble of bearing in his gorgeous uniform with long white beard, looking as if an ancient boyar had suddenly come back to life. He came with his niece (and my godmother) Natalia Stolypin, who was to play an important part in my life. She was a poor relation, but a very beautiful young girl. Her parents died when she was a little girl and left her penniless, putting her in the care of her uncle. But, in spite of his great position, I don't believe my godfather was well to do, because after Natalia finished school he made her accept a position as a Class Dame, a sort of general governess in the school for girls of Russian nobility. She was very lovely — that I realized later. She had soft white skin, dark eyes, brown silky hair, a beautifully shaped aquiline nose with sensitive nostrils, and a rather thin but kind mouth, with a charming smile revealing a rare strain of pearl-like teeth. Strange was to be her life. For some reason, my mother and my aunt were being very critical of Natalia, and they discussed her rather haughty attitude. My godfather wanted my mother to return to Russia and to come live in Moscow. She promised him she would think about it. To my great regret, they stayed only a few days — as I liked playing with the General's medals.

Several incidents stand out vividly in my memory, especially one that should have ended my life at an early age of five. We had a courtyard paved with stones, [with] a wooden ladder leading to some kind of shed where wood was kept. One day I climbed the ladder, slipped, and by some miracle my foot caught between the steps of the ladder. I hung like a turkey, head down by the grace of an ankle, yelling for help — and it came just in time to save my life.

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<sup>9</sup> Val's godfather, General Arkady Dmitrievich Stolypin (1821-1899), became Commandant of the Kremlin in 1891. His son, Peter Stolypin, would be Prime Minister of Russia from 1906 until he was assassinated in 1911.

For the summer we went to a cooler climate, to a little summer place on the mountain — Chexbres, above Vevey — surrounded by the lovely vineyards and groves of walnuts, and here I committed my first sin: I got drunk at five years of age. A friend of my mother, to get me out of her hair, took me for a walk in the mountains. It was a hot July afternoon. We stopped at a small railway station. I was thirsty. They only had beer — forbidden drink — but my mother's friend was elastic and let me drink a very large tankard; and while she went to the ladies' room I drained hers to the bottom. The result was I could not walk, and to the horror of my mother I arrived to the hotel singing at the top of my lungs and drunk as a lord. It took me a quarter of a century before I took courage to drink a glass of beer.

On our return from the mountains I came in contact with the first tragedy. Our maid, a day before our return, committed suicide by drowning in the lake. Her body was never found. She left a note asking forgiveness of my mother, but [said] she could not face the dishonor of having an illegitimate child. For days there were tears — sobbing of her bereaved parents. Our gardener was first ostracized, then dismissed; and I was bewildered, too young to understand.

When I was six, I almost died from a severe attack of diphtheria. I enjoyed the convalescence, and remember my bed was covered with toys. I never kept my toys for long. Already at that age I was extremely curious and wanted to know how and why they were made. That led me one day to ask my mother to explain how chickens are made. She said that *a fowl sits on the eggs and hatches the chicken*. I thought it a magnificent affair, and decided to also hatch a chicken. I got an egg from the kitchen and placed it under a little footstool. (I decided that being heavier than the fowl I should not sit directly on the egg, but use the footstool to protect the egg.) I placed the whole affair under the dining room table and sat there for hours, constantly looking down to see if a chicken was coming out. My family was delighted with my occupation (as it kept me quiet) and advised me to have patience.

Finally, I decided to give up the creation of a chicken — but [deciding] instead to create a cow. My logical deduction went as follows: if an egg produces a chicken, then a glass of milk must produce a cow. This time I sat directly on the glass of milk. It was uncomfortable, but the desire to give birth to a cow gave me strength to endure the discomfort for several more hours. Finally, my mother gave me a toy cow to compensate for my disappointment.

We stayed in Vevey two winters and then moved to Lausanne. My mother was tired of keeping a villa, so we stayed at the Hotel Beau Rivage.<sup>10</sup> Nothing of great importance occurred then except that I remember it as a very happy winter. There was a nice garden in which I played soldiers with another little boy; I commanded armies, fought battles, and attacked what seemed to me then a high hill; but when I visited the place again eleven years later it was not more than three feet high. Often in the evenings, to our great delight, magicians and artists would give entertainment at the hotel.

My aunt and uncle were constantly quarreling, and one day my uncle disappeared with his two sons; I never saw them again. Later our governess, Pauline, left us to get married. Many

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<sup>10</sup> In one version Val says they lived at the Hotel Victoria. There was a nice hotel of that name in Lausanne, but also one in Glion where it is certain they stayed, and it is possible Val confused the two.

tears were shed. I begged her not to go, and even promised to marry her myself as soon as I grew up. This statement must have relieved for a moment the sadness of her departure for my mother. She was not only a governess, but a friend.

One day, a letter came from my godfather persuading my mother to come back to Russia and to live in Moscow. Aunt Matilda was of the same opinion, so it was decided to leave Switzerland. Then began the period of unfoldment, and of learning life and its value.

### 1897 — Strange New Scenery

I remember well our journey back. One day of feverish preparation and packing. The million parcels and bags. The excitement of getting into an old fashioned train with skirt funnels. The station of Basil where we changed our train. Then, traversing Berlin's immaculately clean streets in a carriage (As my mother used to say, "One can eat porridge on the pavement!") and being astounded at bridges over the canals. The long train journey. The Russian frontier, with the tall bearded soldiers standing guard, watching with suspicion every person entering the mysterious land of the Tsar.

The strange new scenery. Endless plains of cut wheat, changing into almost virginal forests of pine and white birch, with only rare villages and still rarer towns. What a contrast to the highly civilized and heavily populated [countries of] Germany and Switzerland. It took us a day and a half from the frontier to reach Moscow. It was warm the morning we arrived. The sun was shining on the gold cupolas of a thousand churches of Moscow. There was for some reason a smell of tar in the air and, I believe, horse manure; but I know there was a distinct smell of Moscow such as I have never encountered before.

### Princes, Tartars and Romanovs

In the 16th century, it was a tiny little city, ruled by one of the hundreds of Russian princes. The great land of Russia was divided then into small principdoms, with no unity. They fought each other, one after another, and were an easy prey to the Tartar invasion in the 13th century, which enslaved the entire country. For two long centuries, the people groaned under the yoke of terror. All progress of civilization was stopped. The roaming horde of Tartar warriors, supervising the gathering of taxes, raped Russian women, killed and tortured the men, often massacring entire villages — and even towns. Much blood was spilt and mixed, left behind to continue its cruel procreation and influence upon future generations of Russians. From that comes the Russian proverb: *scratch a Russian and you will find a Tartar.*

The ruling princes of Moscow quietly gathered strength and acquired land, expanded their domination over other princes, and finally united them. Then rose the battle cry of liberation. They gathered armies, and finally on the field of Kulikovo<sup>11</sup> gave battle with 200,000 men and defeated the Tartar legions. They liberated Russia — but then a century later literally enslaved the people to the landlords under the autocracy and yoke of the Romanov dynasty. Such was the long-suffering fate of the people of Russia. From then on Moscow became the capital of Russia, ruled by one Tsar instead of hundreds of feudal princes.

<sup>11</sup> The battle of Kulikovo took place in 1380.

In the beginning of 18th century, Peter the Great, wishing to break away from all the old traditions, modernized and Europeanized Russia. Wanting to have having an outlet to the sea, he built a new city — St. Petersburg — and made it the capital; but in spite of that, Moscow never lost its symbolism of the heart of Russia. As St. Petersburg became more and more cosmopolitan, Moscow remained Russian in spirit, tradition and atmosphere. Russian people talked with respect and admiration regarding St. Petersburg — but with *love* about Moscow. Napoleon himself understood that, when in trying to conquer Russia he took Moscow, and found that Russian patriots had burned it to ashes — for in its fire burned the destroyed power of Napoleon.

### In the Kremlin

Stolypin, with his beard and decorations, met our train — and the familiar figure of the Governor of the Kremlin meeting us created a minor sensation at the station. I was impressed by the two elegant carriages, and the footmen in livery with imperial eagles. The station master, his staff, the conductor, the porters: all bowed and vied to serve and please us, to anticipate our slightest order, slightest wish. The same conductor on the train was not so servile, just polite — barely polite. That was my first lesson in *servility* and that terrible division of *classes* in Russia.

We were taken to his palace in the Kremlin to stay a few days with my godfather until we found an apartment. I was too young to appreciate all the beauty, all the historic interest of the place: the amazing beauty of churches and palaces, surrounded by walls with imposing towers. I remember only the hundreds of captured Napoleonic guns of all sizes, the greatest and largest bell in the world, called the Czar's Bell, and the largest cannon, called the Czar Cannon. I have never seen anything like it, then or since. If only those walls could speak what they have seen, encountered; first the endless tide of Tartars beating against those walls, then the Poles, Tushinsky brigands, Napoleon and his legions; finally the revolutionary uprisings in 1905 and 1917.

We lived for a few days in the sumptuous apartment in the Kremlin. From its window lay Moscow at our feet, glittering in the sunshine. I was elated. What seemed to be an army of butlers bowed and scraped and served our slightest wish. Undoubtedly we could not be just ordinary people — and snobbishness made its grand entrance into my life. Snobbism — that poison of the human mind, that permeates everywhere; and sometime or other no one escapes it, of being its victim or victimizing others. My stay in the Kremlin made me an easy victim — oh, I was proud. I bragged about it to my new acquired boy friends. I was proud; very proud. I liked them envying me. It pleased my little vanity.<sup>12</sup>

We found an apartment not far, so that we could visit my godfather often. I never understood why he loved our little family. We were not related. There were no obvious ties. The only reason I could fathom was that he loved my mother unselfishly, and with a very

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<sup>12</sup> As a Commandant of the Kremlin in the 19th century, Val's godfather, Arkady Dmitrievich Stolypin (1821-1899) would have lived in the Poteszny Palace, also known as the Amusement Palace as it housed Russia's first theater. In later years, this was also Stalin's residence of choice.

beautiful devotion. He did so many things for us to make our life happy and pleasant in Moscow, and I know there was never a question of a romance between them.<sup>13</sup>

In September [1897] we went to stay with Stolypin at his country place on the shores of a lake, surrounded by forest, far away from a station and civilization — primitive coaches, impassable roads in bad weather. I felt like in a different world: so strange, primitive, vast, and overpowering.

In Switzerland, I had forgotten the little Russian I knew as a three-year-old child; for some reason, I always spoke French there; so at first I had great difficulty in learning my own native tongue — and the habit of rolling a French “R” remained for always with me.

When we returned to Moscow, my father came for a two day visit. I felt funny, and curious to see this stranger who was supposed to be my father. It was my first real acquaintance with him, as I did not remember him from before we left Russia. I liked him straightaway. He was a pleasant man.

He brought me presents and gave me ten rubles, and that endeared him to me even more; then in the evening he took us all to the theater. It was a very successful operetta, and my first acquaintance with the theatre: *Orpheus in the Underworld*.<sup>14</sup> God knows why he chose it; maybe there was nothing else worth seeing. I was thrilled, but did not understand anything. Probably I was taken because there was no one that I could be left with. Then, father left just as suddenly as he appeared.

For a few months, our life was uneventful. Liuba and Vera went to school. Mother used to go out with Vera to the theater a great deal, and Aunt Matilda, who lived with us, stayed at home.<sup>15</sup> I remember one day mother and Vera were discussing at breakfast very excitedly that they had heard the previous evening a marvelous man by the name of Chaliapin. It seemed such a long difficult name for me to pronounce, and it amused me very much. Strange life — little did I guess as a child of seven that one day our paths would cross, and that in some respect Chaliapin would consider me as his rival.

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13 As late as 1901, Zinaida Rosing is listed as having an apartment in Arbat (which is very close to the Kremlin) so it appears that the Moscow apartment obtained in 1897 was kept for at least a few years. Boris Feodorov, a leading Russian historian on the Stolypin family, believes that a romance did in fact exist between Zinaida Rosing and General Arkady Stolypin. After retiring from the Army, and before the Kremlin appointment, General Stolypin lived in St. Petersburg. His wife died in the spring of 1889, the year before Val was born. The memoirs of Baron Alexander Meyendorff, who lived with the Stolypins for a time, make reference to the General’s “frequent and fairly persistent escapades” and state that the death of his wife “was not a real blow.” Meyendorff also states that the General had an affair with an unnamed Jewish woman. Though a military man, Stolypin was very interested in the dramatic arts, and he also played the violin. According to Meyendorff, the General had tried also his hand at playwriting, and had written both libretto and music for a French operetta.

14 This was a rather racy show for a seven-year-old to see, culminating in the famous Can-Can dance.

15 Rosing mentions in his notes that they had a house on the Tverskaya, an extremely fashionable street leading directly to the Kremlin. Zinaida may have kept the apartment in the Arbat for private time with Stolypin.

It was a creative period in Moscow — concerts by Koussevitzky, and Chaliapin beginning to make a colossal success. Women swooned over Sobinov (a combination of Sinatra, Presley, and Gigli). The Moscow Art Theatre was created by Stanislavsky.<sup>16</sup> Chekhov was a rising playwright. A friend of Chaliapin's, Gorky wrote a play called *At the Bottom* dealing with incredible poverty of lower classes, and it produced a great impact on the class of thinking people.<sup>17</sup>

### Winter 1897-98 — A Perfect Little Demon

The next winter, on account of my sister Liuba being ill with scarlet fever, I was sent at once to a lady friend's house. I was very annoyed, and made myself thoroughly unpleasant, insulting my hostess at every opportunity. I stayed only one day, and then Vera took me to St. Petersburg, the place of my birth, to stay with my father. We stayed with him most of the winter. I did not see much of my father; he was one of the leading barristers of St. Petersburg and a very busy man. Father engaged a governess, but I have very little recollection about her. Vera stayed with us a good deal of the time; I didn't like her very much.

Suddenly, away from the restraining influence of my mother and Aunt, from a sweet angelic boy (so I was told) I turned into a perfect little demon, an uncontrollable little ruffian. I made life for everyone in my father's home miserable. Father spoiled me. I wanted everything my way, and if I did not get it, I would throw scenes comparable only with the most capricious prima donnas — including the throwing about of any object near at hand upon my victims.

I remember one special occasion. My sister Vera, my governess, and I were having a nice cozy dinner. Vera was all dressed up in a lovely evening gown, as she was going to the theatre. I decided I would go, too. The request was denied.

In front of me was a tasty dish of rolled cabbage leaves filled with meat and rice, tied with thread, and cooked in tomato sauce. It was a favorite dish of mine. I was looking forward to eating it but the refusal to take me to the theatre outraged me to a point of battle frenzy. In a second, with agility of a monkey, I was in the possession of the dish, and then with both hands, I began to bombard them with the cabbage missiles.

They ran. I pursued them, firing the missiles. In a few seconds their hair and their dresses were covered with meat, rice, tomato sauce and cabbage leaves. My beautifully groomed sister represented an unbelievable sight. The dining room became a battlefield. I held it — victorious — but it was short lived, and as my ammunition was finished, I ignominiously fled to the most intimate and smallest room in the apartment.

I locked myself in, holding the fort, and threatened to remain there indefinitely. This provided a further unforeseen inconvenience to all the inhabitants of the apartment. I was in

<sup>16</sup> The Moscow Art Theatre was founded in 1897.

<sup>17</sup> More commonly translated as *The Lower Depths*, the play was first performed on December 18, 1902 at the Moscow Art Theatre with Stanislavsky directing. It was the first major success for playwright Maxim Gorky.

the possession of the only ‘can’ in the apartment. I blackmailed my antagonists, of not freeing the little room until I was promised unconditional pardon, no cut in allowance, and promised to be taken to a theatre. They had to swear on the Bible.

My governess and sister kept their word. Unfortunately for me, my father was not at home for the catastrophic battle, and when he returned and heard of what I did he gave the only thrashing of life. My father was one of the kindest men I have ever known. He spoiled me very much, but even he, despite his sweetness and kindness, lost his patience and spanked me. In a rage, I kicked and yelled, and as soon as I got free proceeded to demolish everything in my room. My allowance was cut, I was not taken to a theatre, and my bottom was very sore. He did not repeat the punishment — deciding probably it was too expensive. The more victories I scored, the more impossible I became, and the greater were my demands.

When a friend from St. Petersburg, who came to see my mother, was asked how I was, she answered, “My dear you haven’t a son, you have a devil!” So, it was decided in the spring to bring me back to Moscow to the tender folds of my mother; and strangely, on my return there, I immediately turned back again into an angel — a curious unexplainable fact. I became subdued and was a darling little boy again.

### **Summer 1898 — I Understood Nothing**

That summer we spent at Stolypin’s estate near Moscow. It wasn’t far from the home of Leo Tolstoy, and one day a heated debate took place at the dinner table: should we, or should we not, visit the old man at the invitation of a close mutual friend? <sup>18</sup> Tolstoy was being excommunicated from the Church for his ideas on religion, and he was, in general, extremely unpopular with the ruling classes, who considered him a renegade, an atheist, and generally a very dangerous man.<sup>19</sup> As guests of the famous Stolypin, my aunt felt that we should not be seen visiting Tolstoy; my mother felt, on the other hand, that no harm would be done; and since Stolypin himself advised us to go, we accepted the invitation.

After two hours of driving on a country road through much forestland, there was a clearing with a simple wooden house and a primitive garden. An old peasant, whom I at first took for a house servant, was chopping wood — but it turned out to be Tolstoy himself, who was happy to see the friend of a friend.

Tea was served in the garden, and Tolstoy asked a number of questions about the life of Swiss peasants and their amazing agricultural feat of cultivating every inch of ground on the mountain slopes. After a while, I was frankly bored, and if there were any pearls of wisdom they were wasted on me; but my mother was thrilled, and for days afterward she and Arkady had long discussions about our visit, with her defending her point of view. It seems he

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<sup>18</sup> It was General Stolypin himself, who as a young officer in the Guards Horse Artillery had made friends with Leo Tolstoy while in Sebastopol.

<sup>19</sup> Tolstoy was finally excommunicated by the Holy Synod in February 1901.



[Tolstoy] sent some kind of message to Stolypin for the Tsar — which Stolypin refused to deliver.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, I understood nothing at that age.

### Truly a Royal Performance

The Tsar and his family came to Moscow on a short visit. Enthusiasm was great. Thanks to my godfather, I got a good view of the royal family. It never occurred to me that they were human beings, but seemed to me some kind of gods. I envied the two little girls<sup>21</sup> as they drove in a carriage, already proud of their position in life, already feeling themselves their godliness, so above all of us, and so out of reach. Yet already, somewhere in Russia (maybe even in the very crowd that hoarsely shouted its welcome) were men — unsuspected to themselves, yet fated to be their executioners — who would throw them down from this dizzy height, trample on them, and finally butcher them in cold blood, defenseless in a cellar, like cattle.

In the evening, streets were illuminated in colored lights. It was a law that, on all birthdays and name days of any member of the royal family, streets were to illumine. Each house was to provide an attractive sign in lights. All the town was out parading on the principal street, looking at the pretty colored lights. What children were the Russian people, how easily amused and satisfied — demanding then so little — and how little did you understand your people, poor unfortunate monarch.

Soon I was to attend a great gala operatic performance in honor of the Tsar's visit to Moscow. Stolypin had to attend the performance in the royal box, so he very kindly gave us his box of Kremlin Governor, situated next to the royal box. That night it was truly a royal performance, for there was not only a Tsar in the royal box but there was operatic royalty on the stage: the famous tenor Mazzini, and the great baritone of all times, Battistini. The opera was *Eugene Onegin*. What impressed me — more than the performance, of which I understood nothing — was the wonderful glitter of the uniforms, the sparkle of diamonds on the ladies' shoulders and hair — and to sit in the proximity of the royal family. After all, the Tsar was next to God in importance, We were thought at some kind of celestial ceremony.

God anointed the Tsar and made him his representative on earth to rule over all of us, and therefore we must obey and worship him. At that age I believed in this implicitly and became his devoted slave. So I looked more at the Tsar than on the stage, on which was the other royalty — which as yet I did not appreciate. I envied his children, sitting so composed and demure as little statues. I was awed by the sparkle of the Tsaritsa's tiara, and my heart went out to her beauty. I was greatly susceptible to women's charm.

But, the most exciting part of the evening — and in which I could take part personally — was each time when the curtain came down and the audience would applaud, including the Tsar. Once he even stood up, and the audience suddenly turned their backs to the stage and applauded him. He and the Tsaritsa bowed and bowed, and I applauded even more

<sup>20</sup> Tolstoy preferred to send messages to the Czar through private individuals so they would remain confidential. For example, he sent a message to the Czar through Grand Duke Nicolai Mikhailovich in 1902.

<sup>21</sup> The two Grand Duchesses would have been very young. Olga was born in 1895 and Tatiana in 1897.

vigorously; and then the audience began to sing something to the Tsar. It was as good as on the stage. The Tsar bowed again. I had never seen such a sight before. I became a devoted monarchist.

### **Autumn 1898 — I Failed Gloriously**

In the autumn of 1898, two important events took place that shaped the course of my future life. The first was my entering the school — or Gymnasium as it's called in Russia.

The education of the entire country was entirely in the hands of government, with the exception of church schools in the villages. Education was not obligatory. We had no private schools. It was all governed under the Ministry of Education. With their customary shortsightedness, the government did not encourage even elemental education for writing and reading, fearing that it might bring trouble. The result was that 80% of the people were illiterate, and therefore an easy prey in later years to words and promises of unscrupulous political agitators and demagogues.

The Gymnasium consisted of eight classes, or grades, and one preparative. To enter, one had to pass an examination. The prior summer was supposed to have been spent in preparation for the entrance exams, but the allure of summer games, boating and swimming in the country suburbs of Moscow was too much. A tutor was taken to prepare me for the entrance examination to the Gymnasium, although I was only eight.

I went to the examination unprepared and miserably flopped. Usually one tried in two or three gymnasiums in case of failing in one. I tried at three gymnasiums: one for the First Class, and two for the Preparative. In all three I failed gloriously, to the great distress of my mother.

My mother was bitterly disappointed. It meant my being a nuisance at home another year. She was very upset, and was ashamed of me in front of our friends. So she made a final effort, and through some influence I was accepted in the First Class of a Gymnasium especially for children of Caucasian parents.

As the school was anxious to have a certain percentage of Russians in it, I was accepted in spite of my lack of any knowledge. This gave the possibility to finish the Gymnasium in the year 1907 instead of 1908. It made it possible for my parents to take me in January 1908 to Switzerland (instead of my being tied up in school) and meet the person that changed the entire course of my life — but of that later.

### **Winter 1898-99 — Extraordinary Knowledge**

It was a great year of awakening to the possibilities of life. That winter I was taken to hear an opera, *The Huguenots*.<sup>22</sup> It thrilled me. I began to love music.

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<sup>22</sup> The *Huguenots*, by Giacomo Meyerbeer, was possibly the most successful opera of the 19th century. With seven leading roles, and elaborate staging and orchestral requirements, it was a popular vehicle for the Grand Opera productions of that era. The production Val saw at the Bolshoi certainly would have made a lasting impression.

In my first year of school, I was very proud of wearing my school uniform. It gave me a feeling of importance, of having entered life. I was not good in studies, but managed to keep a middle position in the class of forty. I was more interested in playing games.

That winter I learned two new things. One was ice-skating. The second was how children were born. During the first week in school I became the proud possessor of the knowledge of the facts of life. A little school pal of mine came to school one morning very excited and proud, with a very superior air, and declared that he had learned the mystery about life from the parlor maid. It greatly aroused our curiosity, and we all huddled in a corner of the classroom. Showing off, he proceeded to hold forth, explaining the whole thing in very imposing terms and swore us — his enraptured listeners — to secrecy. It all sounded vague and absurd, but he gained our admiration and gratitude, and we all felt as if we had been initiated into a great mystery.

This was too much for me to bottle up — such extraordinary knowledge! After school I raced home as fast as my two little legs would carry me. I found no one at home, so I went to my bedroom, rung for our little maid, and as she came in I took a deep breath and with great authority said to her, “Come and let’s make love.” She gave one look at my descending trousers, went into hysterics, and ran out of the room — and there I was standing in the middle of the room with by now a bare bottom, and completely bewildered at her attitude.

I took my defeat badly, and did not make any further attempt at the facts of life for the next few years. Thus, my first knowledge of the greatest thing in life — that creates it, that is the basic foundation of the world — came from a little school imp, through the vulgar mind of the parlor maid. From that moment, we looked up to him, and often asked him if he had any further information on the subject. I am afraid it developed a superiority complex in him — and God knows where it has led him.

How inconceivably ridiculous is this world and its humanity, who are almost criminal with their ridiculous idea of being ashamed of the force — and the act — that brings life. They hide it in dark corners. They whisper about it — some half blushing, some cynical. They are ashamed of it. Parents are embarrassed to tell their children of this blessing to mankind, of the most beautiful expression of love. It leaves children to grow up like animals, to find out about it for themselves — and how often it is at an appalling cost of bad habit and a wrong point of view, wrecking their (and other people's) lives.

Oh, parents that may read these lines, don't be ashamed. Tell your children, and open their eyes to the beauty of life. Teach them its pitfalls, how to treasure it and not to profane or dissipate its powers. Every school should teach physiology, the hygienics of the body, and its problems should be faced by the world openly and powerfully. It might be a better world — in any case a much more moral one.

## All Very Theatrical

I was a devout monarchist and devoutly religious. I crossed myself every time I passed a church, and often was taken to services, and kneeled on a dirty floor. I kissed the icons and the cross of the priest at the end of the service, absorbing all the germs left by other kissers. It was not very hygienic.

The religious ceremony in the Russian Church was very beautiful — with the lovely singing of choirs, and beautiful priest robes of gold brocades — but all very theatrical, and rather tiring. As we had no seats, one had to stand during the entire service. It was a relief to kneel. Especially I liked when on the day of sacrament we were given a piece of Holy bread and a sip of Holy wine from a most Holy cup. It was delicious — and that was worth the hours we had to stand in church. Sometimes, I attended two services in a row to obtain a double portion of bread and wine. As an excuse for doing it, I said that the more I drink of this Holy wine, and eat of this bread, the more I will be saintly and a good boy.

In school we were taught the Bible literally, that the world was made in six days, that Eve was created from the rib of Adam, and so on. Soon my intellect demanded more logical and scientific explanations, and as it was not forthcoming, [later] at fifteen gradually I became an atheist under the influence of a private tutor I had to help me with my exams. He was a student and, like the great majority of students, was a socialist, and therefore bitterly against the church, which was directly under the control of the Tsar's government and used as their tool to dupe the minds of the lower classes.

## Spring 1899 — The Great Event in Our Lives

At the end of the spring of my first year came the great event in our lives. An uncle of my godmother — the illustrious Prince Vorontsoff-Dashkoff — died. She inherited his vast fortune and became very wealthy, with vast lands and estates.<sup>23</sup> For various reasons unknown to me, in spite of the fact that there was a coldness between her and my mother and aunt, she asked them if they would persuade my father to take the case of her inheritance. My father was invited to manage her possessions and her estates: huge vast lands as large as a small kingdom. It might have been the influence of my godfather, who was anxious to unite the families, and who had high respect for my father's abilities and integrity.

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<sup>23</sup> Val was a little misinformed here. The origin of the inheritance was the Voronzov family — not Vorontsov-Dashkoff — and Natalia's uncle was a Stolypin, related indirectly by marriage. Natalia's uncle, Nikolai Alekseevich Stolypin (1843-1898) had lived mostly in Florence. He did not have any children, and so Natalia (who was also an only child) got most of her uncle's property. Her Uncle Nicolai was also an only son, his father being Alexei Grigorievich Stolypin, who died in 1847 when Nicolai was only four years old. Nicolai Alekseevich's mother, Princess Maria Vasilievna Trubetskoy, then remarried, in 1851, to Prince S.M. Voronzov. Prince Voronzov is the one who owned all the property Natalia would one day inherit. Princess Maria Vasilievna and Prince Voronzov had no children together. So, when the Prince died, in 1882, his fortune went directly to his stepson, Uncle Nicolai — and then a few years later to Natalia Stolypin and the Rosing family.

My father accepted the case, and later got so interested in the land that he gave up law and became joint owner with Natalia of a large estate with thousands of acres in South Russia near Kiev. For this he received a share of that land and we, from as comfortably off people, suddenly became rich, and owners of our own large estate.<sup>24</sup> As my mother was responsible for this offer to my father, a final reconciliation naturally followed, and it was decided that after spending the summer on our new estate we will settle to live in St. Petersburg.

With this event, my childhood was over, and I began my boyhood. New life, new riches of knowledge, of experience, began to open up to me.

### **Summer 1899 — A Boy's Paradise**

We all went to spend the summer on our newly acquired estate, Teofilovka, in the south of Russia.<sup>25</sup> It took us a day-and-a-half by train from Moscow — the thrill of the train journey across Russia from north to south, awareness of the change of scenery from woodlands to the famous steppes of the south, from abject poverty of northern villages to the extraordinary beauty and wealth of the Ukraine, the bread basket of Russia.

I loved stopping at the stations on the way, where I could get to run about the platform, go into the buffet and buy something — anything — an orange, a sandwich, a chocolate. Paradise on earth would be for me to travel on the slowest milk train — that stops at every station — with a new thrill to inspect the station and the buffet, and jump on the train at the very last second.

Imagine endless fields, not flat like the prairies of America, but studded with little islands, broken up by hills and mounds. The rich black earth changed its dress like the slope of the Alps. The fields in spring are richly covered in green of the growing wheat, becoming an ocean of gold life giving wheat with the heat of summer, a golden ocean with gentle waves made by breezes of soft wind. At different points, small oak forests stand on the horizon like ships. Down in the ravines are nestled beautiful villages of pure white huts. The huts are built from earth, all white washed, with golden yellow thatched roofs that look like an elaborate woman's hairdress. In the center proudly stands a church with blue or green dome, with high steeple and a golden cross, rising above the low hut as the guardian of its soul — as if benevolently blessing and protecting the little village from all evils.

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24 Stolypin family historian Boris Feodorov speculates that the lands were given to Sergei Rosing by Natalia Stolypin as a payment for keeping quiet about the General's involvement with Zinaida Rosing. Natalia's sudden inheritance came the year before the General's death in 1899, and it is possible that the gift was the fulfillment of a final wish of his. That the remuneration came from Natalia to Sergei Rosing for ongoing legal and management services rendered made it unlikely that anyone would question the true motivation. If, as Boris Feodorov believes, General Arkady Stolypin was Val's true father, this would also have been a way for the elder Stolypin to insure that his illegitimate son was taken care of. As the only boy in the Rosing family, Vladimir would inherit all his father's assets. In addition, Sergei Rosing was clearly a capable fellow and the General would also have been assured that Natalia's interests were being safeguarded.

25 Teofilovka is 139.2 miles SSW of Kiev in the old province of Podolia.

The huts are surrounded by orchards of cherry and apple trees, and lilacs in full spring blossom. In the spring the village looks like a beautiful bride — so pure, and so fragrant. The air is constantly filled with fragrant perfume of the infinite wealth of nature: the intoxicating scent of cherry orchards, and the freshness of growing wheat. The black earth itself seemed to be breathing its lungs, and exhaling virility and strength. When we first arrived, I wanted to jump out of the carriage, throw myself down on the earth, and roll on my back like a young colt in the field. In a different way, it was as inspiring in its vast beauty as the majestic beauty of Switzerland. Lucky was I to come under the spell of them both.

Such was our estate of Teofilovka. I can never thank fate enough for having given me the joys, the happiness, the richness of life, and the wealth of inspiration derived from the many summers spent there. To this period of my life on the steppes, I owe a large part of my art. It was probably there that I formed my desire — and later determination — to become an artist; and it was there that I formed the fundamentals on which to build my art. I have since seen much of the world, but nothing has touched me or stirred my imagination so deeply.

As a boy, I used to ride out on horseback over the steppes, seeing the glory of Nature. Especially it was marvelous at night, something one could never forget; perfect stillness, a softness in the air at the same time filled with a most exquisite odor from the ripening corn; never a single cloud, but a perfect canopy of stars above a rippling sea of golden corn. Such an atmosphere fills one with a desire to be worthy of the power one has in oneself, and to give everything that is in one, not only in self-aggrandizement, but to help all human beings to understand the great beauty in life.

If a human soul can have strings like a harp, there has been created within me at that time the most beautiful melodies of thought that will remain with me the rest of my life. We are spiritual beings. Humanity is in a process of evolution towards the perfecting of their souls. No real perfection of soul can be had without an understanding of beauty and of love. Art is beauty. Therefore, art is a divine gift to humanity to help people in the evolutionary process to a more perfect state. Out of that comes the natural conclusion that art is spiritual, not material. The artist's great ideal is that he who has the spark of divine gift should serve art, not make art serve him.

The nearest station to our estate was 29 verst.<sup>26</sup> That was quite a distance on roads corrugated with ruts that after a heavy rain become rivers of mud. Indeed, traveling on our country roads was an adventure. Only the cities had paved streets, and even those were mostly paved with cobblestones.

I probably am one of the few remaining people who has lived like a Duke must have lived during the feudal period. At that time it was typical in Russia that the peasant, though freed from serfdom almost for forty years, could not lose the servile attitude. It began on the arrival of the train at the station. We were met by a mob of employees of the estate in their best Sunday clothes, with bouquets of flowers, followed by a sumptuous lunch at the station buffet.

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<sup>26</sup> A verst is an obsolete Russian unit of length equaling .6629 miles, or just over a kilometer; 25 verst is about 19 miles. The nearest town is Uman, some 33 miles from Teofilovka.

Vodka flowed downward, and the spirit rose up. The fear of the new owner disappeared under the friendliness of my parents.

The thing that amazed me, and appealed to my childish snobbishness, was the fact that as we drove through villages on our way to our estate, all peasants took off their hats and bowed — a surviving custom of serfdom. It was the mark of respect that the peasants had to pay to all people of the higher class. From one of the multitude in Moscow, we were now one of the rulers. It was the last spasm of the feudal system.

Our joint estate was like a little state. It covered 25 square miles, and it had 12,000 peasants living on it in three villages. Teofilovka was in the center.<sup>27</sup> On arrival at Teofilovka, we were met with bread and salt by a crowd of peasants, and three priests who performed a ceremony of blessing. It was all very thrilling and impressive, and it seemed to me I grew several inches taller in importance. In any case, my hat felt much too small for my head. Fortunately, I soon lost all that nonsense.

Our house was a mile outside the village, on the top of a hill, with a garden going down to a small lake. It was the winter residence: a large red brick two story mansion with every comfort, a new house with all the modern conveniences, including running water. Two years later, we even had electricity, to the great amazement of the peasants and neighbors. For a country house there was another great luxury: a toilet with flushing water. That was fun too, even when one did not need it, to flush it, to watch the rush and the gurgle of the water.

Natalia did not come with us, and paid her first visit to Teofilovka only the following year.<sup>28</sup> For some reason, she never cared to stay long in the place, or take any interest in the administration, except to lavishly spend abroad and in St. Petersburg the huge income it provided her. That's what most Russian landowners did.

Russian peasants sweated and worked hard to gather the rich harvest of our mother Earth, and the Russian aristocracy worked hard to fill their pockets with fortunes to spend on Paris dresses, jewelry, hotels, and restaurants — as well as at the gambling tables of Monte Carlo, the Riviera, or Germany. Exquisite were their mistresses — much pleasure they gave, and much gold they received. Great was the sweat and privatization of those that provided all this. Lovely and picturesque looked the villages with their white huts, but much ugliness did they hide inside.

Being giving by nature — as well as inheriting from my parents a sensitive and kind heart — I soon became conscious of the injustices of life and the conditions of the poor, and a revolt

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27 The three villages are Dzhulynka, Teofilovka, and Shlyakhova. Dzhulynka is on the east bank of the Southern Bug River. Teofilovka is 4 ½ miles east northeast of Dzhulynka; Shlyakhova is 2 miles beyond Teofilovka. Modern geological imaging shows that Teofilovka sits on the edge of a massive impact crater from a meteor that struck about 280 million years ago some seven miles away at what is now the village of Ternovka. During the Second World War the Germans established a Jewish ghetto in Ternovka and carried out the systematic mass murder of several thousand people during 1942 and 1943.

28 General Stolypin was ill. Natalia was most likely helping to take care of him. He died in November 1899.

started to grow within me against the governing classes and their henchmen, the rotten Russian police. The Tsar was a complete autocrat. His ministers were appointed, nominated by him from the aristocratic circle. The people had no voice, no parliament. All Socialist parties were illegal, and anyone in possession of the book of Karl Marx was assured of imprisonment.

Few people realize that slavery in Russia was very real. Peasants had belonged to landlords — body and soul, like cattle — and were sold by them, often separating husband and wife, children and parents. They also had power of life and death over them, and there were many cases of slaves being lashed to death as punishment. The Russian peasant was only liberated from slavery in 1861 — just 37 years before the time I am describing. The transitory period was slow, and many appalling customs still existed. For instance, the overseers had long whips which they were allowed to use to speed up work. They lashed the peasants if they did not work with enough zeal. Instead of leaving children at home, the women were carrying the small ones to the fields and feeding them in between working, and many times pregnant women actually gave birth in the field. Children were employed to work in the fields, for which they were paid 5 cents a day. Rich was the land. Joyful was the life of those that owned it, but poor were the men that worked it.

But, my father was a very progressive man — and a liberal in politics — so he at once started to change the conditions of life for us, and the working conditions for peasants. To the shock of our employees, to the bewilderment of the peasants — to the disgust of our neighbors and county officials — within a few days my father abolished the practice of lashing, and to employ children and pregnant women. He also created crèches: a day nursery where women could leave their children while going to work.<sup>29</sup> He took away the whips from the overseer, and forbade beating the workers. All of this made a sensation. No one understood his humanitarianism. He was accused of ulterior motives and revolutionary tendencies by the nobility, of spoiling the peasants to buy up cheaply their land. The peasants — who never encountered generosity, unselfishness, desire to improve humane working conditions — whispered that “Mr. Rosing must have some kind of diabolical scheme or he wouldn’t do such kind things for nothing.” So we began our reign over this little kingdom — of 30,000 peasants living in three villages — under a veil of suspicion.

But as the years went by, the peasants — finding nothing but kindness, fairness, and even increase in payment for their work — swung to him. In three years it became an up-to-date modern estate. The nearest hospital was 75 miles, and the nearest doctor was 25 miles. My father improved all this. He hired a doctor. He built a hospital, and a school. Our popularity in the district constantly grew among the peasants.

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<sup>29</sup> In the late nineteenth century, professional daycare for working mothers was a very progressive idea. There were the beginnings of a movement in the manufacturing sector, but the number of factories offering this to their workers was very small. Outside of the major cities it was almost unknown. Sergei Rosing would indeed have been viewed as progressive. After the revolution of 1917 this concept was embraced and energetically regimented by the Soviets.



In spite of being only nine, I took a great interest in my father's work, and I went everywhere with him, learning and absorbing. My father was a very lovable person, and the more I knew him, the more I loved and admired him. In addition to being progressive and liberal, he was kind, gentle, and just.

Life at Teofilovka was a boy's paradise! A new world opened up to me. Living in a great mansion. A staff of 20 servants. A park descending to a lake full of fish and turtles. A bathing beach and pool. And most wonderful of all, there was a stable with 30 horses just for us — and one especially for me. I quickly learned riding and became an expert horseman, later breaking in young colts. I also learned for the first time the difference of sexes in horses, and when I returned to St. Petersburg I was terribly proud of calling out and naming the sex of horses in the street. That profound knowledge impressed my school mates greatly and they nicknamed me 'Horseman' Rosing. I spent all available time in the saddle, inspecting the fields, and paying visits to our neighbors — most of all to the family of the priest in our largest village, Dzhulyinka. The priest had a large family, with three sons and three daughters, and they became my summer playmates.

### August 1899 — A Very Different City

From that summer on, our estate life became a pattern. In August we went to St. Petersburg. We left Moscow for good. The Russian school term was from the middle of August to the middle of May (with two weeks welcome vacation at Christmas and Easter), followed by three heavenly summer months of play.

We had a large apartment on Nikolaievskaya Street.<sup>30</sup> Our house soon became a center for artistic intellectuals, and sprinkled with the more liberal section of the aristocracy. Life was truly gay.

Yes, life in the upper strata of our social world was one long festival. For us it was gay, beautiful, exciting, romantic, and glamorous. I have never since encountered anywhere in the world its equal in hospitality, love of life, craziness and abandonment. It was a never ending parade of theater and dancing — parties given for the slightest excuse. For six years I was only a kibitzer, but after 15 I became a full participant.

We had a wonderful cook. I used to spend a good deal of time in the kitchen, watching her and tasting the dishes. I soon became a very adept pupil, and in later years I was able to cook Russian dinners myself to entertain friends in England.

St. Petersburg was quite a different city from Moscow — more cosmopolitan in its character. Being on banks of the Neva, a few miles from the Baltic Sea, it was built as the window to Europe by Peter the Great in 1700.<sup>31</sup> It had wide straight streets, as compared with the narrow and intricately curving streets of Moscow. The buildings were Russianized French and German architecture, giving it rather a unique beauty and charm.

<sup>30</sup> Nikolaievskaya — once a very elegant street — is now called Ulitsa Marata. The Rosing's lived at 77 Nikolaievskaya. Their apartment — #4 — took up the entire second floor.

<sup>31</sup> St. Petersburg was begun in 1703. It became the capital of Russia in 1712.

I have since lived in many capitals of Europe, but nowhere did I find life so interesting and exciting — or as luxurious — as it was in St. Petersburg. I am grateful that I was privileged to experience it. It was so youthful in its richness of culture and art, so irresistibly gay and exciting, with such taste and finesse in manners and clothes, and with such consummate art of food. It highly developed all the senses. Unfortunately, it was based on unhealthy social conditions — of almost starving masses struggling for their own bare existence to provide all the luxury for a few hundred thousand aristocrats. But to the credit of those few, I must say that they *knew* how to make life intoxicatingly pleasant.

The mind of our ruling class was preoccupied on attaining the highest standard of luxury and enjoyment of life. Very few cared of the terrible contrast of glaring poverty of the lower classes — their suffering. Too many beggars in the street, too many on the church steps with outstretched hand. Some, to appease their conscience would carry little bags filled with a dollar worth of pennies and would distribute them after Sunday service; and expenditure of one dollar was a cheap price to make you feel kind and generous toward your fellow beings. As I grew intellectually, I revolted against the unfairness of conditions, but I guiltily here admit that I did not refuse the enjoyment that those conditions provided.

It was a tremendously creative period for the arts, a coming of age for our stage: writing and music. Pavlova, Fokine, Ksheshinskaya, Chaliapin, Sobinov (great Russian tenor, idol of the ladies), Litvin (the Flagstad of that period), Stanislavsky, [Vera] Komisarjevskaya, Gorky, [Leonid] Andreyev, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Stravinsky, the coming of age of the Russian Ballet, Moscow Art Theatre, the great painter [Vasily] Verischagin, [Ilya] Repin, [Nicholas] Roerich, [Alexandre] Benois. It was a great period of renaissance — artistic fulfillment. Rimsky-Korsakov was still creating, and [Alexander] Glazunov.

Even Lenin, the arch murderer of bourgeois society, later preached with the following statement: *We can't expect yet creative art from the proletarian society, therefore we must borrow it from the bourgeois and use it for our purposes.* Thus they have been all doing it for their insidious propaganda, to destroy the bourgeois with their own creations, but at the time claiming that the productions are Soviet creations.

The future looked bright. Science was taking amazing steps forward for the betterment of our lives and pleasures. Being a backward country, everything came to Russia years later. The kerosene lamps were slowly being replaced by gas and this amazing new invention — electricity. I can still remember our apartment which was lit by kerosene lamps. Gaslight in the theater and streets. It was only when we moved to our St. Petersburg apartment that I became acquainted with two great discoveries — the telephone and electrical light. Then, at the mature age of ten, in bewilderment. I gazed for the first time at the miracle of miracles — an electric bulb. That was to me a miracle. Electricity was a great luxury in those days in Russia. I spent hours at a switch, turning it on to light the room, and off to plunge it into darkness. Surely God must have something to do with it, for He said, “Let there be light” — and there was light. A few months later, some men installed a box. It was the telephone. When I put the receiver to my ear, and suddenly heard the voice of my mother, I felt that science had achieved the ultimate. I was living in an era of wonders.

As I look back, it seems a strange world — no radio, no airplanes, no motorcars, or cinema. Tanks and poisonous gas were unknown, only dreamt of. What phenomenal changes and strides the world has made. Is it for the better? I wonder. Or is it for the destruction of civilization and human race that the human brain invents?

### **My First Real “In Love”**

Aunt Matilda lived with us, and looked after us when my parents stayed in the country that December. A close friendship sprang up between my aunt and Natalia, and they became inseparable. Natalia was constantly at the apartment, adding a great deal of gaiety to our life. Naturally, I was much more interested in our social life — what was going on around me — than in my studies. It is a mystery how I ever got through school. I hated going to school. I missed it at every opportunity, playing hooky.

My first real *in love* was Natalia. She was then about thirty, and was in the prime of her beauty, exquisitely dressed, and always leaving an intoxicating perfume behind her.<sup>32</sup> One night, Natalia, Aunt Matilda and I stayed rather late visiting neighbors in a nearby town and we were riding home. It was chilly, and I slipped down from the front seat of the carriage and sat at Natalia's feet, resting my head on her knees. She gently stroked it. Her hand was soft and warm. It gave me such a sweet sensation such as I had never experienced before, and a feeling I've never forgotten. It enslaved me. I wanted to kiss her hands, her feet, but I was afraid to move, to break the spell. She must have sensed my feelings, and she took her hand away. After a while, it came back. I laid my cheek on it, softly touching her hand with my lips — and I stayed that way for two hours, transported into a new emotional world. From that evening I became her slave. At the dinner table I looked at her with adoration. I would wait for hours just to say goodnight, and to be able to touch and kiss her hand. And I waited for many months for Easter.

### **From Black Eyes to Bloody Noses**

I was also introduced in school to politics and world affairs. The Boer War was on. It split the class in two. The great majority of the school, composed of the Caucasian boys, were pro-English, but some of us were pro-Boer, and black eyes were the order of the day. All my sympathies were with the underdogs — the Boers. On account of the war, I began to read newspapers, and closely watched the progress of the war. I especially hated Lord Kitchener and his moustache, and a war correspondent by the funny name (for us) of Winston Churchill, while General Kruger, General Smuts, and de Wet were my great heroes. The siege of Ladysmith was a great event.<sup>33</sup> In school we staged many snow battles in the courtyard. We, the Russians, suffered constant punishment. It was stopped when one of the boys threw

<sup>32</sup> Natalia Stolypin was born in 1872. She would have been about 28 when the Rosings moved to St. Petersburg.

<sup>33</sup> The Boer War lasted from Oct 1899 to May 1902. Christiaan de Wet (1854-1922) was a Boer general, rebel leader, and politician. Jan Smuts (1870-1950) was a British Field Marshall in both world wars. The siege of Ladysmith lasted 118 days — from Nov 2, 1899 to Feb 28, 1900.

a piece of ice instead of a snowball — which hit my head and laid me out, almost killing me.<sup>34</sup> The Spanish-American War changed my allegiance from Boer to American and from black eyes to bloody noses. We were growing up!

In Russian politics, we were experts — imitating our elder brothers. Since I had none, I was an individualist, influenced by my snobbish relationship with the Kremlin. We closely followed the student riots in prison, and sang revolutionary songs — an inoffensive pastime smacking of musical comedy.

### 1900 — A Great Holiday

The best custom, which all the young people enjoyed, was Easter. Easter was a great holiday<sup>35</sup> — both religious, gastronomic and romantic. Lent was taken very seriously and during the Holy Week the school was closed.<sup>36</sup> We had a number of important church services. We had to go to confession.

In most houses there was fasting, but on Saturday night the religious fervor of Lent and Holy Week came to climax with a midnight service. Every church had a gala service. Churches were crowded to such overflowing that people stood in the thousands outside. To the swanky ones you had to have tickets. Entrance was by invitation only.

It was a pageant of brilliancy. In fashionable churches, women wore their best evening dresses, and men wore white ties or full uniform. A few minutes before midnight, a procession led by the priest, with icons and crosses, went around the church. Exactly at midnight, the priest would proclaim from the altar to the accompaniment of all the church bells of the entire city, “The Christ has risen!” to which the congregation would answer, “Indeed he has,” followed by general congratulation and (what was most important) kissing. Choirs then sang a beautiful Easter hymn, and everyone began to congratulate each other.

From that moment on, for the right to kiss religiously a lady of your desires, you had to say, “The Christ has risen.” She was obliged to answer, “Indeed he has,” and let you kiss her three times on the cheeks. That wonderful custom lasted for three days. You could come up to anybody — friend or stranger. Often on the third kiss we would miss the cheek and planted the kiss on the lips. Sometimes it was extremely pleasant and thrilling — sometimes quite the opposite. Unfortunately some fanatically religious men with large bushy beards would also come to me and say, “The Christ has risen,” and I had to answer, “Indeed he has,” and let the bushy beard kiss me three times. The custom was peculiar and very quaint. Some people took the custom very seriously, others as pretext for kissing those whom one normally only dreams

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<sup>34</sup> Val’s immigration record at Ellis Island in 1924 makes note of a “small scar on back of neck.” This is possibly evidence of the injury he sustained from the schoolyard battle during the Boer War.

<sup>35</sup> Because of the Russian use of the Gregorian Calendar, traditional Russian Easter always falls about 2 weeks after the holiday observed in Western Christianity.

<sup>36</sup> Lent in Russia was called The Great Fast and lasted for seven weeks — instead the six weeks observed in the west. This fasting also included abstaining from sex, as it was considered just another appetite to control. Many of the aristocrats observed only the first and last weeks of this restrictive season.

about. I adored the custom, but I despised kissing old ladies and men — especially bearded ones — but oh reader, what a chance it gave to kiss the pretty ladies whom one only dreams about! I was very happy that Easter. I kissed Natalia.

Every household had a table ready for Easter supper, called *breaking the fasting*. After church, brilliant suppers were given, and it was an orgy of food and drink. Tables groaned with food and wine, and so did the people the next day. It lasted till the early hours of the morning.

In the early afternoon all the men had to visit friends around town and pay compliments to all the hostesses by whom they were entertained during the winter. Women stayed at home and received visitors. It was a frightful ordeal, but at that time I enjoyed it. Some men had to make forty to fifty calls. There were no motorcars, only slow horse carriages, and in each visit you were supposed to eat or drink something from the Easter table. The doctor and the chemist were busy the next few days! Such was Russia — love of extremes — fasting and praying for seven weeks, and then gorging without restraint or limit.

### 1901 — A New Interest

Then, suddenly I discovered a new interest — singing. It was due to an accident. A client of my father's sent him a gramophone as a present.

It was difficult to realize that my father's noisy entrance into the room, submerged by parcels, would set the pattern of my life and subsequently that of many others. At that moment he looked more like a porter covered with badly wrapped up parcels.

“Well, what are you standing gaping at? Come and help me.”

“What is it?”

“Something very wonderful. A new invention. A gramophone.”

“What's that?”

“It reproduces any sound, including the human voice. I have here our favorite singer, Figner, singing your favorite song. Remember that evening?”

With the enthusiasm of an eleven-year-old boy, I plunged in to help my father assemble this strange contraption. It was a monumental task. The horn alone was several feet in length, and its suspension to the machine was a very difficult affair. Having no mechanical abilities between us whatsoever, we cursed the inventor — some man by the name of Edison.

Before long, the machine was ready to perform. Then, imagine our disappointment. The machine was rotating too slowly. The voices all sounded in a range of baritone. Then we set it too fast, and they sounded like the squeals of a bunch of hysterical women who were being provoked in a private part of their body!

Finally, all was properly adjusted — and out of this unwieldy horn we heard our beloved singer [Nikolai Figner] singing the famous song. We were witnessing a miracle, a true revolution, and a great step forward in science which will affect our whole future civilization. Our future great men, our future heroes, will be immortal. We shall be able to hear their voices and better understand their personalities.

At first, I did not believe in its reality and thought that my father was playing a trick on me, but he played other records. I fell for this stupendous new invention. It was a great novelty, and I played it by the hours, all day long, listening to mostly operatic records. Soon I began to imitate them, singing in a very loud voice — soprano, tenor, and even bass. My family indulgently smiled. *Let the boy have his fancy.* But soon I became a damn nuisance. My lungs became more and more powerful. My vocal enthusiasm had no bounds. Strangely, I cannot remember my ever having a boy's voice. Even at age eleven I sang in a ringing baritone voice — and I made my mind up then to be a singer. I spent all my pocket money on going to the opera. The male singers were my heroes — and the fat soprano my first infatuation.

To escape the boredom of schoolwork, I would sit during classes pretending to be a great operatic producer and would cast operas from my classmates according to their personalities. Since they were all boys, the female roles were assigned to the less robust, or more feminine — of course, the written casts were kept strictly secret.

My parents began to seriously worry over my artistic inclinations, and with great logic and wisdom tried to impress upon me that the career and life of a singer was not a stable one, and unless one was a celebrity it was beneath the dignity of a man. "I will be a celebrity," I assured them.

"Alright," said my mother, "but in a few years you may lose your voice. Then what will you do in life?"

"Why should I lose my voice?" I answered, with the inexperienced arrogance of youth.

"It has happened to others," said mother.

"Oh, it won't happen to me."

Those arguments were constant.

Generally, I much preferred the theater to concerts. I wanted to act — and I did. In my room, with the assistance of another enthusiast from my class, we acted out scenes from operas, improvising our own words and melodies. I was very versatile, playing Nero one minute and Desdemona the next. It must have all been very funny, but then it was all very serious. We always chose the most tragic scenes, with death and murders in them. Tragedy was my specialty. I was at my best. Gradually, ambition grew, and from my bedroom we moved to the large dining room, and gave performances there for the servants and a few guests. I am afraid the audience laughed when they should have cried, but we were greatly satisfied.

The opera that produced the biggest impression on me was *Faust*, with Mephisto in red velvet striding about the stage. A new ambition was born — to sing Mephisto one day — an ambition never to be fulfilled. But the opera *Faust* played an important part in my future career.

### Summer 1902 — Dzhulynka

The winter in St. Petersburg lasted until late April. Then, as if by magic, it would become the warm spring. The green leaves then would come out of winter hiding. The beginnings of the maddening white nights — the sleepless, the languid, romantic sensuous night that seems to enter your whole being.

The whiter languorous night transferred the center of enjoyment of St. Petersburg society from the center of town to the Islands, where the best restaurants opened their summer places and the love trade left its beat of Nevsky Prospect for the promenading under the shady trees of the Islands. Every night, the elite of St. Petersburg society would drive in their elegant carriages to exhibit their wealth, contemplate others, and whisper scandals — who is with whom. [There was] quite a competition for the trade of charming ladies under the shady trees. Many a time I walked and looked for a romance, adventure — but only found love for sale to the highest bidder. I would trudge home empty handed.

We spent May to August in the country. That summer we moved into the Dzhulynka house. We had two mansions. Our summer residence was seven miles away in the large village, Dzhulynka, on the shore of the large river, Southern Bug.<sup>37</sup> It was much lovelier than the modern residence in Teofilovka, but it took us three years to realize that, after which we went to live there. The house was 300 years old; an old manor reminiscent in style of old American colonial architecture; one story, but long, with a porch supported by lovely columns. No one knew its detailed history except that once it belonged to a Polish count who ruled the region. It was situated on the outskirts of the village with a beautiful half-mile drive leading to the porch. There were mysterious cellars — once, I was told, used as dungeons. But probably barrels of beer and wine were kept there, rather than prisoners.

The house was surrounded by 15 acres of thick bushes of lilac trees.<sup>38</sup> It looked like a lilac forest, with a pattern of garden paths intricately woven into it. Within it, it felt like an island of lilacs surrounded by garden paths. The bushes were so thick that it seemed impossible to penetrate them; but I soon discovered secret passages leading into the middle of the island, where one could get lost or hide oneself among the flowery bushes in little clearings, covered with a green carpet of grass and wildflowers. Oh, what great fun it was to go there and play games, sometimes being Robinson Crusoe, sometimes a Red Indian. It was a lovely feeling of being hidden and secluded from the eyes of the world — and later, when I grew up, very useful.

<sup>37</sup> The Southern River Bug is 806 km long. It starts in Podolia and flows southeast to the Black Sea.

<sup>38</sup> Native to western Ukraine is *Syringa josikaea* or Hungarian Lilac which can grow from 2 to 4 meters high or 4-5 meters in width. Rows of these would certainly have created the secret garden effect Val describes. Lilac season in the Ukraine peaks in mid-May, which is close to when the Rosings would have first arrived there and seen the lilacs in their most beautiful bloom.

I loved that house, that wonderful romantic garden. Every time I think of it and visualize it I become nostalgic and long to see it again. Probably I never will. Probably it is now destroyed. Since then it has seen so many terrible things: the Revolution, the Civil War, 1<sup>st</sup> German occupation, 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and 2<sup>nd</sup> German occupation, the German retreat, and the battle which was fought there.

One day in 1944 I was in Camp Roberts<sup>39</sup> preparing productions for the American troops, and when I opened the morning paper I read a terse communiqué from Stalin: “Yesterday our troops in the battle of Dzhulynka defeated the Germans. They were thrown across the River Bug leaving 2,000 dead.” It meant so little to the general reader — except the fact of German defeat — but to me the feeling was indescribable. I was stunned. I saw the burning house, the gutted and destroyed garden, and the empty village — the madness, the tragedy of human hate and viciousness descending on the peaceful village so dear to my heart.<sup>40</sup> That house, that garden were so full of cherished memories, where so much happened, where so many things entered into me for the first time in my life, where I grew from a little boy into a man, so many things that shaped my future, my destiny.

### **Attempts to be a Man**

Sex began to interest me more and more. One day I lured one of our pretty maids to come and play with me. I led her as captive to my lair in the middle of one of the lilac islands — then I took courage and asked her to give herself to me. She looked at me, burst out into laughter, and ran away. I felt humiliated and stupid. I did not make further attempts to be a man.

Also that summer in Dzhulynka, two important events occurred in my life: the wedding of my elder sister, Vera, to the handsome Baron von Sivers, and my first step on the stage. Both took place in the garden of our summer house in Dzhulynka.

A wedding in the country is a great event, lasting for three days. All the best peasant houses were hired for the occasion. A large tent was erected in the garden for the wedding feast to accommodate three hundred guests who arrived from all over the country.

For this great occasion I was to organize fireworks, and permission was given to taste wine. Up until that time I had not been allowed to drink, so I looked forward to the wedding to at last taste the forbidden nectar. I greedily watched the battery of bottles as they arrived

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<sup>39</sup> Rosing was Entertainment Director at Camp Roberts (near Paso Robles, California) for two years, from December 1943 to December 1945.

<sup>40</sup> The Russian “Mud Offensive” designed to split the southern German Army in two began March 4, 1944. Koniev’s 2nd Ukrainian Front took the massive German supply depot at Uman on March 10th. On the evening of March 11th, Russian units from the 16th Tank Corps of the 2nd Tank Army took control of the Dzhulynka crossing at the Bug River. Villagers confirm that Rosing house in Dzhulynka was destroyed during WWII, most probably during this battle. The house in Teofilovka miraculously survived and still stands. Its rediscovery in September 2001 by two of Val’s children is the subject of the documentary film Finding Dzhulynka.



from the nearest town, helped to arrange them in the cellar — and then decided to taste everything.

The guests began to arrive at 10 a.m., and champagne was served before going to church. It was a hot July day. I was thirsty. As everyone was too busy to watch my drinking, I got loose on the bottles. Champagne tasted almost like lemonade. I drank in the house five glasses before going to church — and I liked it. It made me feel gay. After church, again more champagne was served, and I drank another five glasses. I was hilarious.

We went into the tent. Then the wedding lunch was served. Russian meals always started with hors d'oeuvres, served at a special table. It constituted a meal in itself. Now I can't understand how people could eat so much. With the hors d'oeuvres we drank vodka — a very potent alcoholic drink, stronger than whiskey. At the hors d'oeuvres table, I counted thirteen bottles of different kinds of vodka, all pretty, of different colors — green, red, white, and blue — and I felt obliged to sample each one of them. So I drank a jigger of each kind, and felt exceedingly bright and gay.<sup>41</sup>

I was still on my feet. We then moved to the main tables. I staggered to my place at the dinner table. It was a hot July afternoon. I was terribly thirsty. My stomach was on fire. I had to put it out. In front of me stood bottles of Madeira and Port wine; I was thirsty, so I drank first a full tumbler of Madeira. It didn't help. Then I followed with a tumbler of Port. God what a mistake. At that moment I was called to go and supervise the arrangement of dinner for the coachmen. I got up, moved a couple of steps, and then suddenly — like lightning — felt as if I had been struck on the head. I fell — and was carried out to my room; I came to in my bed, where I fortunately became violently sick. For hours, I was in terrible agony. No one realized that I had alcoholic poisoning. I suffered terribly. The doctor said it saved my life, but left me hating even the smell of liquor.

I stayed in bed from 3 to 9. Meanwhile more victims of potent spirits were being brought in. By the evening I was a little better. I was supposed to supervise the fireworks. I adored fireworks. When I remembered the fireworks, I forced myself to get up, and ordered the large box of fireworks to be carried to the lawn. I tumbled out of bed. I put on my Gymnasium uniform, indecently forgetting the trousers, and half undressed I stumbled to the field.

Then I opened the large box of fireworks which I had lovingly collected for three months, and with trembling hand lit a match to see what was inside — but my hand was unsteady. The fingers could not hold the match, and it dropped inside the box. In a split second the amassed beautiful fireworks did their explosively artistic exhibition of burning inside the box. I was lucky to get out alive as fires of every imaginable color — jumping rockets, explosive bursts of Roman candles — left the box and strew the field with its burned out covers.

That was my final tragedy and disgrace of the day. I staggered in shame — to the accompaniment of hilarious laughter of the crowd — back to bed. I slept, exhausted, sick at heart — and in my stomach. The next morning I was alright, but I have never liked wine or alcohol since. It was a real case of “kill or cure.” For several years after that I could not stand

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41 Some of the flavors of the local Ukrainian vodka were pepper, honey, mint, and milk.

the smell of liquor or wine. Since then I have never been drunk, nor even tipsy. I can drink one or utmost two jiggers of bourbon or scotch with ginger ale, or two small glasses of wine diluted in a tumbler of water. So looking back I must say it was a lucky day for me to over drink myself. It saved much money for me and no doubt many headaches.

The next few days, while the tent was still standing, I had a brilliant idea to turn the tent into a summer theatre in which I will act, produce, direct. Sheer genius of an idea! And it will provide new excitement to the household! In no time a stage was erected. A one act play [was] chosen: Chekhov's *The Bear* with three characters — casted and rehearsed. We invited 250 victims to witness our great production, and the excitement of the coming performance anyway for me far surpassed the excitement of the wedding of my sister. I made my debut in the part of an old servant.<sup>42</sup> I thought I was magnificent — just wonderful — but my mother told me I was (as they say now in America) lousy.

It did not dampen my enthusiasm. Like a clock work, nine months later my sister produced a son — and I, my first school play, *The Inspector General*.<sup>43</sup> By that time I felt myself a truly veteran producer-director-actor.

### Winter 1902-03

Life became organized every winter in St. Petersburg. To give you a small idea of our social debauchery, I will give you a sample programme of our winter. There were lunches, dinners, and suppers. It was a gay social whirl — theater, dancing, and parties. It was intoxicating in every sense of the word.

It may give some of my readers an inside understanding why our society so easily collapsed, was conquered by the Bolshevik men [who were] dedicated to uplift the world and destroy capitalism and bourgeois society — bring *happiness* — all this to be achieved by the *if necessary* means of murder, execution, massacres, oppressive enslaving, and destruction of all basic right of human freedom. But even an idea, such a possibility, was laughable in those days.

The great winter season began in September, after the cream of high society had returned from their summer vacations spent in Europe, [at the] bathing beaches of Crimea, or in the Baltics and Finland. It was time to share with each other our summer romances, excitement, and scandals of who was unfaithful to whom. That required daily parties, weekly at-homes, special suppers after the theatre once a week. Then [we had] two weeks December holidays of unbelievable festivities (lunches, dinners, suppers). Then the butter season before Lent. Then pious sex week of *supposedly* fasting — which amounted that all the food served was consisting of caviar, salmon, sturgeon and other fish delicacies. The menu avoided meat, but champagne was not forbidden to serve — and it flowed.

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42 Chekhov's short two-character farce *The Bear* was written in 1900.

43 Val's first student production, the satirical play by Nikolai Gogol portraying greed, stupidity, and corruption in Czarist Russia, was probably a bit later, in 1904 or 1905.

As was the Russian custom, we kept open house. We gave out standing invitations to friends we like: *Please come to dinner at our house*. It meant that the invited person could drop in to dinner any time. We in our turn had many invitations of this kind. I was so surprised when I first came to England that people had to have a specified date to come to dinner. With us it was a general invitation — “Do come to dinner sometime” — and so, often we had up to fifteen unexpected guests for dinner. Some used to take rather an advantage of Russian hospitality, and from that a proverb was born — an unexpected guest is worse than a tartar. When I look back, I am horrified at such a custom, for the mistress of the house never [would] know how many people will be for dinner until a half hour before and had to keep enough provisions to satisfy her hungry guests — and if we were going out ourselves that the unexpected guest would understand and so search [for] another hostess who would feed his hungry stomach. Our sense of hospitality was such that we sincerely enjoyed having people drop in for dinner.

Studies were the last thing I thought about. I passed from class to class by the skin of my teeth — and chiefly by my natural ability in mathematics, and my knowledge of French, which later was my Waterloo. Latin was my nemesis. Religion was neither very successful. Ice-skating also occupied much of my time, which should have been devoted to study. In addition, I learned how to play Vist, a Russian card game similar to Bridge, only more difficult.<sup>44</sup> It fascinated me watching grown-ups playing it, and [later] at fifteen I was considered a prodigy — one of the best players — and Aunt Matilda, who adored the game, often kept me up till 2 or 3 a.m. playing double dummy with her. I invariably won, to her great annoyance. She would refuse to pay me, and the account usually was settled by her giving me some of her very expensive fruit — which she kept in her room, knowing of my free access to the larder in the kitchen.

During the winter, we had an incredible amount of large balls and masquerades. The largest one was the Masquers Ball at the Mariinsky Theater (the opera house).<sup>45</sup> Then, every Gymnasium, every branch of the University, and every military school vied with each other for giving the most exciting ball of the season. The classrooms were transformed into amazing artistic and original creations. A buffet of wonderful food was served free to thousands of guests. The hosts were the graduating class, but the entire school participated. The greatest artists appeared at the concert program. When I began to have a voice in the artistic arrangement of my school, I rebelled against the old-fashioned ideas of having *just* a concert. I wanted a play — and won the approval to produce in my 7<sup>th</sup> grade *The Inspector General* and

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44 The modern game of Bridge comes from the Russian game Biritch, also known as Russian Whist, an early form of Bridge. Whist is pronounced “Vist” in Russian. Val had a reputation as a first-rate Bridge player. This skill was also instrumental in the meeting of his first wife.

45 Russian Maslenitsa was festival week full of feasts given as a send off to winter. It was held the week before the start of Lent, corresponding to the similar festival of Carnival in the west. The highlights were the masked balls held at the palaces in St. Petersburg. The pagan origins of the Russian festival are a celebration of the return of the sun after the long winter. Accordingly, the symbolic traditional food of Maslenitsa is the pancake, round and golden like the sun.

in my last year *Boris Godounov* by Pushkin.<sup>46</sup> In my exuberance I already imagined myself a second Stanislavsky. How far I was from the truth!

The gaiety in St. Petersburg continued unabated, but I longed for the spring, and my beloved Dzhulynka — with its healthy peace. With each year, I grew to love it more and more. I felt the call of the earth and of the open steppes. I loved my pack of fifteen mongrel dogs, finding them more faithful, with more love than most of the humans. I loved the heat of the sun, browning the skin, warming the blood, creating health, energy and desire to know life.

In the meantime, that winter I heard Chaliapin for the first time, as Mephisto.<sup>47</sup> This little shrimp stood in a queue for ten hours in the bitter cold to get a ticket. The shrimp assailed the astonished box office man with vituperative tirade which he has learned from some of his aristocratic officers on his God-given sacred right to buy a ticket on the number he was shoving into the clerk's face. Terrified, to get rid of this unexpected volcano, the clerk offers him a ticket in the front row — usually reserved for high ranking officers, generals, and ministers. That cost by the present standard at least \$25.00. The shrimp, to another astonishment of the box office man said, "All right, I'll take it." He deposited part of the value. That meant he had to drive home, find the porter (his banker — who lent him occasionally money at very high interest), drive back and pay the balance. In all, that would cost him \$30.00. But Chaliapin was worth it. To sit in the front row among generals was an additional thrill. He would be able in the intermission to stand and lean against the railing of the orchestra, face the audience and expose his person to admiring glances...

But I was well repaid by seeing the great man, and I became determined to be an opera singer. I was versatile. I sang like the dramatic tenors Figner and Mazzini, the famous baritones Bragin and Maksakov, like the bass Chaliapin, and even like the coloratura soprano Boronat.<sup>48</sup> I spent all my money on records. I had them all. By the age of fourteen, I knew every existing voice that had been recorded.

My voice matured, and I was obliged to be satisfied with imitating only male voices — still my field was vast. My inclination and desire led me towards basses, on account of my favorite record by Chaliapin of the Mephisto songs. My next favorite was *The Prisoner* sung by Maksakov in a vibrant baritone, and then the aria of *Onegin* sung by Bragin. The tenor records gradually took second place in my vast repertoire.

### Spring 1903 — I Could Not Sleep For Days

The south of Russia is a strange mixture of people. The peasants in the villages are Ukrainian descendents of Cossacks, and the landlords are practically all Poles, as the country was once conquered by Poland in the 16th century. The Cossacks revolted, freed themselves from Poland, but left the landlords. About that time, the Jews, emigrating from Spain and

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46 Pushkin's play, *Boris Godounov*, was written in 1831. Mussorgsky's opera was based on the Pushkin's play.

47 Chaliapin performed "Mephisto" on December 16, 1902 at the Mariinsky Theater. Czar Nicholas II attended the performance and wrote about it in his diary that night. This is possibly the same performance Val attended.

48 Alexander Bragin (1881-1955), Maximilian Maksakov (1869-1936), Olimpia Boronat (1867-1934).

Germany, settled there in little communities. When Ukraine was annexed by Russia in 17th century, Jews were banned from living in the north, especially Moscow and Petrograd<sup>49</sup>, except by special permit of the government, or if a Jew had a university education. Their situation grew steadily worse, and in 1900 became similar to the one now in Germany.<sup>50</sup> They could not hold position in any government office, ministry or court. Jews were barred from being officers in the Army or Navy, but were subject to conscription. Only 2% of all [Jewish] students were accepted in the universities [before 1905]. No Jewish singer, musician, actor, or dancer was engaged at the Imperial Theatre — with only a few outstanding exceptions.

The life of Jews in Russia was worse than that of peasants and workers. They were looked down upon — despised by the upper classes and hated by the lower. Their only friends were the intellectuals and the higher bourgeois — the middle class — which began to form itself into the Constitutional Democratic Party under the leadership of Pavel Milyukov.<sup>51</sup> Their objective was a constitutional monarchy with responsible government from a Parliament not appointed by the Tsar. This party, though legal, was looked at very unfavorably by the government and upper classes.

The government had to give a victim to the masses to distract their attention. The Jews were chosen. The government deliberately blamed the Jews for all the misfortunes of Russia and incited the masses against them. Even from the altar, priests preached this. It was a policy. The long-suffering illiterate Russian people have to have a scapegoat. The ruling class offered them the Jews. (That the Jews made the most of their superior practical brain to capture commerce, of that there is no question, but they had no alternative. The Jews were forced to pay bribes everywhere. It was a fight for existence.)

Then suddenly, events began to follow one after another that shook all of Russia, horrified the civilized world, and undermined the power and stability of the throne. The Black Hundred,<sup>52</sup> as they were called — the arch monarchists, the secret police, the bums, drunks and dregs of society — openly preached hatred of the Jews, inciting the masses to massacre the enemies of Christ, blaming the Jews for all the misery of the Christian Russians. They were the same element that later served the hideous crimes of the Bolsheviks — only with such grandiose scope that the Czar's atrocities were puny in comparison. I am sure he even did not know of their being perpetrated in his name. The leaders of his Black Hundred were bums — degenerate drunken sots — led by stupid extreme monarchists, believing that God appointed

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49 St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd in 1914 at the start of World War I because it was thought that St. Petersburg sounded too German. The name was changed again in 1924 to Leningrad after the death of Vladimir Lenin. In 1991, after the USSR came to an end, the city reverted to its original name.

50 Val worked on his memoirs over several decades, writing numerous drafts. This passage was from a section written in the late 1930s.

51 The Constitutional Democratic Party, founded in 1905, was also known as the Kadets. In the first provisional government, after the February Revolution of 1917, Milyukov became Minister of Foreign Affairs.

52 The Black Hundred were conservative supporters of the Czar, and they were both anti-Semitic and anti-Ukrainian. The organization officially emerged in St. Petersburg during the Russian Revolution of 1905, but it had predecessor organizations known by different names.

the Czar — while the Bolshevik communists were guided by the mad genius Lenin himself. The same degenerate sadists were led by such brilliant intellectuals and great thinkers like Zinoviev (who massacred tens of thousands in Petrograd), the head of Cheka (OGPU) Dzerzhinsky (who murdered hundreds of thousands all over Russia), and the greatest genius of planned extermination that ever existed — Stalin himself — [who] murdered in millions.

Like a performing company, the shock troop of the Black Hundred traveled from town to town on a pre-arranged organized schedule, having obtained the cooperation of the police and troops stationed in a number of towns in the south district of Russia where Jews lived, and having obtained the cooperation of the Governor of that district and of a number of amoral priests who preached indictment against the Jews in their churches.

The worst pogroms occurred in Gomel, Zhytomyr, Berdychiv, and Kishinev.<sup>53</sup> I visited Kishinev soon after the terrible massacre. I was traveling south with my father, and we received the news in the train. At every station we stopped at there was great excitement. Stories of untold horror were carried by escaped refugees who told how the worst elements of the town, led by agitators of the Black Hundred, ransacked the town, killing over two thousand Jews. We heard how the governor called the troops and kept them standing in the square before his palace, and never gave an order to interfere and suppress the bloody orgy that lasted two days. It was two days of everlasting shame in the history of Russia. I was thirteen years old. I saw the gutted houses and looked at the broken shops. I heard how women were raped in front of their husbands, and children killed before the eyes of their parents, how they tortured people by opening their stomachs and filling them with feathers from ripped cushions. At that very impressionable age, I could not sleep for days. I was haunted by the pictures of suffering I had heard described, and my young resentment against the ruling classes turned into hatred.

For the next few months the Jewish population all over Russia lived in terror that the pogroms would become general. From the south, pogroms spread to the north, and that winter rumors were afloat that the Black Hundred is planning a massacre of Jews in St. Petersburg on the 6<sup>th</sup> January, that all Jewish apartments will be marked with a cross just like St. Bartholomew night in Paris when the Catholics massacred Huguenots.<sup>54</sup> Groups of students began to organize themselves to be on call that night to fight the mobs. A terrible panic seized the Jewish inhabitants. There weren't too many because Jews were forbidden to live in St. Petersburg unless they belonged to the following professions: rich merchant, doctor, lawyer, engineer, artist, or university professor. They were not allowed to be officers, and generally the colony was not large, so within a few days time every liberal Russian offered to hide them in their house.

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53 About one third of Kishinev's 140,000 residents were Jews. The first Kishinev pogrom took place in April 1903, beginning on Easter Sunday. A second pogrom followed in October 1905. The Zhitomir pogrom took place on May 7-8, 1905.

54 The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in France started on August 24, 1572 and lasted for several months, spreading from Paris to other parts of the country. The Huguenots were French Calvinist Protestants. Before it ended, over 5,000 of them had been killed.

We invited some of our Jewish friends to stay that night with us. We had a family of a school mate of mine. On the day the pogrom was to take place the Menaker family came to stay with us. In spite of the horrible circumstances, I was very excited. I had a revolver and my two hunting guns. We barricaded the two entrances with furniture and — with loaded guns, a buffet supper, and a card table to play Bridge — we settled to spend a night of vigil. We ate all the food. We played a number of rubbers of Bridge. We listened to every sound on the stairs. But nothing happened. Like this we spent the night until new rumors floated in that the pogrom is not going to take place. Maybe it was originally a false rumor, or at the last minute orders from above stopped the planned pogrom. In any case, nothing happened. In my youthful eagerness to fight, I was almost disappointed. Anyway, it was an exciting nerve-racking experience.

The policy and action of the counter revolutionary Black Hundred suddenly changed. The press continued to pound on the Jewish merchants, accusing them of delivering wrong ammunition, rotten food, and spoiled leather in the boots, accusing the entire Jewish population of betraying the Russian Army.

It was under the influence of the Dreyfus case in Paris, a Jewish captain in the French army who was falsely accused of selling documents to the Germans.<sup>55</sup> He was condemned to the Devil's Island. Years later (after the confession of the real criminal conspirators) he was reinstated with honors. But his life, his health, his home, was ruined.

### Summer 1903

The second consequence of my sister's wedding happened the next summer. As the son left the bosom of his nurse, Vera engaged a very pretty young girl to help her with the child. Vera and her husband came to spend the summer with us in Dzhulynka and brought with them Amalia, a young Baltic German girl. She was also a maid companion for my sister Liuba. Amalia was about twenty-two years old. She was very pretty, with a sweet pointed nose — like an attractive little fox. She was very vivacious and gay, and I was delighted to have her in the house. The looking after of the 3-month old Arkady didn't take much of her time so she devoted her spare time to me. We played games like two comrades, and somehow the possibility of any other relationship never entered my head. I over-idealized women with a foolish belief that they were above sex, except when married, that it was impossible for a woman to have a lover except her husband.

Amalia came often to my room to say goodnight. We would sit on the bed and chat and laugh. One night I started to tease her, for which she began to fight me. Our faces came close together and — before I knew how or why — it happened. She kissed my lips and ran out of the room. It was my first kiss. I liked the sensation. I was thrilled beyond words.

From then on I began to follow her — and repeat this very appealing new sensation. We did not play games anymore, but spent our time kissing. I was timid and frightened. She was experienced, and enjoyed my innocence. Though my knowledge of life was little more

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55 The Dreyfuss case was a political scandal that divided France from 1894-1906, It involving the alleged treason of a young Jewish artillery officer.

advanced than it was when I was nine and asked our maid to make love (not having the slightest understanding what it meant), I was still not even an apprentice — but eager to learn the trade.

One night there was a southern moon. The world seemed bathed in silver, the air so soft and refreshing after the heat of the day, intoxicating, with the perfume of lilacs. Around us, the world was asleep — except for the crickets.

We went for a stroll into the garden. Silently we walked along the paths. She directed our way. We stopped before a hidden entrance to an island, completely surrounded by bushes of lilacs, well known to us in our games. I was afraid. She took my hand. I followed. We were alone, secluded in a heavenly spot, surrounded by fragrant nature, all covered by a blanket of silver moonlight.

The blooming blossoms seemed to conspire for my downfall, and the benign moon smiled encouragingly at my clumsily crossing the Rubicon. But having crossed it — suddenly a panic seized me — I became terrified, and in most ungallant fashion I ran away, leaving the frustrated lady alone. I did not have Caesar's courage.

I will always be grateful to Amalia for having led me into manhood among so much beauty — and not in sordidness and cheapness as fared most of my comrades. But that night I realized little of all this. I was too young to appreciate it. I was an ungrateful and rude lover that night.

My retreat lasted for two weeks. I avoided her. She understood, and patiently waited. Then nature took its natural course, and I came back to the knowing arms of Amalia. From then on my progress was in a forward direction. No one in the family suspected anything, and Amalia came to live with us in St. Petersburg — convenient, but not so wise.

### **Winter 1904 — Intoxicating in Every Sense**

When I returned to St. Petersburg, I felt a greatly superior being, ready to enter the intellectual and artistic life of the time — and the times began to be disturbing. That winter, the government plunged Russia into the Japanese War.<sup>56</sup> It was a great blunder. The Grand Dukes and some of the wealthy aristocracy had very valuable concessions in Siberia. Japan, who needed expansion from her bulging-with-humanity island, and with tremendous progress of westernization, coveted those possessions and provoked war. We all laughed. It looked like a mosquito attacking a bear. How absurd for little men that looked weak and undeveloped to imagine they could fight the powerful giants of the Russian moujiks.

The declaration of war at first stimulated a great wave of patriotism — the last for the Romanovs. Even I forgot my enmity. A tremendous procession of workers, students, and citizens marched down the Nevsky and paraded with flags in front of the Winter Palace, singing the national anthem. I hastily organized my neighborhood and marched it to join the main procession — and led the singing with my lusty voice. I believe I joined the procession

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<sup>56</sup> War with Japan was declared on January 30/February 12, 1904.



chiefly for the opportunity to sing loudly and without restriction. I felt I was singing in public. We waved the flags, cheered the empty windows of the palace, and felt a great accomplishment of showing our devoted support to our Little Father.<sup>57</sup> I paid for it by getting a bad cold. Singing for hours in a bitter cold January day gave me a terrible laryngitis and I was voiceless for weeks — to the great delight of my family. It became quite peaceful at home. My feelings were hurt for this non-appreciation of my artistry, but Amalia continued to console me.

Proudly and joyfully singing, our armies left for the front. Our old-fashioned fleet proudly steamed from Kronstadt on its long journey to the East. The government was warned by some officers that our ships were too old fashioned, that our guns could never reach the Jap ships, that our fleet will be destroyed and thousands of lives slaughtered without defense — but it was of no avail. St. Petersburg took the war as a picnic. No one considered Japan seriously. Little island. Small yellow people. What a joke! “We shall cover them with our hats” became the slogan. Greater was the shock when defeat followed defeat on land and sea.

A new profiting class sprang up like mushrooms. Stories were whispered that the Army was supplied with boots that had paper soles instead of leather, and that they were sent rotten food. Corruption and mismanagement was glaring at every step.

By that time, I forgot my singing of the national anthem in the street, and my heart and soul was with the Liberals. We mourned the loss of life — but rejoiced at each defeat. It must seem terrible to you, reader, but one had to live under the autocracy of the government to understand this. St. Petersburg society was dancing so gaily at charity balls for poor wounded soldiers. Suppers were never so luxurious. Theaters and restaurants were never so full.

The criminal inefficiency and hopeless corruption of the government and officials became obvious to the entire nation when the new long-range Japanese guns outdistanced ours, helping to capture Port Arthur, murdering and destroying our armies. Hundreds of thousands of men were butchered and their deaths were laid to the steps of the throne. It shook the entire nation. The Liberals and the Socialists — with whom the war was unpopular from the start — seized this opportunity to attack the government and stir unrest. Each defeat was not Russia's defeat, but that of the government. With each defeat the criticism of our government became louder. The tragedy was brought practically to every peasant hut of the land. The revolutionaries lifted their heads and opened their mouths and began to spit fire — but the counter revolutionaries were also active. At Tsushima, the naval battle, our entire fleet was sunk of almost a hundred vessels — battleships, cruisers, destroyers — while Japan didn't lose a single battleship. The sea battle of Tsushima<sup>58</sup> was a crime of murder; it soon became an open secret. An ignominious peace was signed in New Hampshire, with America acting as a go-between.<sup>59</sup> The defeat had to be blamed on someone else. The defeat had to be taken away from the Czar. [It was] placed on the heads of the Jews.

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57 Little Father was an affectionate nickname the Russian people gave to their Czar, as he supposedly looked after them paternally and benevolently.

58 The Battle of Tsushima was fought May 14-15/27-28, 1905.

59 The peace treaty between Russia and Japan was signed on September 5, 1905.

## 1905 — First Political Experience

Having accomplished their aim of giving vent to the people's rising hatred and discontent, it was time now to pay attention to the revolutionary agitators and the workers — where the real danger could come from. Poverty was at its height. The Hydra of the Revolution lifted its head and began to glare out of its dark invisible corner on its enemy.

The government decided to crush it. They needed a pretext to ferret out the leaders, to crush any revolutionary tendencies. For this purpose, they encouraged a priest by the name Gapon to organize a union of Russian factory workers. Provocateurs were sent to factories and workers quarters, under the leadership the famous Father Gapon, to organize the workers to march on Sunday the 9th of January to the Winter Palace and present the Tsar a petition for reforms to ameliorate their living conditions. But police guards, dressed as workers, introduced at the last moment demands of political reforms — an 8-hour day, and freedom of press and speech. The unsuspecting workers enthusiastically voted for the introduction of these points, and Gapon was powerless to prevent it or to cancel the great procession of workers which was organized to go to the Winter Palace and present the petition to the Tsar. A copy of the resolution (which had political demands instead of just economic ones) was sent ahead and served as a pretext to get from the Tsar an agreement to refuse to accept such a revolutionary petition and to disperse the procession with soldiers and Cossacks.

Great excitement reigned in the town; everywhere people discussed the proposed procession, and the name of the until-then-unknown Father Gapon was on everybody's lips.

The governor of St. Petersburg warned the workers not to follow through with it, and then issued the famous order to the troops who were supposed to bar the procession not to spare cartridges.<sup>60</sup> That phrase became politically engraved in the heart of every liberal and socialist in Russia, but somehow no one believed that a peaceful procession — that included women and children, with icons and crosses — would be interfered with or that the troops would fire. But the government seized its opportunity to show a firm hand — and it drove several nails into its own coffin with one stroke.

As I sympathized with the workers condition and their poverty — and having a liberal inclination — I attended a number of meetings. This was my first political experience. It all had a sense of drama, excitement, and even danger — of doing something verging on illegal. Having led my district in a patriotic procession to the Tsar at the declaration of the Japanese war, I felt it was now my duty to do so again, to support the workers' demands. I now offered to do so at the meeting, and as I was from an aristocratic district I was vigorously applauded — and very proud of myself. I, with a group of my fellow students, canvassed the district and got over 100 volunteers to join the procession. None suspected danger — only fun.

Our school was in ferment. Pitched battles were fought between liberal minded boys and the monarchists. We succeeded in giving them a good thrashing as we were in the majority.

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<sup>60</sup> Governor-General Dmitrii Trepov's famous order not to spare cartridges was actually given later in the year during the railway strike of October 1905. A few days later Nicholas II issued his October Manifesto — an unprecedented document which spelled the beginning of the end for Russia's autocracy.

I adored fighting. Being rather small in height, I used to throw myself head down in the midst of the foe to avoid face blows — hitting fast and hard anything around me, often by mistake my own side. The uproar during those battles — which took place in the big hall of the school — was terrific. They did not last long — as the Masters would come up, and we would disperse as by magic — but we would be back to fight as soon as they left the hall.

### **Their Intentions Were Peaceful**

We were strictly forbidden by the school and our parents to go out that Sunday into the street, but I sneaked out of the house before anyone was awake. My pockets were full of sandwiches — and I took my revolver.<sup>61</sup>

At first, the streets were deserted. White snow was crisp, the sunshine making its sparkle like millions of rare diamonds. I raced around the streets until I found the whereabouts of Gapon.

I took a tram toward the workers quarter, where crowds were beginning to gather.<sup>62</sup> I found him surrounded by leading workers carrying the soon-to-be historical petition. There was such a dense mob that I could not squeeze closer than twenty or thirty feet. At a prearranged signal, the procession began to move, swelling its size with each cross street. It extended for miles.

I was 14, full of youthful enthusiasm and idealism, a hero worshiper of the men who braved the wrath of the Czar. That morning, I, and all of us, worshiped the Father Gapon, a young priest who was imbued with a desire to improve the workers conditions. Their life was nothing but dirt, poverty, and hunger — and in the end a pauper's grave — which made the contrast to the life of the well-to-do aristocrats even more terrible.

It was a motley and exciting crowd — workers from different factories, students, liberals belonging to the educated intelligentsia who were in sympathy with the workers, many priests with crosses and icons — all mixed, all excited, all wondering what would happen, all hoping that the Czar would appear to grant the petition, all hoping that it will be the beginning of a new era in Russia. There was also a fear of danger that we might be dispersed by soldiers — and Cossacks with their terrible knouts which cut to the bone, and which could deal death with one blow. I vouch for them that their intentions were peaceful. The women were completely unarmed. There was only one great desire — to present their words, and show their suffering to their father Tsar.

We crossed the bridge at the Neva without any interference. Other contingents were not so lucky. On the Quay we merged into the main procession. We reached the Winter Palace

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<sup>61</sup> In one version of the story, Val says he cursed himself during the massacre for having left his revolver at home. In another, he says he threw away his revolver after the Cossacks charged the crowd so he would not be caught with it. Father Gapon had specifically called for no weapons, not even penknives.

<sup>62</sup> The Vyborg district, where many of the workers lived, was to the north, across the Neva River. Val would have taken a horse drawn tram to get there, as electric trams did not appear until 1907.

Square. At the head, moving toward the Winter Palace, marched the leaders with the petition, carrying icons. The square was almost full from other processions from other parts of the town. A path was cleared for Gapon to reach the palace. The procession stopped. Tightly were shut the gates of the Palace. Troops in full war equipment were drawn in front. The crowd, in the anticipation of the Tsar's appearance, sang the national anthem. The crosses and icons were lifted. The sun blazed down as though giving its blessing.

And then it happened. Sharp and loud was the order of the commanding officer to disperse. The crowd did not move. Surely they could not shoot down defenseless women and children.

Oh, unhappy monarch, how foolish were your counselors. How great would have been your name. What love you might have won in the hearts of your people if you but appeared for a few instants on the balcony and greeted your suffering people with a smile. With beating heart we waited for such a moment, hoping that you would see the light, realize how badly your people are suffering, and offer a friendly hand to them. Instead of bread and friendliness, he gave them lead and steel.

Sharp were the sabers of the Cossacks. Plentiful were the bullets of the infantry. "One, two, three," counted the officer. The crowd did not stir except for a few people kneeling in prayer. The infantry raised their rifles. "Fire!" came the command.

### **The Children Fell Like Shattered Birds**

A volley of shots was aimed into the air, hitting hundreds of children who had climbed the trees in the surrounding park to better witness the event. The children fell like shattered birds from the trees.

The first volley was followed by another directed into the crowd — which broke in all directions. Panic seized us. A stampede followed. The stampede of the terrified crowd was a never-to-be-forgotten nightmare. The cries of men, women, and children, wounded and dying filled the air — and the hate in me toward the Tsar and his soldiers rose to a point of suffocation. I was seized with a hopeless impotence, a powerlessness to stem the onrush of tragedy. Deafening screams came from three hundred thousand throats — cursing. Near me, a baby — only few months old — was struck in the arms of his mother. I can still hear her agonized shriek.

Blood was on the pavement everywhere — and splashed on our clothes from others less fortunate. The men and officers must have become drunk with blood. "Do not spare cartridges," was the order of the day. Another volley was fired into our retreating backs, and then the cavalry of Cossacks and Dragoons swept down on us, hitting right and left with sabers — and whips that had lead on the end — cutting through the clothes into the flesh, killing and maiming people for life.

Fortunately for me, I was not in the center of the procession in the middle of the square, but on the edge by the pavement. I ran as fast as my young legs would permit. I was frightened. I did not want to die. The crowd was fleeing. Men and women screamed from fear, others from pain.

It had taken only a few seconds — but how the world had changed its aspect. From peaceful and hopeful, ready to love, the people became wild, terrorized, with a new hatred in their hearts. The hatred which was born that day never died.

I often wonder why I was spared. Luck, or fate — whatever it was — came then in the form of a doorway. I hid behind a pillar — by a miracle, squeezed myself into safety. After the fourth volley, I ran again, trying to reach a side street. I never thought I had such speed. I stumbled over a stone. Someone fell over me. I felt something wet, warm, and sticky all over my face. It made me feel sick. Fortunately, the man was not badly hurt. I helped him to get up. We ran and finally reached a side street — the Millionaya.<sup>63</sup>

We were out of the crowd. Forgetting I was an atheist, I thanked God. We found some people to help my unexpected friend — to bandage his cut — and I made my way to the main street — the Nevsky — to see what was happening.

The side streets were deserted. But on the Nevsky, angry crowds were pacing the pavement. Patrols of Cossacks were keeping order, dispersing any gathering. Stories were being told of how thousands of workers had been maimed and killed, that several other processions were stopped before reaching the Palace and cut down, trampled by cavalry — that Father Gapon had disappeared. Already accusations were made of him (which were later proved true) that he was an agent of the secret police.

My knees were weak from the shock of what I had gone through, but I refreshed myself with the sandwich I had brought with me. I paced the streets for hours, boiling with indignation and rage — with a mad desire to take out my revolver and shoot at the arrogant and cruel Cossacks and soldiers. I worked myself up, dramatizing myself into a hero of the Revolution, leading a mob that would follow my example and tear the troops to pieces — but my hand remained in my pocket. Fortunately, I did not have the courage.

### **I Suddenly Grew Up**

Exhausted, I went home. The reception I got was a mixed one. There was joy at seeing me safe, and anger at my recklessness and disobedience. My allowance was cut for a month. I lost money, but gained in experience and wisdom. I suddenly grew up.

Just as beauty creates within one a desire to create beauty, so the scenes of horror, pain and death stir within one an emotion of hate — and desire to revenge.

On Red Sunday morning, I turned rebel toward the Tsar and his government — and toward my own aristocratic friends who were still in sympathy, supporting the regime.

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<sup>63</sup> The Millionaya was where the military leaders had set up their headquarters that day. It's doubtful Val had that information at the time. The street runs off the square, right next to the palace. The only other route Val could have retreated down would have been the Morskaya, on the opposite side of the square. He mentions seeing deserted side streets on his way back to the Nevsky. As there are no side streets between the Morskaya and the Nevsky, Val's escape route must have indeed been right through the military headquarters.

My snobbishness was gone. I went out of my way to be friendly with the poor and helped them all I could. I began to take interest in the different political parties, feeling that I must find my own political orientation.

I began to read illegal literature and forbidden socialist newspapers. Maybe my upbringing and the society in which I moved still retained its certain influence, but I disliked the illegal newspapers and pamphlets. I found them pompous, dogmatic, unrealistic of life, utopian in concept — and, above all, impractical if we were to retain the structure of our civilized society.

I especially disliked a paper by the name of *Iskra* and its important editor — a man by the name of Lenin. I thought him completely off the rails. Oh, it was always amusing to read ranting about the Tsar and his government, but when he began to attack liberals and moderate socialists then it became nauseating.

I learned that a year previously there was a conference of the Party in London, and it split. Lenin became the leader of the crazy group called Bolsheviki, and the old Plekhanov became the respected leader of the Mensheviki.<sup>64</sup> Then there was the Labor Party — the Social Revolutionary Party. All those parties had factions. I soon got lost in the forest of slogans — complicated nuances of party programme. All this was above me, and I agreed with the saying that four Russians would meet together and there will spring up ten political parties, as each of the four not only disagrees with each of the remaining three but with himself as well.

The Red Sunday opened the gates for a flood of political and revolutionary activities. In a few months more than twenty political parties were formed with different shades of program.

The one who appealed most to me most was the Constitutional Democratic Party, who became known as R.D. They represented the flower of Russia's intelligentsia. They wanted a limited monarchy, with a liberal constitution like England. Within a few months it became the most popular and powerful party in Russia. Life was politically exciting: meetings, brilliant speeches, and denunciation of the Tsar's government.

Then began the first tremors of the great earthquake — the revolution which was to follow in 1917. Signs of unrest began to appear. The universities of Russia were the center of the ferment. All socialist parties were illegal and persecuted, their members arrested, thrown into prison, or sent to Siberia. It was natural that it needed the education of youth to carry on the struggle. The underground central committee of the socialists recruited their rank and file of workers from students. It required the fearless idealism of youth to face the dangers and tortures — mental and physical — of the Russian secret police, the prisons, and Siberia. Thousands of young lives were lost and broken for the cause. Heartbreaking were the stories which were whispered about their sufferings, rousing fierce indignation in our young hearts and solidifying the front ranks to fight for liberty. Many of them became leaders in the February Revolution of 1917, and suffered again even worse persecution in the hands of their past comrades — the Bolsheviks — in the October Revolution of 1917. Ungrateful is humanity — how easy it forgets services and sacrifices.

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64 The London congress was actually held in August 1903.

Blind and backward was the Tsar's government. Stupid was their policy and actions. The less educated and enlightened the masses were, the less they would think, and realize whose fault their condition was. The students went from village to village trying to bring light and understanding to their dark minds.

### Spring 1905 — An Eventful Spring

It was an eventful spring. Natalia became engaged to Prince Kochubey.<sup>65</sup> I became very fond of him, and naturally, it cured me of my *calf love* for Natalia. He was one of the most charming men I ever knew — an aristocrat in the full sense of the word. They were soon quietly married, as he was divorced. After their marriage, he did not change the routine of her life, and both were constantly with us. They were now *both* our daily visitors. He was a great gastronome. The dinners and lunches became even more elaborate.

A few months after their marriage, they were dining in our house, discussing their plans, and someone (I don't remember who) suggested that they should buy a villa in Montreux on Lake Geneva and live there part of every winter. I enthusiastically supported the idea, and they decided to do it. If at that moment I could only have gazed two and a half years later into the future. How little did I suspect that this seemingly unimportant decision about the villa in Montreux would change the entire course of my life. How often fate decides our future when we do not even suspect. To think of the many people whose lives I influenced later — at that moment they were oblivious that fate was deciding *their* future too.

Next, in May, my sister Liuba got married in St. Petersburg — and I was left alone.<sup>66</sup> I did not get drunk that time. It was a jolly wedding. After seeing the newly married couple leave on the train, we had a ball lasting till daylight. It was one of those heavenly white nights, lasting till early morning in May and June.

Both my sisters being married, I now became the spoiled child of my parents. As I was almost a young man, I had more freedom, and my allowance was greatly increased. Life was glorious: theaters, parties, and a new bicycle, which I adored. I used to go out late at night for long rides to the islands.

Oh, those white nights in May in St. Petersburg — when darkness never comes, and the city seems to be bathed by a white veil of light, coming from the North Pole — how it makes one's heart beat faster and long for romance and love! What dreams are born — and broken!

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65 Prince Vasily Sergeevich Kochubey (1862-1911) was descended from a great leader of the Cossacks, Vasily Kochubey, who was the subject of the opera *Mazepa* by Tchaikovsky, and figured in the poem *Poltava*, by Pushkin. Natalia Afanasievna Stolypina was ten years younger than the Prince.

66 The wedding between Liuba and Alexander Dmitrievich Paskay-Sharapov took place June 1, 1905. Prince Kochubey was one of Liuba's "Guarantors."

### Summer 1905 — No Longer Children

Life in Dzhulynka that summer was very gay. There were several weddings, balls, theatricals, and infatuations — with timid kissing of hands (and occasional lips) under trees in the moonlight.

Our priest's two daughters had both become lovely girls, with big brown eyes and dark silky hair. We went everywhere together — and we suddenly realized that we were no longer children and playmates. I suddenly realized how attractive they were — especially the younger of the two, Lenchka. I promptly fell in love with her — but alas (again) without success, as she became infatuated that summer with a student, to my great distress.

At the end of July, we were awakened in the middle of the night by the tolling of the church bells. I jumped out of bed, and ran out on the porch. The sky was red. Two miles away in the middle of the fields stood several huge stacks of gathered wheat. Each stack was as large as a four-story house. Two of them were ablaze, shooting flames high into the sky. A fresh breeze was carrying the burning straw, setting fire to nearby fields of wheat, and like a river of fire it was moving toward the village.

I could hear the yells of the frightened crowd. In a few minutes, every man, woman and child were running with all available pails to fight the fire and protect the village. I jumped on a horse — half dressed — and rode to the fire.

Every available carriage was commandeered to carry water from the river three miles away. It took a half hour before our two old-fashioned fire engines arrived. I shall never forget the sight of the flames of hell shooting high into the sky, cracking and roaring. Thousands of yelling peasants surrounded the fire, aimlessly throwing buckets of water, women praying, children crying. It was impossible to get near enough to fight it.

For two days and nights, we fought the fire, preventing it from spreading. Had the wind been strong in the direction of the village it might have been a tragedy from flying burning straws. The investigation found that the cause of the fire was truly Russian in mentality. The night watchman guarding the stack had an enemy who wanted him to lose his job — so the enemy set fire to our property. There's peasant logic.

### Fall 1905 — The Tide Swept Forward

The Kishinev pogrom, the disastrous Japanese war which ended in an ignominious peace, and the frightful Red Sunday — all opened the eyes of the people. It gave a new impetus to the revolution. The unrest grew. The war, which came to shameful end, released hundreds of thousands of troops, clogging all the stations. The transportation was hopelessly inadequate and the discontent of the soldiers added to the rising temper of the country. I was elated. It seemed the hour of retribution for the Red Sunday was approaching. I was eager and elated at the possibility of the event.

In September 1905, the ferment and discontent became universal. Meetings, though forbidden, were held in every factory. Prisons were overfull. Police were inadequate in



numbers to cope with the situation. The government began to lose its head. For the first time in the history of Russia, there was an organized, united movement against the government. A general strike was proposed to cripple the entire country.

The names of revolutionary leaders, Trotsky (who organized the first workers Soviet councils in St. Petersburg), Lenin, Plekhanov, and Chernoff<sup>67</sup> began to loom from out the unknown. But it was the Liberal party of Milyukov, composed of the Russian intelligentsia, that was the most popular, and whose moderate program — a constitution, a responsible government, freedom of the press and of meeting, an eight hour working day, and agrarian reforms — was most likely to succeed. Demands were moderate, but the government refused to give in. Wholesale arrests were made.

It was too late. The tide swept forward. Strike after strike was sweeping the country. And then, suddenly, in early October, nine months after the Red Sunday, the first Revolution was born. It began with a completely unimportant little strike in Moscow of letter setters in the printing union.<sup>68</sup> For some crazy way, the bakers came out in sympathy. To make it further illogical, the railroad brakeman followed the bakers. From that moment the strike flood began. The entire railroad brotherhood followed the brakemen. All transportation stopped. Factory after factory closed down. There was no electricity. Institution after institution struck — even us, the high schools (Gymnasium) — and in a few hours the entire country was at a standstill. The government was crippled. It was not prepared to cope with such magnitude of action and opinion.

### **I Imagined Myself a Danton**

Political fever was high. For a few months we thought of nothing else but politics. Meetings were held everywhere. It became a fever. New parties sprang up like mushrooms, each with different programs of reform. In all, thirty-five parties presented themselves for the elections.

Even in our school, we formed a schoolboy's council to rule the school and bring reforms, and to my disgust an elder student was elected as its president. To appease me, I was made secretary, but soon it was found that I was utterly incompetent to keep minutes or do any paperwork. I needed activity — public relations — so I was made vice-president. We called the first assembly — where I made my maiden speech. I don't recollect there was much sense in its content. It had something to do with the police, but it was delivered with great dramatic fervor and I had a standing ovation. My vanity was appeased. Looking back I don't honestly believe that our motives were that honest. They were more inspired by the desire not to go to school, to revenge ourselves on teachers we did not like — and above all to have fun, and feel that we too are doing something important for the country.

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67 Viktor Mikhailovich Chernov was one of the founders of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party. He became Minister of Agriculture in Kerensky's short-lived provisional government, and fled to the west after the Bolsheviks rose to power.

68 The Moscow printing strike was September 19/October 2, 1905 at the Sytin publishing firm.

To distract our attention from political matters and into other channels, the school authorities encouraged us to organize sporting events and theatricals. We held constant general meetings, delivered great orations, and passed political resolutions. I adored hearing myself speak. I imagined myself a Danton, with a voice like a lion.<sup>69</sup> Once I delivered an especially dramatic speech against the government, and I was carried out on my comrades' shoulders in triumph. Often we would call a meeting suddenly. All classes would immediately be abandoned — to our delight and the despair of the teachers.

### **This Strange Casino**

The council ran the school. The teachers danced to our tune. We introduced many new rules, among them that attendance in classes was not obligatory. Quarterly exams were abolished. Smoking was permitted in the lavatory. Instead of it being used for natural function, we used it for a club, exchanging dirty stories — and gambling. A regular Casino de Monte Carlo sprang up in the big lavatory, functioning chiefly during class hours, when all the gamblers of the school would leave their respective classes, complaining of suddenly having either headaches or stomach pains (or were called by the school council) and gather in this vast uncomfortable place.

I was part of the management of this strange casino. I often held the bank. I became the president of the gambling syndicate and ran the roulette. The playing hours were from 1:00 to 3:00 during the afternoon classes. A green cloth was spread on the floor. I held the roulette on my lap, sitting on the middle can. It was a little uncomfortable, but one must suffer to be beautiful. The players squatted on the floor and real money was used, mostly coppers with an occasional silver stake. That would produce great excitement among the players — and us, the bankers.

The syndicate was doing quite well, when one day suddenly appeared the director of the school. It must have been quite a sight. A panic ensued. The players scattered like rats, and I was left alone sitting on a can with a roulette wheel on my lap. There was no defense. Two weeks previous it would have meant expulsion — but now it was different. The director smiled, took gently the wheel from my lap, and in a very philosophical manner advised me *never to try and win back losses*. I thanked him for his advice and went back to my revolutionary activities. We did not dare to demand the wheel back, which we understood found its way to the director's house, and [was] used to advantage to entertain the teachers.

### **And Then I Met Trotsky**

The Gymnasium Student Council, while important in its own school, was used by the University Council as messenger boys. We ran all over the city carrying messages, and attended the session of the Soviet (council of workers deputies). Two of us had the status of deputy. After the gambling fiasco I spent my time mostly at the sessions, eagerly listening to rousing inflammatory speeches.

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<sup>69</sup> A leader of the French Revolution, Danton was noted for his fiery and passionate speeches.

Finally, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October [1905], the Tsar's government capitulated and he granted the sham constitution, a Duma (the literal translation of the name is *thought*) parliament, certain liberties of the press, and amnesty for political offenders. The Duma had no power, and was only a consulting body. The government was still to be chosen by the Tsar — and not from the Duma. It was a great political blunder that later cost him his throne — and his life. Had he given then an honest constitution, similar to England's, I am convinced there would never have been the second revolution. The compromise was accepted with a heavy heart, but with a hope that it would lead to more liberal reforms.

For the next few weeks we celebrated our first honeymoon of limited freedom. I was too busy to attend classes. I continued to attend the meetings of the Soviet. In my spare time from politics, I organized my first big school production. I directed the production of a dramatic version of *Boris Godounov* at the school. I played Dmitry the Pretender. It was a great success, and I definitely showed acting ability.

And then I met Trotsky. He was the hero of the Soviet, only 26 years of age, with black unruly hair, a black mustache and goatee, and fairly thick glasses, partially hiding the expression of fanatic eyes. By his brilliancy of speeches, by the quickness in which he formulated one resolution after the other, he became the undisputed leader of the Soviet, supplanting that of Khrustalyov-Nosar, its original president.<sup>70</sup> The Soviet had the Menshevik majority. Lenin was not even a member of the Soviet — and bitterly critical of it.

Being a complete extrovert, full of eagerness to be in the front and know everything that was going on, I unhesitatingly pushed myself on the platform to be near the leader and hear the progress of the Soviet. One day I came up on the platform and found Trotsky standing by himself reading a document. Unceremoniously, I stood looking at him. He looked up, and seeing a smartly dressed Gymnasium student, frowned and growled, "Yes?"

At that period I also had an inferiority complex, and always wanted to please the person I spoke with, so I expressed my great admiration for his marvelous speeches — his superb delivery, his dramatic voice colors.

I expected from him a word of thanks and a friendly smile; instead, another growl and "Nu tak shto," meaning "So what." I was so taken aback by his rudeness that I could not find how to answer. I turned red — more from anger than embarrassment — and I spat out, "So nothing!" He said, "Anyway, you look like a well-dressed mama's boy of a nice bourgeois family. You should not hobnob with proletarians like us." I almost exploded from rage. "I am a deputy. You are a sham. You are no more a proletarian than I am. You are a sham — with a glib tongue." He laughed, which disconcerted me even more. I turned my back and left the platform.

From that day my dislike of Trotsky never diminished, only increased. We never met again.<sup>71</sup> Once, at the zenith of his power, while Lenin was still alive, our lives were linked by

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<sup>70</sup> Khrustalyov-Nosar was a Menshevik sympathizer.

<sup>71</sup> Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) was born in a small village. His father was a well-to-do farmer. After spending several years in prison and in Siberia for revolutionary activities, he escaped to London where Lenin was also residing at

the same beautiful and wonderful woman. She became his mistress, visiting the Kremlin. Later, she and I had a passing affair in New York. Still later, it was strongly rumored that Mussolini fell to her charms between Milan and Rome. What a collection! What a company for me! In the succession of her romances, I was sandwiched between Trotsky and Mussolini.<sup>72</sup> Looking back, I am not sure if I should be honored by her inclusion of me, [or] how distinguished I should feel. I am not sure if I should be pleased to have been in the distinction of such company. Strange quirk of fate! I ought to be ashamed, but I am not. I hope I will have a better fate than those two. One died by his head being smashed with a crowbar; the other was hung.

### The Barefoot Dancer

That winter, two concert artists created a great sensation in St. Petersburg: Jozef Hoffman<sup>73</sup>, the pianist, and Isadora Duncan,<sup>74</sup> the *barefoot dancer*, as she was called by Russians — the Greek goddess, the perfection of grace and art. St. Petersburg fell at her feet. Society was agog. Tickets to her recitals were unobtainable. I remember so well the excitement she caused in our circles. Every snob felt that it was his or her duty to be seen at the recitals of Isadora. The seats were at a premium.

By some miracle I was able to obtain a ticket. She became a goddess in my imagination. My heart was in my mouth. My eyes could not believe that such a perfect woman can exist. Her image was with me for weeks. My room became a shrine to her beauty, with postcard pictures in her lovely dancing poses.

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the time. Trotsky secretly returned to Russia in February 1905. He joined the St. Petersburg Soviet using the name Yanovsky, became vice-Chairman, and then Chairman following Khrustalnov-Nosar's arrest. In less than a year Trotsky himself was arrested and sentenced again to Siberia, but he escaped yet another time.

72 English sculptress and cousin of Winston Churchill, Clare Sheridan, arrived in Russia on Sept 19, 1920. She stayed for two months, sculpting both Trotsky and Lenin. Her friendship with Val in New York City was sometime between November 1921 and March 1922 during his first trip to America. Clare met Mussolini in the fall of 1922 at the Beau Rivage Hotel in Lausanne, where Val had lived for a while as a little boy. She was invited to follow Mussolini to Rome, where his interest in her was so intense that she reportedly had to flee for her life.

73 Polish pianist Jozef Hoffman had studied privately with Anton Rubinstein, founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Hoffman reportedly gave 21 consecutive recitals in St. Petersburg without repeating a single piece of his repertoire. Hoffman eventually ended up at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia for many years.

74 Isadora's first trip to Russia had been a few months earlier. She wrote in her memoir that her train from Berlin pulled into Nicholas Station (which was just a few blocks from the Rosing's apartment) at 4 a.m. on the Monday morning following Bloody Sunday. Her train had been delayed by heavy snows. It normally would have arrived 12 hours earlier. The station was deserted, but as her sleigh carried her down the Nevsky Prospect to the Hotel Europa she wrote that she passed a long funeral procession of men, women, and children transporting coffins of their loved ones murdered the day before. In reality Isadora arrived nine days after the massacre, but burials were no doubt still going on. Isadora was nonetheless profoundly affected. Her performances began occurred two days later at the Salle des Nobles.

From that night I saw her dance she remained my goddess. I dreamt of her. If then I could have guessed how close friends one day we will become (with her and with her daughter-pupil, Anna<sup>75</sup>) I would not have deemed it possible. It would have seemed absurd. The gulf was great. Thirteen years later the gulf was bridged. Strange are the ways of life. I could not have imagined that she would be an influence on my life and work, and that several events of great importance would come to me through her friendship. I would have died of laughter at the ridiculous suggestion of such a possibility. She was a goddess. I was an insignificant mortal.

### **The Greatest Charm of Our Existence**

I suppose that is the greatest charm of our existence, the constant suspense of the unknown — witnessing, and at the same time being part of, a great drama called life — where every minute a new situation, and new unexpected twist, can arise. Some people very mysteriously and knowingly declare that everything is fate — fate does this, or does that. Poor humanity — when it can't explain something, they blame it on fate.

Whoever you may be, Goddess of Fate, heavy and uneasy must be thy conscience. At least I don't blame you for anything, for any unhappiness or suffering I had in my life. I blame myself for them. I blame my own actions — or lack of them. Nor do I give you credit for any success I had, or for any of my joys or happiness. I made them myself.

No, I believe our success depends principally on ourselves, on the strength and clearness of our vision, our desire, and determination. Like a magnet, our thoughts attract the necessary conditions and people for the fulfillment of our desires. And like in Chess or Bridge we make the right or wrong move — and win or lose. But to say that everything is preordained — that we have no choice in our decisions — is absurd.

I partly believe in luck and in chances, but it is up to us to make the best of it when it comes our way. I had a great deal of luck in life, but I did not always make the best of it.

### **Spring-Summer 1906 — “Law and Politics are Your Future”**

Spring came, and with it the political excitement in St. Petersburg subsided. The school teachers again regained supremacy, and many students were punished. The town revolution collapsed, but the agrarian [revolution] began. Estates were burned and looted. The landlords fled for their lives. The Socialist Revolutionary Party sent thousands of its members to incite peasants to revolt, to burn estates. They lied that their Little Father Tsar has ordered all the landlords to give their land to the peasants to be divided among them, and that the landlords refuse to obey the order — and therefore the Tsar wanted the peasants to punish them, burn the estates and take the land.

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75 Val later became friends with Isadora and her pianist-composer lover, Walter Morse Rummel (grandson of Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph and Morse code). Isadora introduced Val at the end of one of her Wagner-themed performances in April 1921 at the Prince of Wales Theatre. She invited him to come to the stage and sing “Traüme” — if he would do so, she would dance to it. Accompaniment was by the London Symphony Orchestra with Walter Rummel conducting.

As ninety-nine percent of the peasants were illiterate, it was easy to sway them. The peasants were ruthlessly suppressed with punitive expeditions sent to give an example to others.<sup>76</sup> When we arrived to Dzhulynka, we found a very ominous situation. Every night the horizon was red with fires of burning estates. Most of them had fled. Several of our neighbors' mansions were burned down, and we lived in daily expectation of the same fate.

In our villages as yet there was no open revolt. The sane heads of the village and the more wealthy class (the kulaks) held the hotheads and the destitute class in check. But we also heard that there were several revolutionary students holding daily meetings in the village and going from house to house to stir the revolt. The liberal reform of my father began to pay. The original doubt they had about him [had] turned to respect and a certain amount of loyalty.

My father had an exaggerated idea of their loyalties. My mother and my sisters wanted to leave immediately. I, on the other hand, was finding the situation very exciting. I could count on 5 guns to defend our home: four double barrel hunting guns, one Winchester with seven shells, and three revolvers. Besides, I had a number of Roman candles in my fireworks collection which the women could light and aim at the crowd from the window, and those flying bowers of colored fires I was sure would create panic. If nothing else, I had an imagination of a Field Marshall. All the same, while we were daily debating to go or not to go, we slept with loaded guns, and my entire pack of fifteen dogs roamed loose on the grounds to give us help and warning. Several times, I was awakened by a false alarm. I must say, I enjoyed this sense of constant danger.

One morning, as we were having breakfast on the balcony, we suddenly heard an ominous rumble of voices in the distance.<sup>77</sup> Our butler, white as a sheet, rushed in and informed us in a trembling voice that a huge crowd of peasants had entered the gate (about a quarter of a mile from the house) and were advancing. My mother was terrified, and wanted to order the carriage for all of us to run. My father was also nervous, but undecided. I, on the contrary, was very cool and pleased, and I advocated to go and face the crowd. "If we leave the house," I reasoned, "we acknowledge defeat, and probably the place will be burned down." Against my mother's protest, Father agreed. I ran to my room, collected my revolver, and with father went to the front of the house and waited.

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76 The only province where the peasant unrest of 1905 was kept under control was Saratov, where Peter Stolypin, son of Val's godfather, was governor. Stolypin's success during this period led to his selection as Prime Minister the next year by Czar Nicholas II. He immediately pushed toward land reform, striving to relieve the root causes of the country's civil unrest. Had he been allowed to succeed, the Russian Revolution of 1917 might never have happened. Stolypin was assassinated in Kiev in September 1911.

77 Val earlier described the house in Dzhulynka as being one story. It's possible the balcony referred to here was more of an outdoor porch.

The sight was most alarming. Between two and three thousand peasants had invaded the grounds and were rapidly advancing.<sup>78</sup> Would they realize that we were always their friends — or will we be just landlords in their eyes? The slogan that was spreading was “Down with the landlord!” What could we and three servants do against this mob?

All the stories of the French revolution — and of the present one in Russia — flashed through my head. My father was just recovering from a severe illness. His nerves were not strong enough to cope with this situation. I felt like a trainer of lions shut up in a cage with an angry bear. One false move and we will go down. I saw my father become pale. I thought, “If they think he is afraid, it's finished.”

We were standing on a high porch, about fifteen steps from the ground. In a flash, some strange instinct told me what to do. Without a second hesitation, I rushed down the steps and ran to meet the crowd. My move was unexpected for all. My father stood motionless on the steps. The family and the household, who had followed me to the porch, cried warning to me — and orders to come back.

I felt as if I was possessed with the will and strength of a demon. I increased my speed, running at the crowd as if I had the strength of throwing them all out in one blow. The front ranks of the mob — seeing this little flying figure — in amazement halted, and awaited my arrival.

Slightly out of breath, I waved cheerfully to the peasants, and in my loudest baritone voice — vibrant and gay — shouted a friendly greeting. “Good morning friends! What can I do for you? My father is not feeling well, and can't talk with you, but I will gladly convey him a message.” The leaders seemed at a loss of what to do. They did not anticipate this welcome. They came prepared for angry words. There were a few murmurs of sympathy regarding my father. Taken aback by my arrogance, some of the front ranks took off their hats from a long-standing habit. At last, their spokesman said, “We have information that the Tsar has ordered the landlord to hand over the land to the peasants — and we have come for it.”

Seeing among the leaders a number of the better to do peasants — who owned their own pieces of land — an idea came to my mind. I burst out laughing, and said “You have been misinformed! Someone who wants to get you into trouble has been telling you wicked lies. There is no such decree. Besides, such a decree would be general, not only for the landlords, but also for some of you who have twenty, thirty, or more acres while others have only one or two. In such an event all the land must be pooled together and equally divided.” I began to name the wealthy peasants I knew among the crowd.

That they did not like. Some of the poor peasants began to shout, “That's right!” — that Ivan and Peter, etc., should give their land. That created an uproar and an immediate split. It was a bombshell for the wealthier ones, who were the leaders, being the most influential peasants in the village. In true Russian manner, they began to scratch their heads; I've never

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<sup>78</sup> The village of Dzhulynka had a peasant population of about three thousand so it's possible that a mob could have numbered that many. Even if only hundreds marched on the Rosing estate, to Val it probably seemed like the entire village was upon them.

been able to fathom where such a habit originated — perhaps to gain time. Perhaps the habit stimulates brain activity. In any case it's a funny one, especially when it's done wholesale. Their embarrassment amused me. I was now full of confidence — and proud, thoroughly enjoying myself.

The rich peasants felt themselves on dangerous grounds. The rich shouted that that's not true, that probably the whole thing was a concocted lie by the revolutionary student, that they should re-debate. They whispered among themselves, and then — bowing, with a quite a changed manner — said they would go back for further discussion. They wished my father a speedy recovery, and fighting amongst themselves they turned round, left the grounds, and went back to the village. We never heard again from the peasants.

I was proud of myself, having single handed turned the tide. My family hailed me as a hero. My father should have been angry at my impertinence in taking the lead. Instead, he embraced me, and predicted for me a great political career. "You want to be a singer? You are a damn fool. Law and politics are your future!" It was my first taste of success on a grand scale. It was quite intoxicating. Amalia was doubly tender to me that night.

My ambition to become famous was born that day. I felt quite a hero, and for a while thought that father may be right — picturing myself as a great political leader — but soon it wore off and my passion for singing and the stage again predominated, to my parents' distress. Looking back, wise were their councils, but sometimes the inexperienced youth has a strange intuition far wiser than wisdom, and I must be grateful that I followed my intuition and did not obey them. It's strange, as I look back, at how many things in my life I did against all sense and logic, that later proved to be my salvation — for my best — and twice probably saved my life.

### **Spring 1907 — Seventeen Was Not Too Young To Be in Love**

The agrarian revolution was mercilessly crushed by the government, and Russia settled down into a sham democracy with its Duma. The election brought in an overwhelming majority of liberals.<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, my father was defeated at the election by a coalition of all the landowners against him. I was very disappointed, as I wanted to be the son of a deputy if I couldn't be one myself.

Freedom of speech, and the uncensored criticism of the government in the Duma, delighted our hearts. I reveled in reading its reports. But the government had time to find its power again. The Duma was dismissed. It tried to revolt, retreated to Vyborg in Finland, and issued a proclamation to the country, but it was dispersed and its members persecuted. The flower of Russia's brain was eliminated from future elections. A new law was then passed, limiting voting to the wealthy classes.<sup>80</sup> Oh blundering ill-advised Tsar, how cruel were your counselors.

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79 The election to the Second Duma was in February 1907. Stolypin strongly pushed for candidates that would support his reforms.

80 The Electoral Law of June 1907, backed by Stolypin, increased the seats allotted to private landowners in provincial assemblies from 34 to 51%, and decreased the peasant representation from 43% to 22%.



My affair with Amalia was beginning to bore me.<sup>81</sup> Fortunately, it was mutual. Seventeen was not too young to be in love with her, but my rather romantic nature began to crave for real love. I was ready to bestow my longing heart on any dame that would have encouraged me. I was very shy with women, and had an inferiority complex about my looks.

My first pup's infatuation with a girl my own age was a failure. My love was unrequited. The young lady preferred my schoolmate with rosy cheeks. During the previous winter, when we were revolutionizing in the school and doing everything but work, we also began to flirt with girl students from a school nearby. Their school used to finish later than ours, and we used to stand on the opposite side of the street and watch them come out. A classmate of mine, Suloeff, and I were courting a young girl from the school across the street. She was about 15, sweet, and very pretty. She had a romantic name — Galia. Unfortunately for me, my friend Suloeff had golden hair, blue eyes, and pink cheeks. She preferred him. It was the first blow to my vanity, and my first heartache.<sup>82</sup>

A few months later, another girl I was interested in — whose name I don't remember — preferred a young dancer, Adolph Bolm, whose name is now world-known. I met him in Chicago a few years ago and we had a good laugh at our rivalry — which he didn't even remember — but which caused me much sorrow.<sup>83</sup>

### **I Never Saw Her Again**

One day, soon after Easter [1907], I came back from school and found Amalia gone. The front door was opened by a new maid. That morning Amalia was sent away. I was told that she and my mother had a quarrel. I never was told the reason, but I always suspected it was because mother found out about our relationship. Amalia did not even leave a note for me, or her address, and I never saw her again. My feelings were mixed. I was glad and sorry at the same time. I missed her cheerful companionship — and soon sex became a problem. The new maid had a face of a horse — not conducive to take Amalia's place. I was doomed to celibacy — at least for a while.<sup>84</sup>

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81 Val had now been Amalia's secret lover for nearly four years.

82 Alexander "Sascha" Suloeff was one of the 40 people killed in Tiflis during the bank robbery staged by the young Joseph Stalin on June 26, 1907. The 250,000 rubles appropriated in this crime was used to fund Bolshevik revolutionary activities in and out of Russia for a number of years.

83 Adolph Bolm (1884-1951) graduated from St. Petersburg's Imperial Ballet School in 1904 and immediately became a dancer in the Mariinsky ballet. Like Val, he was Russian but had Swedish ancestry. After touring with Anna Pavlova, Bolm went on to be a key member of Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. From 1916 on, he lived in America. The meeting with Bolm in Chicago, where he founded Chicago Allied Arts with dancer/choreographer Ruth Page, would have happened sometime between 1919 and 1929. Also during that time, Ruth Page was a key member of Val's staff at the Eastman School in Rochester. In another similarity with Val, Bolm spent the last part of his career in California.

84 Val's sister Liuba wrote out a family tree that was eventually passed down to her grandson, Urii, who showed the document to me one night in St. Petersburg. Above the listing for Valerian, Val's son by Marie, his English first

Though I learned about that part of life early, I was saved from the great many pitfalls that one is exposed to during the adolescent period, from the danger of developing bad habits, from the fates and perversion that loomed and glared at us from every corner. I know of intelligent boys whose brains became dulled by bad habits, of boys who ruined their health by contracting diseases from prostitutes, and some who became perverted. Oh parents, why don't you face this problem openly and try to solve it? It's not the fault of some youngsters — boys or girls — if nature has endowed their senses with early developed sexual desires. They have to find an outlet, and so they take the easiest way out — not knowing the consequences or dangers — and it soon becomes a habit, then a vice.

### **The Most Ridiculous Contraption**

Another day, as I came home I saw the most ridiculous contraption standing in front of our house. A group of people surrounded it, laughing and deriding its values. It looked like a 4-seater buggy, but it had a funny box in front. The crowd told me that this buggy arrived without a horse. Absurd!

But after a few minutes, the owner came out, proudly seated himself, and did something with a crank. Nothing happened. He did it again. And again. Nothing happened. He did it 3 or 4 more times — and then suddenly the body of the buggy began to tremble, to shiver, to spit, to make horrible noise, and to all our wide eyes it began to move away, scattering people, frightening horses, and leaving behind a smell and smoke.

Thus I became acquainted with this silly thing from America called the automobile.

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wife, there was a line with the name Apollon on it and a question mark where the mother's name should be. Urii wanted to know "Who was Val's first wife? And what happened to his son, Apollon?" I told him that Marie was Val's first wife, that there must be some mistake; Valerian was his first son. Urii bridled, and insisted that his Babushka could not have been mistaken. I got to thinking about it, and it suddenly made total sense that the reason for Amalia's sudden disappearance was that it was discovered that she was pregnant with Val's child. She must have suddenly been whisked away. In order to keep the scandal hush-hush, and to protect Val, not even he was told the reason for Amalia's sudden disappearance. Liuba's omission of the mother's name was due not to ignorance but most likely to discretion. In Val's novel, *House of Rosanoff*, the fourteen-year-old street urchin, Stepka, meets "Amalia, a young girl from a Baltic province, who had come to Moscow as a governess, but soon lost her job, and found that the only way to livelihood was the street... She liked Stepka...and...generously introduced him to the facts of life." If Val had been aware of an actual child of his, surely he would have fictionalized Amalia even more sympathetically as an unwed mother. Though Val never saw Amalia again, she always kept a place in his heart and this is how he sadly imagined she must have ended up. The reality was probably somewhat better. The family, with their resources, most certainly would have continued to provide for both Amalia and her child. The parallel irony between Val-Amalia-Apollon and General Stolypin-Zinaida-Vladimir cannot be overlooked. In both cases, the families would have provided.

### The Wonderful Simple Faith of Youth

Life settled into a procession of festivities: balls, theatre parties, adolescent romances. I was constantly in love but none culminated into any affairs. My voice was increasing in strength and creating more nuisance at home. Politics began to lose interest as my artistic love of singing and theatre increased and obsessed me to the point where my school studies decreased.

I made a round of vocal teachers, just to hear them say that I had a beautiful voice. A number expressed the desire to teach me, and even offered to give me a scholarship; it pleased my vanity, and encouraged my determination. There was strong difference of opinion regarding the type of voice I had. Some said I was a tenor, others a baritone. For several years it was not definitely settled. Only at twenty-one did my voice definitely become a tenor.

Finally my parents agreed for me to take lessons and I chose the expensive one: Tartakov, a famous baritone of the Imperial Opera Company.<sup>85</sup> Singing became my chief interest. What joy it was!

I thought I was on my way only to fame, without disappointment and heartaches — but got many. Oh, the wonderful simple faith of youth. I was very proud of my voice, and carried my music with me to every party I went to in hopes that I will be asked to sing. To my disappointment, it did not happen often. My voice was loud, and my singing was probably not very pleasant. My singing probably was like the roar of a young bull — but visions of sudden fame fueled my young mind.

### I Lived and Breathed Opera

I remember once going to hear the new sensational baritone Titta Ruffo singing Tonio in *Pagliacci*. As I was driving to the theater, I was dreaming that he would suddenly become ill during the performance, and I would jump on the stage from the audience and carry on the performance and make an immediate sensation. Needless to say, Titta Ruffo finished the performance himself — without my help — and received a great ovation. I, with a number of enthusiastic fans, stayed on, yelling “Bravo, Titta Ruffo!” Those ovations at the end of the performance were usually led by some young aspiring vocalist like me who wanted to hear how their voice sounded in the opera house, yelling on different tones — chiefly top notes — the name of the singer. It was great fun to hear one’s voice rolling in a vast theater, and it used to please the vanity of singers — so all were contented.

In St. Petersburg, we had three opera houses: the People's, the Conservatoire (later the Music Drama) where also was given an Italian season, and the Imperial, the culminating

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85 Joachim Tartakov (1860-1923) had been the leading baritone at the Mariinsky Theater. He became Director of the Mariinsky in 1900. He also taught voice at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

ambition of all Russian singers.<sup>86</sup> We also had an Italian season every winter. It was the Golden Era of opera, with the three greatest men's voices in their prime: Caruso, Titta Ruffo, and Chaliapin.<sup>87</sup>

My mother was very musical, and we often went to the opera together. She told me a great deal about the last generation of singers — the legendary names of Patti, Nielson, Melba (who was still singing, but did not visit Russia), Sembrich, and the de Reszke brothers — and how much better they were than the present ones. Naturally, if they were better than artists like Chaliapin, Caruso, and Titta Ruffo they could not be human. They became, in my imagination, vocal gods.

The great throat specialist Avaeff claimed I should be a baritone judging by my vocal cords, and I staged over my voice a number of arguments between the fiery Avaeff and the vocal teachers, who claimed I was a tenor. In the end, nature won, and I became a tenor, with a very baritone quality in the low and central register, which enabled me to sing songs sung by Chaliapin — to his disgust and fury. *Imagine a tenor singing my songs! It is absurd — pure publicity. How can he sing them?* But to my face he was polite. To me, Chaliapin was a hero — a God. I never dreamt that Chaliapin would one day even consider me his rival! But, unquestionably, imitating gramophone records of Chaliapin, Maksakov, Bragin, and other bass-baritones made their stamp on my young throat in my formative years. The beautiful tones of Chaliapin, Bragin, and Maksakov crept into my voice without me being aware of it — meanwhile having learned from the records those songs.

There was another new invention that played a vital part in my life. It was called moving pictures.<sup>88</sup> No one took it seriously, but I thought it great, especially a film depicting some kind of a devil — Mephisto.

But opera had become my great passion. I would stand for hours in a freezing cold to get a ticket for my god, Chaliapin.

I lived and breathed Opera. Above all I wanted to sing Mephisto. Once I engaged a little hall at a very little club for the vast sum of five dollars for the night, and gave a concert in which I sang Mephisto's aria. I tried to sell a few tickets, but it was an abject failure and ended by me inviting a few school boys and their sisters. I paid the bill by borrowing the money from our house porter as I was afraid to ask my parents. I had to repay with a 100% interest. My singing of the *Calf of Gold*<sup>89</sup> was an even greater disaster than the sale of tickets. But nothing discouraged me, and I went straight ahead.

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86 The People's was the Narodni Dom. The Conservatoire was the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The Imperial was The Mariinsky Theatre.

87 Caruso was a tenor, Titta Ruffo a baritone, and Chaliapin a bass.

88 The first silent films reached Russia in 1896, a touring show of early shorts by France's Lumière brothers; the first domestic production emerged in 1908.

89 Song of the Golden Calf is a bass aria, from Act II of Gounod's Faust, sung by Mephistopheles.

### Trying to Drown Other Voices

I had another setback. I wanted to join the school choir — for the participants received lenient treatment for their bad marks at school. I was warned several times by the conductor that chorus singing is not solo singing — but I enjoyed too much trying to drown other voices. I was imagining — as I sang hymns — that I was singing in some big dramatic ensemble — with me as the hero in *Aida*, with my voice ringing over the chorus and the orchestra — followed by an ovation from the audience. My dream was rudely interrupted at the end of the service, the conductor saying that my voice was loud, unpleasant, and that it spoiled the beautiful singing of the choir. He then kicked me out. I was deeply offended, and from then on considered him an un-musical bore who does not appreciate great voices! It did not dampen my enthusiasm.

How obnoxious I must have been. I sang in the corridors of the school, in classrooms before lessons, and in my favorite place, the large lavatory washroom. It had marvelous acoustics. This feud with the chorus conductor lasted all during the school years, and when I gave my first concert in St. Petersburg I was petty enough to send him a complimentary ticket with a note inviting him to see if I had fully reached the stage of solo singing. He wrote me, accepting the invitation — if I could assure him that I had passed the stage of singing only high notes! After the concert he came to my dressing room. He had tears in his eyes. He said, “You have the makings of a great singer. Don’t fail me now.” We hugged each other, and I loved him for this the rest of my life. I tried not to fail him — but there *was* great struggle over my love of high notes. In spite of the fact that I imitated the tenors least of all, nature forced me to become a tenor when my voice matured.

### The Invisible Line from Boyhood to Manhood

The great longing of a Gymnasium student is to finish school, get the diploma, and enter the university or military school. The day of the last final exams — if you are sure of passing — is a night of festivities, of drink, of women (if you can get one), and above all *the new uniform*. It’s the passing of the invisible line from boyhood to manhood.

University students were allowed everything, and considered full-fledged men of the society. A Gymnasium student was very restricted — smoking, drinking, gambling, women were not allowed — and [he] may be expelled.

Unfortunately, I was not sure that I will be able to pass my final examination, as I spent most of my times on theater and singing. But above all, I knew that my German language fraud will be exposed. Ever since the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade — when we began to study French and German — my teacher for some reason decided that I, having a Baltic German grandmother, must speak well German. I did speak well French but did not know a single word in German. Having settled that in his mind, he made my life in the German class very easy — probably to keep me from being a showoff. He forgot my existence, and at the end of the year would give me the highest mark for my credit. Who was I to object or to argue with him at such a peculiar behavior? But as the day of the final exam was approaching, I also felt that the hour of retribution was near. Then a calamity took place.

I was never very strong at religion — Greek Orthodox. The Bible had to be read in an archaic Russian, and that bored me. Anyway, though I was very religious in spirit, my theological knowledge was skimpy. So to my misfortune, my examiner was the priest of our church — and he didn't like me. His first question was for me to explain the word *providence*. Now I know how ridiculous it was for me to get stumped at that word, but I did — it completely befuddled me. *Providence* sounded to me like *province*, so seeing his impatience at my stupidity I said, "Well it's a sort of heavenly region." I shall never forget his expression — as if I have raped him, spiritually. He said, "Go away," and gave me the lowest mark.

And so I failed in Religion — which meant that if I fail in another I must remain another year in the Gymnasium. As I knew that I cannot possibly avoid failing in German, my fate was sealed. I was disgraced. All my beautiful student uniforms which I have ordered will be useless. I felt I'd rather commit suicide than to remain at Gymnasium. I was desperate. Like the ham that I was, I was dramatizing myself — and the situation — to the limit.

On the morning of the German final I felt as if I was going to my execution. In my ridiculous mental condition I took my revolver. I felt better. I don't know why I should have, except I might be able to stage a great scene — threaten with suicide, and win the sympathy of my teachers, who would forgive [me] and let me pass. All this might have been good on the stage, but not at the final exams.

I was sitting — trembling — waiting for my turn to be called to the examination table. Just as my name was called, my teacher, having full confidence in my profound knowledge of the German language — after all, didn't he give me highest mark for 4 years? — responding to the urge of nature left the examination table, waved a hand to me of good luck, and proceeded to the lavatory. This left only the second examiner at the table, a very old German in his late 70s, and hard at hearing. And suddenly — with the favorable turn of events — an idea was born. It was truly a stroke of genius. As I came to the table, I began to sneeze violently — to cough — and in a hardly audible whisper — continuing coughing and sneezing — said in German that I have a terrible cold, probably the only words I knew. *Ich habe eine grosse kält*. That magnificent phrase ended in a new spasm of coughing. The old teacher became terrified to catch my cold, looked up my credit, put down the same, and told me to get out.

I flew out. A miracle happened. I passed the exam, and I finished the Gymnasium. That night I celebrated my first night as a student. I went to the opera — in the best seats.

### Summer 1907 — Calf Love

That summer my luck in love changed. On arrival in Dzhulynka I fell in love with a married lady. She was considered the beauty of the entire district. Her husband was a government inspector of land, and my father gave them a cottage on our premises. Such close contact with such a lovely lady produced a devastating effect on me.

As her husband had to be away a great deal, she was bored. My *calf love* rather amused her, and in little ways she encouraged my growing infatuation. After much nervous hesitation — and sleepless nights — I finally decided to declare my love.

It never occurred to me that I was doing the wrong thing because she had a husband. Russian society in that period was strongly under the influence of everything French. It was an obsession: Paris...Paris... Not to have been in Paris — not to speak French — was considered for every educated Russian as bad as not having good table manners. Paris was considered the Mecca for our society of gaiety and life. Being Parisian was something to imitate and to achieve. Everything was Parisian. Dressmakers. Cooks. And French novels.

The stage was beautifully set. Moonlight, the scent of lilacs, her husband away — and she in a seductive pose on the balcony. Everything was right — except for me. I talked of horses, dogs, and cows — a most inspiring conversation on a moonlight night. She waited for some signs of intelligence from me, but my nerves failed me. I must have been funny and boring to her.

Finally, she got up, laughed, and said “Time for good children to go to bed. Good night.” I meekly said “Goodnight,” and went to bed chastened. I felt humiliated; I realized I was still an inexperienced young boy. A man of the world would have known how to act. He would have boldly taken her in his arms, covered her with passionate kisses, and broken her resistance. Such a vision made me giddy. I cursed myself for having been a coward. The opportunity never occurred again.

I don’t know if the uniform had anything to do with it — or if being a university student made me eligible for marriage — but the belles around our country place made a great deal of fuss over me. I was invited everywhere. I myself was very marriageably inclined. I had missed Amalia, and I despised the idea of buying love. I preferred spending money on opera.

The priest of our village had a very beautiful daughter. We grew up together, played together, danced together, and before we realized [it] we became potential sweethearts. My uniform must have produced the effect. One night, returning from a party, Lenchka declared her love for me.<sup>90</sup> I was very flattered — but taken aback. Naturally, I responded like a gentleman and declared my long concealed and never-ending love for her. It was sealed with a kiss. After that night, until I returned to St. Petersburg, I went secretly to see her every night. We met by the river or in the garden in one of the islands surrounded by lilacs bushes. Either cowardice or some invisible guiding hand prevented me from taking advantage of a willing maid. If I did, I would have no alternative but to marry her for we were childhood friends, and I would never have let her down. With us in Russia, a maidenhead was sacred — and honor of a maid can only be saved by marriage, the blessing and forgiveness of the church. But I resisted the temptation — and left for St. Petersburg a free man.

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90 Lenchka is the Russian nickname for Elena.

### Fall 1907 — My Political Star Rose Quickly

Our university was an old building, originally built by Peter the Great, and [had] housed his Ministry. Sometime later it was given for the University. It was a beehive of activity. After the scholastic registration, the duty of every student was to register in one of the political parties — which interested me more than the studies of law.<sup>91</sup> My father wanted me to follow his path of the legal profession after my episode with the peasants. He believed in my political future and was sure that I would grow out of my artistic ambitions. So I hastened to enroll myself in the Liberal Party — the Constitutional Democrats.

My political star rose quickly. At the very first meeting which I attended, I came in late, but just at the time of the nomination for deputies of the party. The leader was battling for his position against his rival. He needed a friend on the deputy list. We had met a couple of times at my cousin's house, so as he saw me come in he immediately proposed me for the slate. I was naturally pleased and flattered — and thus by sheer luck and accident, I was elected as deputy on the Student Council of the University. It was a great honor — which I certainly did not earn.

We had to address a number of student meetings to canvass votes, and I had my first opportunity to clash with the Bolsheviks. They were a comparatively new political party. The Social Democratic Party split four years previously at a party congress in London.<sup>92</sup> Lenin, their leader, mustered a weak *majority* and called his section that — which were actually a complete *minority* of the party. He advocated dictatorship of the proletariat, which amounted to dictatorship of the Bolshevik party, which really amounted to the dictatorship of the leader of the party — in other words, Lenin. He also advocated that *the end justifies the means*, and any lies, any dishonest or cruel action was permissible — a dangerous political doctrine. Honesty they considered a bourgeois morality which they hated and despised. But they hated even more their former comrades the Social Democratic Mensheviks.

From the very first meeting, the Bolshevik section pounced on me. They were clever, unscrupulous lot. They would find out somehow about the private life of their opponent, would add their own lying concoction, then publicly mock them, and try to make us look ridiculous in the eyes of the student body. Our liberal section was composed from some of the Russian intelligentsia: lawyers, doctors, artists, etc. They were the cream of our nation — honest, idealistic, practical, and brilliant. We were the middle of the road. We stood for evolution, gradual reform through education, and were against violent revolution and dictatorship, either from right or left. So we were attacked from both sides — the narrow-

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<sup>91</sup> Val was a law student at St. Petersburg University, located on Vasilevsky Island on the grand embankment across from the Admiralty and the Winter Palace. Law was the course of study in 1907 for the majority of the University's 8,000 students. Vladimir Lenin himself had graduated from there in 1891. By the time Val got to the University, it had undergone a number of reforms. Nearly 22% of the students were from non-nobility and non-civil servant families. The percentage of Jewish students had nearly doubled since 1905 to around 11%. The University was an increasingly political and radicalized place.

<sup>92</sup> The Second Congress was held in London in August 1903.



minded egotistical selfish monarchists, and [the] embittered fanatics, [the] cruel leftists. Both extremes were unscrupulous.

### Comrade Abram — Krylenko

I was descending from the platform after my maiden speech — quite pleased with myself, accompanied by an ovation from the liberal section and violent boos from the left — when I met on the steps a thick shortish student with thinning hair that was beginning to go early. He bumped into me and yelled, “Out of my way, capitalist parasite!” I had seen him before. He was the leader of the Bolshevik faction, Comrade Abram. His real name was Krylenko — a brilliant speaker, and the most hateful, arrogant, vicious personality.

I knew instantly he wanted a row and scene — that he would turn to his advantage and create a riot in which he would accuse us, the Liberals, of trying to muzzle free speech. I turned my back to him to let him pass, and shouted, “Go ahead, lying hyena. Poison the air!” Laughing from my section and renewed applause tried to drown the ovation of the leftists for their leader.

He began by trying to devastate me personally. He said, “You have just heard a very elegant speaker, elegant not by what was said — that was nothing but bubbles — but elegant by how he looked. His hair alone must have cost him a couple of hours at a barber — and probably an expensive barber at that. Those capitalist parasites think that it is more important how the hair looks on the skull than what’s inside the skull — and obviously our elegant friend has nothing!” Then that was greeted by an ovation from the leftists, and boos from our section.

This was the beginning of many political battles I was to have with him. My seat was in the center, Krylenko on the extreme left. I met his stare with an equal stare. Sometimes he would attack my clothes. He would ask me from the platform “Hey, Rosing, how much did you pay for your uniform? It looks lovely. Who is your tailor?” I was silent. “Are you afraid to answer? I can tell you all what mine cost — 20 rubles. Yours cost at least 100. The difference would have fed a lot of hungry people instead of going to the pocket of a bourgeois tailor.”

Another time he attacked me as a landlord, he said, “I hear you have 300 working horses and 30 special ones just for yourself. Think what it would have meant for the peasants who have no horses.” I was quick on my feet and told him that his spies have reported to him correctly.

For four years Krylenko and I were reelected and almost daily fought on the councils. We hated each other to the point of sickness. Comrade Abram — alias Krylenko — rose high in the Revolution. His name will never be erased from the pages of history. When Lenin overthrew Kerensky, he appointed Krylenko as the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armies. He was an ensign — a big jump. Many years later, his second boss, Stalin, appointed him as chief prosecutor in his purges. He was the Fouquier de Tinville of the Russian Revolution — and finally he himself was purged. I did not shed any tears for him.<sup>93</sup>

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93 Nicolai Krylenko was five years older than Val. His schooling had been interrupted after he was exiled for a few years as a result of his activities during the Revolution of 1905. He returned to St. Petersburg in 1909 to finish

### January 1908 — A Crazy Russian in Love

The life of a student that had money was incredibly gay. I hardly attended any lectures, and went to the university only for my political activities. I was grooming myself to one day become a deputy of the Duma. Literally every night I had one or more parties. I never went to bed before 5-6 a.m. My parties chiefly consisted of just going to the opera and occasionally to a drama theater, and then to a party. All our parties began around 10 or 11 p.m., unless it was a dinner party. It always began with music. Then at 2 a.m., supper was served, and after supper began card games, and it didn't break until 5 a.m. I especially loved to play bridge. One time we began a bridge party at about 5 p.m. and didn't finish until 9 p.m. the following night. We never stopped — except for nature's demands — for food was served to us while we played. Yes, those were crazy times.

By December, my health gave out, and I got a severe attack of flu. My parents became anxious of my health and decided to take me with them to Montreux, Switzerland — where my godmother had a villa, and father had to discuss business problems.

I was thrilled beyond words to go back to the memories of my childhood — to revisit Vevey, Chexbres, and Lausanne, to see the great hill at the Hotel Victoria at Glion, where I played war games. I was also going to visit Geneva — where lived Lenin. I wanted to see him — and to tell him what a terrible party he is creating, what a germ and liar his university Comrade Abram is. Oh, I worked out a hot speech in which I gathered all my venom I felt for Abram for all his insults. I was going to lay him flat.

We arrived in Montreux late afternoon in time for dinner, after which we went to see my godmother and my aunt, who lived with her. Everything I saw was different, thrilling, and new — way ahead of our luxurious but in some way primitive life.

The next night I was approached by an elderly gentleman in broken French who invited me to make a fourth at Bridge. That moment decided the entire future of my life.

The elderly gentleman was a retired British general who had seen service in Ceylon. The second man was a German — Count Prashma — a real elegant Prussian officer, and the last was a beautiful English lady in her forties, of Greek ancestry. The General coughed and sniffed at every move. He puffed a Havana cigar — which I hated.

The lady, Mrs. Falle, was coy and flippant about her constant mistakes. I, being a good player, soon got disgusted and would have liked to quit.

Then something happened. A young girl came into the room and sat by her mother. It was as if a Grecian goddess had suddenly descended. It seemed as if the dusty smoky room of the

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his degree at the University. When Krylenko's time came, he (like so many others before him) was made to confess to false charges. He was executed on July 29, 1938 immediately following his 20-minute trial. Fouquier de Tinville was a French revolutionist and Chief Prosecutor in the revolutionary tribunal during the Reign of Terror. In contrast to Krylenko's own hasty dispatch, Fouquier de Tinville's trial took 41 days.

hotel became the Elysian Fields. I was stunned. I had read about love at first sight, and laughed — but this was it. The card game lost all value for me. I would have trumped my own ace of trumps if such a thing was possible. If the other three played badly, I played worse.

I wanted my opponent to win the rubles as quickly as possible, but the darn General insisted on finishing the round. And when the goddess left for the ballroom both Prashman and I vied for who played worse. He also suddenly wanted to finish the Bridge and go to the ballroom. Anyway, I was first out of the room, but found the goddess already besieged with petitions, especially with one — a clinging kind — a German naval officer, Baron B — . But my time came, and from that moment I began a romantic blitz.

I don't know what I expected, [being] a first year student, barely eighteen, depending entirely on my father, never having earned one penny in my life. On top of that, to impress the lady — as I wore a swanky student uniform — I introduced myself as *an officer of the Russian army*. I truly began with all the strikes *against* me — and all *for* my two German rivals. One asset I had. She was very musical — played violin and piano. I sang badly — but I sang. I had a voice that was vital. That began to lower the scales in my favor.

I did everything a crazy Russian in love would do: rented a boat, arranged a concert, toboggan parties, a masquerade. I used every means at my disposal — which I had learned so well in St. Petersburg — to become indispensable in this courtship.

### The So-called Magnetic Circle

Two or three weeks after I met Mrs. Falle and her daughter, they asked me if I believed in spiritualism. As at that time I was a militant atheist, I laughed and said that I fortunately don't believe in God or in the existence of spirits. But as Marie looked at me with a tender expression in her eyes, and asked me if to please her I would attend a spiritualistic séance that they are having in their room that evening, naturally I accepted the invitation without any further argument.<sup>94</sup>

An incident took place [there], so mysterious that I have never been able to give an explanation from any possible standpoint or angle. All I know is that what I relate below is the solemn truth — without one word of embellishment or exaggeration.

After dinner I went to their room. Besides Mrs. Falle, Marie and me, there were Count Prashma and a new Frenchman and his girlfriend from Paris. They were sitting at the table and invited me to join them. I begged off to join the circle and suggested that I would sit outside it and write down what they would dictate to me.

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94 Spiritualism came into vogue in the mid-19th century and professed communication with the “so-called dead” as being a scientifically proven fact. The movement soon spread to England where it became very popular in late Victorian society. Spiritualism grew out of the experiences and claims of two mediums in Rochester, New York: the Fox sisters. Ironically, it would be in Rochester, New York years later that Val would experience his other unexplained spiritualist encounter.

The lights were lowered. The five joined hands, creating the so-called magnetic circle. They were all silent, solemnly concentrating with head down. The silence was oppressive, yet I wanted to laugh — to ridicule them. They looked funny to me, like children playing a serious game.

Then suddenly everything came to life. The table gave a shiver. They all sat up, and Mrs. Falle very solemnly asked, “Are you a good spirit? If so, tell us who you are. If not, go away, go away.” I almost choked with silent laughter, but the table by one tap answered yes (two taps meant no) and spelled out its name.

The spelling was done in the following fashion: Mrs. Falle called out the alphabet; the table simultaneously tapped and stopped at the letter it wanted. It was a long process, but as I was happy to be in the same room with Marie, I didn't mind. I wrote down the letters as dictated to me.

The first spirit was that of an old friend of the Falle family and a godfather of Marie. They tenderly conversed. His table taps were gentle. I would describe them as tender. He gave them some personal advice and then left. The table again became immobile.

Then it again became agitated — and then truly violent. The force with which it was beating out the letters was tremendous. I naturally suspected either the Frenchman or Count Prashman of using his strength to move the table, except I could not understand the point as both of them were seriously interested in the subject.

The spirit gave his name as Danton, the great orator of the French Revolution. That was more than I could stand. I ejected a loud, “Oh, really, that is too much!” The Frenchman turned on me and told me to shut up, but I couldn't, so I sarcastically interrupted the great Danton at the table and said, “Why would this famous tragic revolutionary come to such unrevolutionary people like the sitting circle?” To which the Frenchman — less politely in tone than before — said, “He is one of my ancestors, and I am very proud of it — so kindly shut up.” Marie's sweet voice added pleadingly, “Please don't interrupt.”

I became silent, and the conversation of the circle with Danton took an interesting turn. Prashman asked how did he feel when he was guillotined? Danton said, “I deserved it, so I took it like a man. It was Desmoulins who died like a woman — cried.” Prashman asked, “Why did you deserve to be guillotined?” Danton said, “I was responsible for the terrible September Massacre and the execution of the king and queen. I could have saved them all. I should have. Too late.” He gave one huge lunge of the table that almost made it tumble — and the table went dead again.

I thought the Frenchman staged that little episode quite brilliantly — and yet he was genuinely elated, so he must have believed it. Poor sucker, I thought. Probably Prashman did it, for it took a man's strength to move so violently the heavy table.

I was getting bored. Then a new spirit came to the table and began some kind of a dribble that no one could understand. It made no sense, and we did not know what language. The only thing we understood was that it was for *me*. I took down the letters that were dictated to me.

It was as follows: *tishkom choroshayadushash tobibitatheistomverneesk boghy.*

Neither the circle nor I could make any sense from the letters, and they in English, French, German, and Italian told the table to that effect, and they even asked me to say the same thing in Russian.

The table again knocked out exactly the same letters, after which it shook — tried to jump — and became immobile. By that time, everyone had enough, and I began to try and see if there was any sense in the letters so that I can be of service to Marie — when suddenly, I could hardly breathe from astonishment...and almost fear.

I deciphered the message. It was unmistakably in Russian. Almost trembling I asked if anyone present knew any Russian. They did not. I knew their answer before they spoke. No one in those days except the Russians knew the language. I was sitting outside the circle. I was antagonizing [them], and spoofed at the whole idea, yet the people at the table [had] dictated to me an incredible message — in a language they did not know. Here it is — for I shall never forget it as long as I live. It could not have been prearranged, as no one knew I was joining up until the last minute.

The letters broke into words as follows: *Ti slishkom choroshaya dusha shto bi bit atheistom vernis k Bogy. You are much too good a soul to be an atheist. Return to God.*

When I read the meaning, and thoroughly investigated the possibility of a trick, and having found none possible, I had to think. Strangely, the thinking was done for me, and atheism shed itself naturally from me like the skin of a snake.

I could not explain the phenomenon, but there was no doubt that it was the strangest thing that ever happened to me. Overnight I became deeply religious, not in a narrow sectarian sense, but in a broad, universal and infinite sense. I also realized that with a finite mind we must accept — and cannot explain — all the wonders of the infinite.

The incident drew me closer to Marie. After a few days, I took courage and declared my love for her. Now in Russia, declaration of love did not mean proposal of marriage, but the English young ladies had a different kind of education. And so, before acknowledging her own feelings, she asked me *what will my parents say?* I was caught, and embarrassingly said that I was *sure they will be delighted.* And so, I became engaged.<sup>95</sup>

### **A Bravura Worthy of Youth**

I was 18 years old. First year in the University. Have never earned a penny in my life — and quite sure of my parent's complete disapproval. And as I was completely dependent on them, I took a dim view of the possibility of actual marriage — but at that age one at least has an abundance of courage.

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95 Val's mother and father had already returned to St. Petersburg.

Naturally, I said nothing to my aunt and godmother and continued free and happy days — but time was running out. The examinations were approaching. I was utterly unprepared, and money was getting short, so I finally had to leave — back to St. Petersburg. With many tears — and eternal vows — I left.

I had it badly. Every turn of the wheel seemed to grind my heart. Even Paris — which I saw for the first time, which I had longed so much to see — meant nothing to me. As I approached St. Petersburg, my determination and courage grew to tremendous proportions.<sup>96</sup>

My family was delighted to see me, and as the train arrived at 8 a.m. a sumptuous breakfast and my entire family awaited me. After our warm greetings, I exploded the bombshell and told them that I was engaged to be married. At first they were vastly amused — as they thought I was joking — but I followed up by telling them that I was leaving for London after the exams.

My father — first to realize that I was serious — asked *on what money I intended to do all of this*. I calmly answered, *on his* — that *if he has given my two sisters a large dowry I was entitled to expect the same*. To this brazen tirade of mine he politely smiled, and informed me that he had *no intention of doing it, or even to give me needed funds to go to London*. I bravely took the setback, and smilingly answered that *I shall find money*. That was a bravura worthy of youth.

Mother was extremely upset over the fact that my love was an English girl, and that *the English people are treacherous and false, and I must forget Marie*. Discussions were useless. The only sympathetic soul was Prince Kochubey, who secretly expressed his best wishes to me — but did not dare to help me.

My exams were a disaster. I flopped practically in all, except international and criminal law, but this did not bother me as I could take them again anytime I wanted.

So I set out to get somehow some money. The only way possible for me — as I was incapable of any kind of job — was gambling. I went to a gambling club (which were allowed in Russia) and lost practically the little I had. But I had a gold watch and a few other trinkets, like a chain and cuff links. The next day I went to pawn them. That night I was invited to a party. I went, as I knew there would be gambling — Macao, a sort of Baccarat. The god of love was with me. I had phenomenal luck. I cleaned everyone out. I won what would be the equivalent for today of about \$2,000.<sup>97</sup>

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96 The elegant Nord-Express, starting in 1896, ran from Paris to St. Petersburg. It ran first to Brussels, then Köln, Hanover, Berlin, Königsberg and Wirballen in Lithuania at the Russian frontier. A change of trains took place at the Russian frontier due to Russian trains running on broad gauge tracks. From Wirballen it went on to St. Petersburg.

97 This variation of Baccarat is typically a high stakes game. Val wrote this section in the 1950s. As of 2009, the equivalent sum would have been \$15,000 to \$20,000.

It was daylight when I left. I was on wings. I didn't bother to go to bed, but started packing. By breakfast I was ready to go. But I still had to renew my passport, get university permission, and book sleepers, so I gave two days for this. At breakfast, I announced that I was leaving in two days for London. My parents smiled benevolently. But when I pulled out and spread on the table the mass of money, they realized that they can't stop me to go to London — and they hoped that if I go I might get cured, and that the visit to England will be good for my education — so they added some money to my fund and gave me their blessing to go.

### Spring 1908 — Three Wonderful Months in London

I loved London. I spent three wonderful months in London. It was a lovely spring. Mr. and Mrs. Falle insisted on my staying in their home, situated near the Crystal Palace.<sup>98</sup>

The great White City Exhibition was on, with its wonders.<sup>99</sup> I never saw anything to compare [to] the magnificent fireworks at the Crystal Palace. How puny seemed my little effort of fireworks in Dzhulyinka. The theme of the fireworks showpiece was a zeppelin invasion of London. How prophetic.<sup>100</sup>

St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev seemed dwarfed in comparison to the great city of London. I was overwhelmed and awed. We seemed provincial and backward in comparison to the modern developments and luxury of London.

The streets were full of Hansom cabs, the specialty of London. They were so convenient for a romantic couple. You [would] see two or three of those Hansom cabs at the entrance of Hyde Park, near the Hyde Park Hotel, in which at an exorbitant price you could ride through

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98 The Falles lived at 189 Anerley Road. The Crystal Palace, a stunning huge Victorian cast-iron and glass building enclosing a million square feet, was a popular local attraction from 1854 until its destruction by fire in 1936. The residential area around the Crystal Palace, called Sydenham Hill, was a wealthy suburb full of large Victorian villas. One of the residents at that time was the great explorer Ernest Shackleton, although he was away on his first expedition to the South Pole at the time of Val's stay in the spring of 1908.

99 The Franco-British Exhibition, nicknamed the White City Exhibition, was a vast 140-acre fantasyland of white plaster palaces, waterways, and trade pavilions celebrating good relations between France and Britain. It ran from May 14th through October 31st, 1908. 8 ½ million people, including a Russian Grand Duchess, came to see it.

100 The outdoor spectacle at the Crystal Palace, organized by theatrical producer John Marlborough East (1860-1924), was called Invasion. Each performance, attended by crowds of 25,000 or more, featured a dazzling German zeppelin attack over a mock English country village. Menacing parachutists descended amidst bomb bursts to find themselves battling a company of British soldiers mustered to repel them. The pyrotechnics, which actually destroyed the newly rebuilt village for each weekly performance, were visible from all over London. That such an ecstatically destructive spectacle was put on six years before the onset of the First World War is a startling indicator of the underlying sense of national foreboding beneath the final bloom of the Edwardian era. This large-as-life outdoor spectacle may well have given Val ideas he would draw upon for his own large-scale outdoor historical spectacles half a century later.

the park and smooch in the relics of the past. There were no taxis. Paris was ahead in that respect — I was able to have my first ride in a car from the Paris station — but the thousands of Hansom cabs gave London a unique face.

When in London, I studied with Sir George Power, pupil of the great Lamperti.<sup>101</sup> The weeks flew by. I was accepted as the fiancée of Marie and introduced as such to all their friends, but my parents — though sending me some additional money, for I spent lavishly in entertaining Marie and her family — were silent on the question of marriage, and it was beginning to be awkward at avoiding the question of when the wedding could be. Finally the time came when I had to return back, as there was no further money forthcoming. I promised to return as soon as I can arrange matters with my parents. It was a sad parting. We both cried like babies.

There was another complication to the marriage. The consent of Marie and her parents was conditional on my giving my word that I will not pursue a theatrical career. That was a hard pill for me to swallow. But a boy of 18 in love will promise anything — so I gave my solemn oath not to go on the operatic stage, only concert.

### Summer 1908 — The Music of Applause

I went by boat to St. Petersburg, and then to Dzhulynka. My meeting with Lenochka was a little awkward, but she took it very well — but her mother, who planned that Lenochka would marry me, was very cold toward me.

My parents were doing everything they could to take my mind from my romance. Parties, theatricals, and a trip to Ouman were arranged for me. They even suggested for me to give my first concert. That idea thrilled me, and the concert was organized in the neighboring town of Gaisin, 75 verst from us. Large posters were printed and hung on every station. I got out at every station and stood by the poster, to see and be seen.

Our home was well known, and I expected a good house, who would come out of curiosity to hear my first concert. The thrill to see one's name in print, the eagerness to sing, and the music of applause from a polite audience — and undoubtedly they were polite. My voice was big, and my technical knowledge of singing was practically nil, but my ability was at *least* that of a new Caruso.

But all my concert success determined me more than ever to marry Marie. Why? I felt I had a future as a singer. I will be able to make big money, as did Sobinov and Chaliapin. Meanwhile, I must continue law studies to please my father, so I had to go back to St. Petersburg to pass the exams I failed in the spring.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> British tenor Sir George Power (1846-1928) was best known for originating the role of Ralph Rackstraw in Gilbert & Sullivan's HMS Pinafore in 1878.

<sup>102</sup> Like Val, lyric tenor Leonid Sobinov (1868-1934) studied law before deciding on an operatic career.



### Fall 1908 — A Tempting Idea

Believing that the London danger was past, my father made a big mistake to entrust me with too much money: the payment to the University, rent for the apartment, and some other bills, my upkeep for three months — besides my fare. A tempting idea began to enter my head. I dutifully chased them away, but they kept returning.

On arrival to St. Petersburg, I found a few cholera cases [had] turned into a terrible epidemic. Five hundred people died a day. Panic seized me.<sup>103</sup> Suppose I get it? Suppose I died and never saw Marie again? There was only one thing to do — to elope to London. I wrote melodramatic letters to my sister, who was in St. Petersburg, and to my parents — and fled. I wasn't afraid of the future anymore. I was sure now *I can earn my living by singing*. Oh the optimism of youth!

I was enthusiastically received by Marie and her parents, and then followed quick developments. I was allowed to keep the money, [and] I was sent additional. Marriage permission was given, [and] allowance for our comfortable living agreed. My sister [Vera] and her husband [Baron Peter Arminovich von Sivers] came to represent the family to the wedding, and in the little Russian church in Welbeck Street London I got married.<sup>104</sup> I [had] just turned nineteen — spoiled — with the entire life ahead of me on a platter. *How many parents would have done what mine have done for me?*

### April 1909 — A Rising Young Caruso

Two months later, I brought Marie to Russia.<sup>105</sup> She easily won the St. Petersburg society with her beauty, delicacy of manners, and her musical talents. Reception followed reception, to greet us — more out of [the] novelty of having an English lady as a guest of honor than their love for me. At that period, everything English was in great fashion. The hostesses would

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<sup>103</sup> The cholera epidemic of 1908 lasted for two years, and killed over 9,000 residents of St. Petersburg, affecting both the well-to-do classes and the lower classes. At one point there were over 400 new cases reported per day. St. Petersburg was considered the least healthy city in Europe. One third of the city's nearly two million inhabitants had no running water. Most of the people lived in overcrowded conditions, with an average of seven people to an apartment. An adequate sewer system was not developed until early in Stalin's reign. Dozens of barges transported sewage out into the Gulf of Finland. The rest was dumped into thousands of cesspits around the city or spilled illegally into the Neva. It appears that Val's instinct to flee the city was justified as much by survival as by romance.

<sup>104</sup> The Russian Chapel in Welbeck Street was in the same building that had been home to the Imperial Russian Embassy until 1853. The Greek-Orthodox wedding which took place on February 3, 1909 was performed by Evgeny Smirnov, whose family had been chaplains at the Russian Embassy since 1780. A lavish reception was then given at the Langham Hotel, which was only a couple of blocks away. The Langham was popular with Russians in London. The hotel bar is still called the Tsar's Bar.

<sup>105</sup> Marie remembered it differently. She said they honeymooned in Brighton for a couple of days and then departed for Russia. She described her arrival in St. Petersburg, how she rode briskly through the February snow in a troika with dozens of little bells on it.

use English terminology without knowing what it meant. The glaring one was an invitation to *come five o'clock tea at 4*.

Marie was a wonderful musician, played beautiful piano, violin, and possessed a charming voice. She now played all of my accompaniments, which greatly added to my success.<sup>106</sup> The Rosings soon became the attraction of the evening parties and concerts, and the repertoire of songs began to grow. To the arias from *Pagliacci*, *Martha*, and *Rigoletto*, I added songs of Debussy and Duparc, and arias of Tchaikovsky and Borodin. I sang at every possible party, seeking invitation, and carrying my music with high hopes of being invited to sing. At first I was asked out of curiosity and politeness, then as my singing became better it was an entertainment for guests, and finally by the time I was twenty to twenty-one I became an evening attraction. I became known as the rising promising young tenor, and was extremely popular in the social world. I was being praised and encouraged by everyone to such an extent, and as Marie loved accompanying me she began to realize the wrong to keep me to my promise of never singing in the opera — and she released me of my promise.

Parallel to my singing, I continued my university studies, exams, and political fight with Comrade Abram. My marriage gave him additional ammunition to needle me with his sarcastic sallies. As I entered the council room for the first time after my return to Russia, Comrade Abram greeted me with the singing of the wedding march. His communist friends joined him. The rest of my socialistic opponents responded with a hearty laugh. When it died down, he renewed it by saying, “I am so relieved that our esteemed mama's boy liberal friend will have *two* women to look after His Elegance.”

I went up to him and waited for the house to subside, and said, “In my life, I shall earn my existence by my singing. And if up to now I benefited from money from our estate, that was earned for us, as Comrade Abram so ably stated, by the sweat of our peasants,” — and here I raised my powerful voice, then held them all — “and even if this was true, I *still* prefer to live by the sweat of people rather than by the blood of innocent victims. For Lenin — leader of Comrade Abram — and the whole Bolshevik section are financed and are living on the money they expropriated in the hold up of a bank for which they killed my friend and hundreds of innocent people. You are murderers!”

The uproar was terrific. The right and the center gave me standing ovation. The Bolsheviks shouted and yelled, threw pencils and copybooks, demanding my expulsion from the council, and then rushed at me. But my friends quickly surrounded me, and it would have been a free-for-all fight if the Bolshevik section didn't retreat, giving way to superior forces of the liberals. I scored that day a big victory, and Comrade Abram was more careful in his sarcastic remarks to me. Besides, I lost interest and though reelected I became so absorbed with my artistic life that I neglected many of the council meetings in the next three years, during which time I passed my exams more by luck than knowledge.

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<sup>106</sup> Marie also learned to speak Russian and subsequently translated for English audiences the lyrics of the Russian songs that Val included in his concerts.

I began to study voice seriously with the greatest Russian singers: Slavina, Figner, and Kartseva. I was being wanted to sing for charity, concerts, and clubs. Rumors began to spread that I was a rising Russian Caruso.

### Spring 1911 — I Made a Flop

I lived in a world of contentment and utter selfishness. I began to imagine that I was a god's gift to humanity. The blue skies were clear. Then suddenly out of nowhere a little black cloud appeared. It was black — true — but could not do much harm. There appeared in St. Petersburg rumors of a monk, who it was said had supplanted another monk, Iliodor, in court favor. It was also whispered that this dirty unkempt monk — by the name of Rasputin, which means in Russian *man without morals* — had supernatural powers to stop bleeding of the Tsarevich. But [that] Rasputin had not only supernatural powers, but also exceptional natural powers of a man — good with women, and that none of them could resist him. [It was said] that he took advantage of his position at the court, [and] had already seduced many aristocratic women. His line was *if you are a sinner I can save you, but first you must sin with me*. It worked wonders, but so far he has kept his influence only below the belt.<sup>107</sup>

My first attempt to become a professional singer met with a dismal failure. Slavina — my teacher at that time, and the Kammersinger of the Russian Tsar — promptly arranged an audition for me, which was very difficult to obtain.<sup>108</sup> The unfortunate part of it was that the audition coincided with my having entered the Roller Skating Championship of Russia being held in Pavlovsk, a summer place near St. Petersburg.<sup>109</sup> I was very proud of my roller-skating special figures. I performed great stunts that awed the watcher: for instance, skating on two front wheels on one foot — it always brought applause — and the hour of my triumph was approaching as no one could do the stunt. And the audition, which was so difficult to obtain for a young singer — and which I did only through court connections — was approaching also. Being in the finals, I felt that I could not abandon the Roller Skating contest. I daily practiced skating for hours until I was exhausted and my throat was raw from inhaling dust.

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<sup>107</sup> The bleeding attacks of the heir were not common knowledge in Russia at this time, and it is surprising that Val could have known about them. Rasputin, however, was undoubtedly a frequent topic of conversation among court insiders visiting the household, such as Prince Kochubey and Natalia Stolypin.

<sup>108</sup> Mezzo-soprano Mariya Slavina (1858-1951) originated the role of the Countess in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* at the Mariinsky Theater in 1890, the year Val was born. Nikolai Figner was Hermann, which would one day become one of Val's operatic roles. Slavina also was Russia's first Carmen. During the Russian Revolution, she immigrated to Paris where she continued to teach singing.

<sup>109</sup> Roller-skating was an aristocratic craze in St. Petersburg in 1910 and 1911. The cream of Russian society flocked daily to a rink that had been built at one corner of the park in central St. Petersburg known as the Champs de Mars. In Pavlovsk, just south of the city, the skating facility was located in the park just outside the great palace. It also interestingly doubled as an early silent movie theater.

It was a great thrill for me to enter the holy of operatic holies and to walk on the same stage that Chaliapin, Battistini, and Titta Ruffo did. A young conductor, Albert Coates,<sup>110</sup> who just made a very brilliant debut, was playing for me. I sang the lovely tenor aria from *Faust* [*“Salut demeure chaste et pure”*]. My voice that day would have suited better to sing Mephisto.

I made a flop, disgraced Slavina — who refused to teach me anymore — [and] disgusted all my sponsors and family, especially when the next day a notice appeared in *The New Times*.<sup>111</sup> *Yesterday the tenor Rosing sang an audition at the Imperial Opera House and made no impression whatsoever.* That was a slap. But in compensation, I won the Russian Roller Skating Championship.

### Fall 1911 — My First Contract

The setback did not last long. I found a good new teacher, Kartseva.<sup>112</sup> This time there were no skating interferences and I made great progress. In a few months she presented me to the director of a new opera company, the Music Drama, which was opening the following year.

The company was organized by a great director, Lapitsky,<sup>113</sup> who got support to create an opera company on the lines of the Moscow Art Theatre. I gave a brilliant audition for the director — and repeated the same in a public audition a few days later — and won my first contract as the leading tenor of the Music Drama.

Now I had a title: I was artist of the Music Drama! I was proud like a peacock. Having become an artist of the Music Drama, I scoffed at the idea of practicing law — and at my father’s argument that one day I can lose my voice but as a lawyer I can work to the end of my days. Wisdom was on his side, but fate was on mine, and I chose the career of a singer and not that of a lawyer. How right I was, the future will tell.

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110 English conductor and composer, Albert Coates (1882-1953) was born in St. Petersburg. He was principal conductor at the Mariinsky Theater from 1911-1919. Val was to work with Coates again and again, both in England and America. Coates was instrumental in convincing Val to leave England for America in September 1939.

111 *Novoe Vremia*, published daily, was an ultra-conservative newspaper. It was the most widely read and respected paper amongst Russian officials, but was finally closed down in 1917 by the Bolsheviks, who confiscated its presses.

112 Alexandra Valerianovna Panaeva-Kartseva (1853-1941) studied in France with Pauline Viardot. In 1877, she met Tchaikovsky. She sang Tatiana in the first performance of Eugene Onegin. Her sister was Diaghilev’s stepmother and teacher.

113 Iosef Mikhailovich Lapitsky (1876-1944) worked with Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1903. The Musical Drama Theatre was the first opera company in Russia to have a stage director. During six seasons, from 1912 to 1919, the company performed nationalist operas as well as Russian premieres of Verdi’s *Aida*, Wagner’s *Parsifal*, and Debussy’s *Pelleas & Melisande*. The performances took place at the Great Hall of the Conservatory. Guest artists included the likes of Lipkowska and Sobinov. Among those attending was a young Vladimir Nabokov, who later wrote about the performances he saw there.

My debut was set to sing Lensky in *Eugene Onegin*, followed by a disastrous choice for a singer of 22 years of age — Walter in *Meistersinger*. I had to learn all this in the next few months.

### **Mrs. Rubenstein's 'At Home'**

Another interesting musical event took place that winter. I was engaged to sing at Mrs. Rubenstein's *at home*.<sup>114</sup> She was a very wealthy lady and liked to introduce young coming up artists to St. Petersburg society.

A little boy of nine with curly hair and large eyes was playing violin. He opened the concert. I was amazed at the depth of the tone, the perfection of his technique, and the abandonment. I asked our hostess for the name. It was Jascha Heifetz, making his first public appearance in St. Petersburg.<sup>115</sup>

At that time, I made my first gramophone record for His Masters Voice — an aria from *Tosca* and two duets with the great Russian woman star, Lydia Lipkowska. Oh, how thrilled I was. That was a red-letter day of my artistic life.

Dear Fred Gaisberg was the recording supervisor.<sup>116</sup> He went from capital to capital recording the best singers of that period. Fred and I became close friends and that friendship lasted for many years.

### **Summer 1912 — Headed for a Disaster**

The summer I made big preparations for my coming opera debut. I was very proud to be engaged to sing Lensky, but I also made one very bad mistake. Instead of being pleased with the tremendous vocal progress I made with Kartseva, I felt I should go back to London and study there with Sir George Power, with whom I studied when I first met Marie.

We went to Bad Ems<sup>117</sup> and gargled my throat to get it in shape, then to London for additional vocal instruction, then a summer place in Finland on the Baltic to bathe, and prepare the roles musically — but nothing helped. I was headed for a disaster.

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114 Mrs. Rubenstein was probably the widow of Anton Rubenstein, world-renowned pianist and composer, who founded the St. Petersburg Conservatory. "At homes" were private parties given by prominent women in society which featured intimate performances by popular singers and instrumentalists. These performers were often paid very well; it nicely supplemented their income and allowed them the chance to get to know and socialize with the absolute finest members of society. The "at home" was also very common in late Edwardian English society.

115 Jascha Heifetz, born in 1901, began studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1910.

116 The *Tosca* aria was recorded in May 1912. The recording session with Lipkowska, later in the year on Dec 19, 1912, was actually Val's fourth with Fred Gaisberg.

117 Bad Ems, with its alkaline mineral springs, was a popular summer bathing resort in the 19th century, with regular visitors like Kaiser Wilhelm I, Tsar Nicholas I, Tsar Alexander II, Richard Wagner, and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Sir George was a pupil of Lamperti, and had a good deal to offer, but to mix up the two different styles of vocal production of Kartseva and Lamperti didn't do me any good.<sup>118</sup>

I came back to St. Petersburg for rehearsals, and I began to notice my voice problems very much. To make the matter worse, Kartseva's two daughters fell ill with scarlet fever, and I was left to my own vocal devices — and that was not good.

### Fall 1912 — The Coming Tenor

We were to rehearse three months on half salary. It was an unheard of idea. The Mariinsky Opera and the People's Opera were the usual old-fashioned stereotyped form of acting and production with very little rehearsal or imagination, except for a few operatic giants such as Chaliapin, Figner, Sobinov, and very few others. We were rehearsing only three operas: *Eugene Onegin*, *Sadko*, and *Meistersinger*. Being in two of them, I rehearsed the entire day, and as we lived on the other end of town, I never got home between rehearsals.<sup>119</sup>

I was considered the coming tenor of the company, a good promising actor, and women thought me attractive. It didn't take me long to respond to flatteries and temptations, and began innocent flirtations. I did not fall seriously in love. It was more curiosity of a spoiled youngster — and to kill free hours between rehearsals — but Marie took a grim view of my behavior.

Not accustomed to strenuous work, I was beginning to be nervous, tired, and short tempered. My voice could not stand the strain of rehearsing *Walter*. I began to lose control of the voice — forced and pushed it. My famous top register was going. Quality was getting harsh. I began to be a disappointment to the management, myself, and my fellow artists. Instead of admiration, I was getting sympathy and advice.

To somehow counteract the situation I got myself a swank horse and carriage to commute easily with the opera house. The only good it did was have a new surge of kind females, who were pleased to be driven home, and allowed a few stolen kisses as compensation for the drive back home. None developed into affairs, but it developed into a few explosive quarrels with Marie — as we both had tempers — and I left the house and went to live with parents.<sup>120</sup>

My vocal condition became so bad that, to save my voice, I had to resign the role of *Walter* — to the great disgust of Lapitsky whose fault it was in the first place of assigning me the role. So, I sang only *Lensky*. The debut was good — but not sensational. The voice lost that outstanding gold quality that made everyone call me the Russian Caruso — and I could not get it back. I panicked. I jumped from teacher to teacher. Fortunately, it wasn't a long season of actual performances.

118 Giovanni Lamperti (1839-1910) taught voice in Milan. His book, "Vocal Wisdom," was published in 1905.

119 Val and Marie's apartment was at 67 Sergievskaya, a very fashionable street — now called Chaykovskogo.

120 The Rosings still lived at 77 Nikolaievskaya.

It was a blow to my pride and ambition, and there was even a question of being reengaged for the next season — but I sang at a charity concert the aria from *Boheme* with a resounding top ‘C’ and in the end got the contract — but my confidence in my own voice was gone; I knew that something had gone wrong, and that the Caruso-like sound was no more.

### A Lesson for My Future

Before leaving the Music Drama, I had a big row with Lapitsky — which impressed me very deeply and was a lesson for my future.

In *Eugene Onegin* there was a quarrel scene with my fiancée, Olga, and my friend, Onegin. It was a scene I loved very much for it gave me the opportunity to chew some scenery. One night a new idea came to me of a new way to act that scene. Olga was to give me a flower for my lapel, and later, when I accused her of infidelity, I tore the flower from my lapel, threw it down, and very dramatically crushed it with my foot. Olga liked it, and thought it was a stroke of genius of directing. We did it, and I was waiting to get high praise from Lapitsky for this unsolicited new stage business.

To my furious amazement, he rushed backstage and accosted me, deriding me for *daring to introduce new business into the production without his permission* — [said] that I am a *dilettante*, that I am *nothing but an irresponsible young man who will never achieve anything*. I really bristled all over me, hearing those insults and scolding. All I could stammer in my bewilderment: “But did you not think it was a good thing I did?” He snorted back at me, “Is not a question of whether it is good or bad — it’s a question of principle! If every artist on the stage will start to introduce new business, nothing will be left of the original production. It will disintegrate.”

With that he left me fuming, and then and there I decided to resign and leave the company where my individuality was not appreciated — but the next day I signed a contract for the following season.

### I Was Shocked

Another surprise came to me during that season. A young tenor who understudied me and took the part of Monsieur Triquet was always extremely friendly and attentive to me. Then one day when we were dressing, he said to me, “Valodia, you’re beautifully made. I love to see you undressed.” I thanked him for the compliment. “No, really. You are so strong. Masculine. I... I...” (Here he slightly hesitated) “I love you — I do.”

I was shocked. I heard about such things between men, but I never believed that it actually existed. I became very embarrassed, with a very creepy feeling. At the same time I felt sorry for A--- and I did not want to be rude to him. So I laughed and said, “You are crazy. How did you get into this kind of business?”

He explained: “Oh, I had a governor who taught me that way. I liked it, and it has become now a habit.”

“Well my advice to you,” I said, “is try a new habit. You are good looking, and I am sure you will have no difficulty in finding a girl.”

“No thanks, I’d rather stay as I am. Too bad you are wasted on women.”

Not enough, my friend, not enough. I dressed as quick as I could and left the embarrassed lover.

A few years later in London I asked a visiting girl member of the Music Drama how was A — , and if he has reformed. She said yes. A few girls plotted a seduction. They got him into a room, tied him to a chair, and one girl — braver than the rest — performed the seduction. From then on it is rumored he has changed his habit for a more natural field.

### **The First Bridge Editor in Russia**

Marie’s brother Bertie, who was in India during the period of our marriage, came that year to live with us in St. Petersburg. He was a truly wonderful guy, and the soul of refinement, honesty, kindness, and dignity. He learned to speak Russian, and got a very good position with an English business firm. He fell in love with my elder sister Vera, who was by that time separated from her no-good German baron. So Bertie decided to act as a peacemaker between Marie and me, and it was decided that at the end of the season we will meet at the station, and reunited go to Switzerland.

A few weeks before I left for Switzerland I became the first Bridge Editor in Russia for the largest newspaper in St. Petersburg, the *Evening Times*, under the name of Gnizor (Rosing reversed). It was a little awkward to run the column from Switzerland, but I appointed Liuba’s husband<sup>121</sup> as my assistant. After my bitter disappointment at the Music Drama, this afforded me a little food for my vanity.

### **Winter 1913 — Something New was Beginning**

It was nice to be back in Switzerland and to recapture lost illusion. I gave two concerts, one at the Montreux Kursaal with a young conductor, Ansermet.<sup>122</sup> The orchestra sounded wonderful, but my voice had not recovered. My nerves were shaken, tense beyond words. I could not sing.

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121 The nobleman Alexander Dmitrievich Paskay-Sharapov (1884-1942)

122 Ernest Ansermet (1883-1969), a native of nearby Vevey, Switzerland, conducted the Montreux Kursaal Orchestra for several years starting in 1911. At the time of Val’s concert, Igor Stravinsky was living in the nearby village of Clarens in the Villa Pervenche, which happened to be conductor Ernest Ansermet’s former home. Ansermet became several years later the conductor for Diaghilev’s famed Ballet Russe. Much of Stravinsky’s early music such as *Petroushka*, introduced by the Ballet Russe, was written at this earlier time in Ansermet’s own Villa Pervenche. The Casino-Kursaal de Montreux, built in 1881, home to the Kursaal Orchestra and site of Stravinsky’s first conducting engagement outside Russia, stood until December 4, 1971 when it spectacularly burned down after a Frank Zappa concert. The fire, next to beautiful Lake Geneva, inspired a visiting member of the band Deep Purple to write the classic rock song *Smoke on the Water*.



I was to be preparing Don José for *Carmen* and Herman for *Queen of Spades*. I decided I could not do it and must get out of my contract — which, thanks to the doctor, I was able to. I resigned from the opera house and remained in Switzerland. I went to Dr. Mermod in Lausanne for throat treatments. I spent with him a whole winter, but nothing helped.<sup>123</sup>

We then went to London. Sir George tried hard to repair my voice but did not succeed. I had a few days when I sounded like my old self, others I croaked like a frog. My nerves were at a breaking point.

Something new was beginning to come into my singing. I began to think and to feel. I began to realize that singing is not only high notes to please the ladies, that there is a great deal besides — only I was too immature to understand it, and still pursued empty tones, high notes, fortissimo. I still had plenty of that, but somehow it did not give me or my listener the same satisfaction.

It was a pleasant, gay winter, except for the constant worry over my voice — one day good, the other in pieces.

### May 1913 — Albert Hall

Amy Woodforde-Finden,<sup>124</sup> whose song I was singing, took me to see Melba — the great diva Melba. She was the queen of the operatic world — the most illustrious star I have ever met.<sup>125</sup>

In those days, the operatic stars were the most glamorous people in the world. It was known that on several occasions, the people unharnessed the horses of Melba's carriage and pushed the carriage by hand. They had the adulation of national heroes. It was still the Golden Age of Opera, still the age of high notes and soft pianissimos, of tenors that sent the women into ecstasies.

Having heard Melba's records, I expected to see an ethereal creature à la Isadora Duncan, but I was presented to a might-have-been beauty, but on which marching time had left its marks. All the same, she was Melba, and I was exhilarated, and sung as I have rarely sung before.

Melba got excited, rushed to the telephone, called her manager, the great Lionel Powell, to come immediately to hear a marvelous tenor. He was at the door before I had time to tell her

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<sup>123</sup> Arthur Mermod (1852-1915) was a doctor and otolaryngologist based in Lausanne. He also has the distinction of having operated on Vladimir Lenin in 1904.

<sup>124</sup> English composer Amy Woodforde-Finden (1860-1919) wrote exotic (and sometimes erotic) songs inspired by near-eastern and oriental themes.

<sup>125</sup> Australian soprano Nellie Melba (1861-1931) was a very big star. Shortly after the First World War she became the first performer to be named a Dame of the Order of the British Empire. Peach Melba and Melba toast are both named after her. Like Val, Melba recorded for HMV.

my history. I sang again — even better. Powell immediately gave me a date for my London debut in Albert Hall.

It surpassed all my expectations, to make my first appearance in Albert Hall, the greatest concert hall in the world, with a capacity of 10,000. It did not matter to me that Lionel forgot to offer me a fee — small matter. The honor for a young artist to sing in that concert was worth all the fees I could get. I would have been willing to pay to sing. I felt my career is made in England if I sing as well as today.

In some way it was the turning point of my career and my life. But success doesn't always come easy. Just a week before my debut, I got a bad attack of the flu, and unless a miracle would happen I either would be unable to sing at all, or at least will sing badly — for the flu always attacked my larynx and chest.

The Persian Shah himself could not have been looked after better. Doctors came. Inhaling machines were installed. Electric massages were instituted. Pine and eucalyptus were sprayed. Special foods were cooked.

O, youth! How foolish are your values! I was angry with God. I scolded Him for doing this to me. Poor God — how much blame he got. Two times Val, you and God had a quarrel. It was the second time I had gotten angry with God.

The first time was two years previously when I was in our country place in Russia, and got a letter from Sir George [Power] including a clipping announcing his pupils' concert. "What?" I said to Marie, "He is giving a pupils' concert without *me*, his best pupil? That cannot be! I *must* go and sing there." Marie was just as naïve and stupid like me, and a telegram was sent immediately to Sir George announcing my arrival and participation in his concert. Next day I took the train, traveled two days to reach London, spent hundreds of dollars, caught a beautiful cold, and had practically no voice at the concert. It was then that I got angry with God, spoke to Him out loud in a very stern voice, saying that this was not a *just reward* to me after having come back to His fold — and demanding the restoration of my voice. Well, my message did not reach Him, and I cracked all over the place.

Now I was furious and spoke to Him. Maybe the message this time reached Him, for on Saturday the voice was clearing up. I went to try it in the terrifyingly huge place. It sounded all right, and it was decided that I will sing.

I will never forget my taxi ride from our apartment to Albert Hall.<sup>126</sup> I felt as if I was going to be executed. But after my first few notes of the aria from *Tosca*, I found my balance and sang well and received the honors of the day. The two other participants in the all star concert

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<sup>126</sup> Listed in the program as Wladimir Rozing, Val's debut at Albert Hall took place on Sunday, May 25, 1913. The aria from *Tosca* was probably "*E lucevan le stele*" which was Val's first record for HMV a year earlier. One reviewer complimented "a refreshing avoidance of the mannerisms that too often beset the operatic tenor." Also on the program was "*Che Gelida Manina*" from Puccini's "*La Boheme*", Aria from Massenet's "*Werther*", and "*Serenade*" by Rechkooff (Rechkunov) on the program. The Massenet had been on the reverse side of Val's first record. The Rechkunov piece was on Val's second record made with Fred Gaisberg in St. Petersburg.

were Alice Verlet, coloratura soprano, and the return from America of Mischa Elman, a great Russian violinist.<sup>127</sup> Mischa, who was very nervous, was already there, and he ignored my existence before my appearance. Only the reception I received after my *Tosca* aria made him listen to me and register my existence in the world. To the radar ears of his father, my applause registered louder than that of his son. So to counteract further possible danger — as if it was done unintentionally — he hid my encore music under a chair, so when after my second appearance the public gave me a rousing applause demanding an encore, I could not find my music; and I had to stall and come out three times to bow before my father-in-law — also a crafty individual — located my misplaced music. It was a bad mistake of Papa Elman — and I always remembered.

It was my first legitimate professional success. Melba had not been present, but a few weeks later I was engaged by her to sing at her concert in Tunbridge Wells.<sup>128</sup> I was not in good voice, and sang badly — and the handsome tenor, Ciccolini, got the job to assist Melba on her Australian tour.<sup>129</sup>

### I Would Have to Prove Myself

The Albert Hall debut led to a number of *at home* engagements. They were most profitable. Every hostess of any importance gave musical *at homes* during the season, and they were a very lucrative part of a singer's income. I was a novelty in great demand.

The music at those *at homes* was rarely listened to. It served more as an accompaniment for social talks and scandals — and for the snobbishness of the hostess in announcing her celebrities. So it did not matter that my singing was bad. No one of the society knew how a Russian tenor should sound. It was enough that I came from Russia. I was glad all the same when the season was over.

At one of those *at homes* I met the French composer B-----, whose song I sang practically at every concert — not because it was such a good song, but because I knew so very few. After my singing it, he was effusive in his praises and invited me to dine with him the next day, and to play for me his new song. I felt very honored that a famous composer would be so flattering to me.

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127 Ukrainian violinist Mischa Elman (1891-1867) had studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Though a year younger than Val, Elman had been playing in London since 1905. He had also made his American debut at Carnegie Hall in 1908.

128 Royal Tunbridge Wells is a small English town about 31 miles southeast of London; its opera house opened in 1902.

129 Italian tenor Guido Ciccolini (1885-1963) had previously accompanied Melba to Australia in 1911. Ciccolini had also been scheduled to sail to America on the maiden voyage of the "RMS Titanic" in April 1912, but a change in the scheduling of an opera performance had caused him to miss the sailing. In 1926, Ciccolini was chosen to sing at Rudolph Valentino's funeral.

He served a lovely dinner with champagne to mellow me, but his songs turned out to be *etchings*. After singing for him again his song, he expressed amazement at the power of my voice, and began to examine my body to locate the center of my power — but he located it in a wrong place, and I had no alternative but to give him a punch, in spite of his being a famous composer. I ran out of the apartment as fast as I could.<sup>130</sup>

The incident produced on me a devastating effect. First, one of my semi-gods fell down. Secondly, it seemed that I had more attraction for the males than the females. That revolted me, as I had only interest in the females. I began to worry. I had to prove to myself it's not the case.

### Summer 1913 — The Most Valuable and Extraordinary Hour

May, June and the first week of July are the great season in London. Wimbledon, with its galaxy of international tennis stars, is the climax and then the London society disperses itself — visitors back to their countries, hosts of nobility to their ancestral homes and castles, where they stay until the hunting season is over. Every Londoner, except very poor ones, goes during July or August to two weeks holiday. The beaches and watering places are full. Working and school season resumes after Labor Day.

Artists give concerts there, but who wants to hear concerts in the summer? Houses are usually bad. Only a helpless polite manager usually greets you, saying *the weather is good, no one wants to go indoors*, or that *it rains and people are staying in*, but never, accusingly, *You don't draw*.

My voice was going worse, my health worse, my mind quite erratic. I was losing my memory — enough to start to be worried. I had a few engagements for the coming season. I had to prepare them.

I was offered a tour in Switzerland and the south of Russia, and in between I sandwiched six weeks to study with Jean de Reszke in Paris. I was satisfied, and looked forward to my winter season. My great hope to reestablish it was with Jean de Reszke. I looked to my six weeks with him as my great vocal salvation.<sup>131</sup>

I finally went to Lausanne, Switzerland hoping the invigorating air would restore me. My bathroom began to look like a pharmacy: pills, pills, pills of every kind, prescribed by doctors from different countries — Russia, London, Paris, and now, Switzerland; but none of them seem to bring any results. I was constantly tired, my temper was vile, and my outstanding memory was failing me. The worse I sang, the worse my health — and vice versa.

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130 The unnamed French composer might have been the well-known Alfred Bruneau (1857-1934). Bruneau studied with Massenet and had also spent time in Russia. He wrote a number of successful operas and several collections of art songs, one of which was "The Happy Vagabond." Bruneau published a book on Russian music in 1903.

131 Before leaving London, Val had three recording sessions in July for HMV, his first since leaving Russia.

I was sitting on the balcony overlooking the emerald green of Lake Geneva, surrounded by its towering Alps. The peace and beauty of nature seemed to accentuate my inner despair. It was especially bad that afternoon. I had just finished playing bridge and had committed a series of unpardonable blunders — which included trumping my own trick!

My power of concentration, my memory, and my power of deduction all seemed to have left me, and I was ready to drown myself — only I wasn't worthy of that beautiful lake. Nevertheless, I was wondering how deep and cold it was when a very pleasant and charming American lady inquired why I looked so downhearted. Her charms were such that very soon I was telling the story of my life. The approach had always served me well, but this time it elicited more interest in my health problems than my tenorian charms.

She advised me to see a great Swiss brain specialist, Dr. Vittoz. I protested that I did not need a brain specialist. *I am, on the one hand, an artist — and balance that by being a bridge editor, a chess player, a horseman, and a roller skating champion of Russia. I even dabble in politics.* But the charmer informed me that Dr. Vittoz was *a performer of miracles and could improve one's entire life.* I decided I had nothing to lose — even if I gained nothing — so I made an appointment to see the doctor.<sup>132</sup>

I arrived at the appointed hour with complete skepticism, thinking it a waste of time. I had respect for general doctors, specialists, and surgeons, but a complete disdain for any bordering on the psychological. I was prepared for a lot of pomposity and superficiality, and was ready with sarcastic answers that would lead him down a false path. It was a consolation that Swiss doctors are inexpensive.

His reception room was extremely modest, but spotlessly clean. To my surprise, as I entered the room I was confronted by a small, thin man who welcomed me with a most disarming and sincere smile. The atmosphere was cheerful, wholesome, and friendly. I responded to him with confidence and affection, and spent an hour in his consulting room from 11:00 to 12:00 o'clock. It is difficult to believe that one hour so completely changed my life and the lives of others through me. It was the most valuable and extraordinary hour of my life. When I left him, he gave me his book to refresh my memory on all the things that he had taught me in that hour. I cherished it for many years.

I will now try to reconstruct his teachings, together with other things which I have learned and developed through the fundamental knowledge imparted to me by Dr. Vittoz. After patiently listening to my story of woe, he gave me a reassuring smile and said, "It is nothing. What you have is what most people suffer from to one degree or another. It is very common with artists, lawyers, politicians, or any highly sensitive person. It is especially common among women. If you have determination and patience, it is easily cured and conquered,

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<sup>132</sup> Swiss doctor, Roger Vittoz (1863-1925), developed a system of brain control through sensory awareness and concentration; his book, "Treatment of Neurasthenia by Teaching of Brain Control", was published in London in 1911. His reputation was such that T. S. Eliot sought him out in 1921; Vittoz treated him, and Eliot was able to complete his celebrated poem "The Waste Land" while in Lausanne.

and you'll be infinitely better off for having gone through these two unhappy years of your life." He then filled out a number of charts and began instructing me.

I entered his room feeling defeated, old, and lost. I left rejuvenated, full of faith in my future, with an understanding of my abilities and confidence in my ability to achieve. The success I have had as a singer, director, and producer I owe to him, and if I have helped others to succeed in life, they can thank him too.

What has the Vittoz system done for me? Everything. It helped restore my voice. When I left his consulting room, I was a different person. I walked with a firm strong step. My thoughts of suicide were gone — and the energy which had been locked up for so long began to flow through my body.

Never since that time have I stopped building, developing and improving myself, my thoughts and my art. Of course, I have had setbacks — who has not? But I have found the strength to fight my battles, and my energy is greater today than it was in my B.V. (before Vittoz) days, and it is the envy of those with whom I work. I have almost become as well known for my vitality and energy as for my productions. I am sure had Dr. Vittoz lived he would have approved of the additional points I have developed as a result of much research with other doctors and artists, for he was a man striving to find greater knowledge and greater truth in the infinite science of the universe as it affects us.

A great change took place in me very soon. I became good tempered. Life had a future. It was clear to me where and how I was going, and how to repair the damage. The setback didn't scare me anymore. I even laughed at them in my happier condition. But my voice needed a teacher — a good teacher.

### December 1913 — The St. Gallen Girls

We went to St. Gallen<sup>133</sup>, where I was to sing a concert of *Faust*, with Marie making her debut as Marguerite.<sup>134</sup> The engagement came through a wealthy St. Gallen lace manufacturer — or rather his two daughters who heard me in Montreux the previous season, and got a crush on me as I found out later. They brought pressure through their wealthy father on the director of the opera house to engage me. I insisted on Marie being included. We were to be their guests during the engagement.

They lived in a large mansion with long corridors and game rooms of several kinds, a house where one can easily lose oneself. To my surprise, we were put up in two separate rooms, not even connected. No sooner had I changed my clothes when there was a knock, and in came the eldest daughter, under some pretext, to find out if I wanted anything — and if I had any doubt about my being attractive to women she soon dispelled that idea. I was still

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<sup>133</sup> Founded in the Middle Ages, St. Gallen is the highest town in Switzerland. It was the embroidery and lace capital of Europe in 1913, producing Switzerland's largest export product.

<sup>134</sup> Marie Rosing sang Marguerite under the stage name Marie Bernon at St. Gallen's Stad Theater on December 19, 1913. It was to be her only operatic performance. The theater, now called The Tonhalle, was built in 1907.

young and naïve — besides I really did not want to be untrue to Marie — so the amorous encounter ended with a few kisses, that being a gentleman I hardly could deny a very attractive and passionate lady.

No sooner had she left — and I went to join Marie — when out of one of the doors leading to a billiard room popped out the younger one, cute as can be. She took me by the hand and said, “Oh, I am so glad that at last you are here. You don’t know how I have waited for this moment.” With that, she led me into the billiard room, closed the door, scattered all the billiard balls to swirl about the table, and threw her arms about my neck and kissed me. I really was terrified — anyone could have come in, and I would have been sunk. I begged her to be careful and prudent, but nothing seemed to matter to this ball of fire but kissing me. Now I knew I was attractive to women too. It scared me, but I will honestly admit it did my vanity good. All this in 30 minutes.

From there on, until we left to go back to Montreux, the two minks vied with each other who will get me first into a corner. I believe there was an agreement between them. I believe they expected from me more than they got — and they got just kisses.

The concert was a great success. *Faust*, for which I made gorgeous costumes in London, could have been better. I was nervous for Marie. She looked the reincarnation of Marguerite, and would have been a great success if it was a dramatic play. Unfortunately it was an opera, and in opera you must sing over an orchestra well. She was a fine dramatic artist. This was to be her only operatic performance, by mutual consent.

Neither did I ever see the St. Gallen girls again. They were very attractive, and many times when I was low in my life I regretted of not having had an affair with either or perhaps both. But in our mind we do occasionally commit sins oftener than in real life.

### January 1914, Paris — Jean de Reszke and Sbriglia

From St. Gallen I continued my artistic tour and sang in Montreux and Lausanne.<sup>135</sup> And as I had six weeks before my tour in South Russia, we decided to go to Paris and study with the great tenor and artist, Jean de Reszke. Finally, we arrived in Paris, stopping at the magnificent Hotel Majestic.<sup>136</sup>

The prices for Jean’s lessons were, I think, quite exorbitant. At that time he charged 100 francs a lesson, which was equivalent of today value to at least 60 dollars a lesson — a terrible price to pay — but Natalia and my family insisted, and sent me the price of four lessons.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Val sang again at the Kursaal de Montreux on December 23, 1913 with Ernest Ansermet conducting. The two concerts in Lausanne actually took place a week prior to the St. Gallen performance.

<sup>136</sup> Built in 1908, the luxurious Hotel Majestic on the Avenue Kleber was located halfway between the Arc de Triomphe and the Trocadero. It would later be the German Headquarters in Paris in WWII as well as the site of the Paris Peace Talks during the Vietnam War.

<sup>137</sup> The French 100 franc gold coin, minted until 1914, contained almost 1 ounce of gold. The current value can be referenced at least to that. France went off the gold standard later that same year as World War I got underway.

What we expected I would learn would take about a dozen lessons maximum. We probably expected some kind of magic, but we expected least of all the results we got in two weeks — surprising results.

Jean de Reszke, the great tenor of the Époque stage, was handsome, cultured, and elegant. He and his brother, Edouard, the great bass, were the idols of the operatic world.<sup>138</sup> Jean de Reszke began his career as a baritone, and after his first performance (which was a flop) Sbriglia took him, and in six months created the great *tenor* Jean de Reszke. Especially he brought great singing and great plastic beauty to his movement on the stage. It was the same semaphoric style, but at least it was done with plastic beauty and finesse. His drawing power was equal to that of Caruso, who finally dethroned him — and Jean began to teach.

He lived on Rue de la Faisanderie, had a beautiful old palace in which housed a miniature and adorable little theater seating about 20 people where he presented some of his talented pupils.<sup>139</sup>

Sbriglia was an amazing character, one of the last great voice teachers of the Golden Era.<sup>140</sup> He produced a number of truly great vocal stars — like Nordica, Lassale, Jean de Reszke, Edouard de Reszke, and the sister of the de Reszkes, Josephine. His last pupil was the French bass Plançon, whom I myself heard while still at the Met. Sbriglia became very jealous of Jean when Jean began to teach. He — as the *teacher of Jean* — felt that Jean, being *only a pupil*, *could not teach* — Jean *only imitated him*, but *did not appreciate the science*. Sbriglia told everybody, *I will not accept anyone who studied with Jean. I will not repair the vocal damages made on singers by Jean*. Sbriglia was very belligerent, and became a strong enemy of Jean. The name Sbriglia was taboo on the Rue de la Faisanderie.

I was very nervous at my first lesson with Jean, but he was so kind, so nice, that I felt at ease immediately. He became immediately enthusiastic over my voice. “Vladimir,” he said, “your voice is exactly like mine.” And he began to teach me accordingly. In some way he was right. Marie sometimes from the next room could not differentiate the two voices, especially in the middle.

He would call Edouard — whose immense basso vibrated through the house as he talked — to show Edouard some passage in my voice which reminded him of his voice when he was a young singer. Sometimes Jean would call his wife and say to her, “Show Vladimir how to sing an open ahhh,” and would add, “She’ll show you better than I.” But all his kindness did not help my voice; and when on my second lesson as I was taking high notes he would say, “Anchor yourself to the ceiling” With a superhuman effort I would hit my high note into the top of my head — and tried to reach with my tone the high ceiling of the room — and literally leave my guts on the ceiling.

138 Jean de Reszke (1850-1925). Edouard de Reszke (1853-1917).

139 Rue de la Faisanderie is off the Avenue Foch, a few blocks from the Bois de Boulogne. The palace at #53, where Jean de Reszke lived and taught until his death in 1925, is now the Iraqi Embassy.

140 Giovanni Sbriglia (1832-1916)



After my fourth lesson, I started to give him another 400 francs, but Jean — with a grand operatic gesture — refused to take it, saying, “I don’t want any more money from you.” Then he put his hand in his pocket and offered me money. “Don’t you need some yourself? I will be glad to give it to you.” I was very touched at his generosity and faith in me, and continued to anchor myself with my high notes to the ceiling. That began to crack my skull — anyway my voice. After a lesson with Jean, I would leave with a dreadful feeling that I had no more voice left. Naturally I blamed all this on myself. Jean de Reszke, the prince of tenors, could not be wrong.

He was a wonderful man: kind, considerate, a perfect gentleman. His mistake with me was that though our voices were strangely alike, I was slim, and built very differently from his heavy-set though elegant figure. And what was easy for him to produce, at the end of three weeks completely destroyed the last vestige of my voice. After the lessons I could hardly talk, and finally I realized that I could not continue to work with Jean. I was terribly upset as I was genuinely fond of him and admired him greatly as a man and an artist. What to do next? I had three weeks left before my engagement in South Russia — and I had no more voice left.

In spite of Dr. Vittoz’ method, I was desperate. I [had] just come back from a lesson and felt exhausted, voiceless; and as in Lausanne the previous year, a young American lady from St. Louis whom I have met previously spoke to me.

“Mr. Rosing...What’s the matter with you? You look as if you have lost the world.”

“For me I have — my only world. I feel I lost my voice, and voice to a singer is like a child to his mother.”

“I know,” she said. “I am a singer myself. Who is your teacher?”

“The great Jean de Reszke,” I said with pride. “But I must be very stupid, and must be doing something so wrong that I can’t sing anymore.”

“Don’t blame yourself if Jean failed. Try and go to study with Sbriglia, Jean de Reszke’s teacher.”

As Jean was in his sixties, his teacher must be teaching the angels in heaven. So I laughed — I said so.

“Oh no,” she answered. “He lives, and takes a few pupils. I am one. Only if you go, don’t tell him that you have studied with Jean or he will throw you out, as he refuses to repair damages that Jean so often does.” I thanked her, made an appointment with the ancient Sbriglia, and went to see him the next day with Marie to play for me.

Marie and I went, disguised as English tourists, to pay our respects to Sbriglia, the great master of the singing world. He came shuffling with a cane into the room, a little man with a bristling mustache, dyed black. He looked at me coldly, as one inspects a horse, and curtly said, “Come on, don’t waste time — sing!” So I proceeded to sing the aria from *Boheme* — with the famous high ‘C’.

He was sitting with his chin poised on his cane, devoid of expression, and when I finished he said, "If you take that high 'C' again, as you did just now, you will drop dead. Go away!" That was the end. How low must I have fallen, when a teacher refuses to take me, who was the prize pupil of my teacher.

He turned then to Marie and ordered her to sing. She was too scared of the old devil to disobey. When she finished, Sbriglia chuckled, adjusted his painted mustache, and said, "Her I will take. And you — don't sing." So I made an appointment at his command for Marie, and we left. I felt as if the road to a singing career was closed, and I should go back to Russia, cancel my concert, and start practicing law. Undoubtedly this was the end.

On the day of Marie's lesson she became ill with the flu. As the old devil did not have a telephone, I had to go to cancel Marie's lesson and to make a new appointment. He, as before, shuffled into the room, inspected me from under his blackened bushy eyebrows, and said, "Well, come on. Let me try you."

Obviously he did not want to lose the money for the lesson. But after a few minutes I aroused his interest, and by the time the lesson was over he said, "Alright, I think I can help you. Come every day."

For 3 weeks he did not allow me to sing above a whisper. Low — by myself. At the end of 3 weeks, he allowed me to sing a song — and I was amazed. There was a new voice. Different. I was able to sing, to shade, to control. I was vocally saved. He bullied me, he insulted me, he mocked me — but I took it all, and promised to come back from Russia.

The last two days in Paris, Marie developed a new cold — and being afraid of catching it we decided that I would occupy another room. As fate would have it, that day I met a lady staying at the hotel — a beautiful, glamorous elegant widow. I was susceptible, still eager to prove to myself that I attract ladies — which was in reality nothing but an excuse to justify temptation. This time it wasn't like St. Gallen, and I fell headlong into the siren's net. It was a completely new experience for me to be loved by someone who really knew the meaning of love and passion — and by the time I left Paris I was completely infatuated. Marie's cold was growing worse, and so was my infatuation.

### **Spring 1914 — Kishinev**

Our first concert was in Kishinev. It was the capital of the Bessarabian province — large but completely primitive. By the time we reached Kishinev, Marie was quite sick. We called a doctor, and he ordered her to be taken to the town hospital — as she had measles, and they would not keep her in the hotel. The hospital was a dreadful place: a few individuals, little better than a peasant hut for different contagious diseases.

While I was waiting for Marie's recovery, I gave a truly brilliant concert. It was a tremendous triumph, and the next day the press wrote that though they *don't make comparisons*, they *must say that I sang incomparably better than Smirnov two weeks earlier*. I was in seventh heaven and felt I achieved a great victory to beat Russia's greatest tenor. I spent most of the day sending out to St. Petersburg press notices.

I was treated as a great celebrity by the local society, and I went to a big party given in my honor. I began to feel sick myself. The beauty queen was all ready to have a violent love affair, but just as we cozily embarked on a boat on the local river I began to get chills — and knew that in my turn I got the measles

It was decided that I would run from Kishinev that very night on the Paris Express — to be sick there instead of my going to the dreadful Kishinev hospital. Marie was to follow me the next day, as she was almost completely recovered.

For two days I generously distributed my coming measles to my train companions. By the time I reached Paris — where I hoped to see Lady X — I had a high fever and was taken to a nursing home in Neuilly — and the measles ignominiously brought down the curtain on my still-born romance. Marie arrived the next day. I had a severe attack of measles, but after 3 weeks I was able to resume my lessons with Sbriglia.

Little anyone suspected that we were living the last day of the cycle and entering into a new and most terrible one for the world. For me, life began to take a larger scope. I was entering the big league. An agent, Alexander Khan,<sup>141</sup> arranged for me an audition with the director of the Vienna Imperial Opera Company. He was looking for a tenor who could take the place of a wonderful singer, Piccaver (an American, born I believe in Syracuse). Piccaver was leaving for America.<sup>142</sup> Gregor liked me and I received a 6-year contract with the Vienna Imperial Opera.<sup>143</sup> Overjoyed, we went to London to prepare costumes and clothes for Vienna.

### June 1914 — We Russians were *à la mode*

It was a great season in London. Claire Dux<sup>144</sup> made her sensation in Queen of the Night. Diaghilev brought the Russian ballet and opera to town. Chaliapin, Pavlova, and Nijinsky were conquering London. We Russians were *à la mode*. I was getting popular. I sang my second Albert Hall concert, and again was in great demand for at-homes.

At the end of the London season we packed five huge trunks with furs, costumes, and all our best clothes, and started for Vienna. On our way we decided to stop and stay two to three weeks in Ostende<sup>145</sup> and work on *Tosca* — I was making my debut on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September as Cavaradossi — but after a week we got bored with Ostende and we just could not decide

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141 Impresario Alexandre Kahn produced concerts and operas in both Europe and America.

142 Alfred Piccaver (1884-1958) was British-American, born in England but raised in New York. He was immensely popular in Vienna. Due to his American citizenship Piccaver actually was allowed to continue performing there during the war, and received special treatment even after the United States joined the war in 1917.

143 Hans Gregor was Director of the Vienna Imperial Opera 1911-1918.

144 Claire Dux (1885-1967) performed the role of Queen of the Night in Beecham's production of *The Magic Flute* at Drury Lane in June 1914.

145 Ostende is a popular Belgian seaside resort. When the German army took Brussels a few short months later in August 1914 the Belgian government fled to Antwerp and then Ostende.

where to go. We were still debating the problem as we were driving to the station. So we had two possibilities: one forward to Vienna, the other back to Beauvais, where Sbriglia had his chateau and held a summer class. As we could not come to a solution, we decided to send the five trunks to Vienna, and toss a coin as what to do. Heads would mean go to Vienna, tails go to Beauvais. I shiver to think how close again I was to a disaster. We tossed a coin. Tails came, and we took the train for France.

### July 1914 — God Knows What Will Happen

Just one week later World War One broke on the world. All the Russians caught in Vienna were interned in a concentration camp. That included Nijinsky who spent most of the war in it, and came out to enter a mental home in Switzerland.<sup>146</sup> I would have been interned too, and my whole life would have been smashed — or anyway changed completely. Just the toss of a coin made that difference.

When one week later the order of mobilization was announced Sbriglia (who went through the Franco-Prussian War<sup>147</sup>) said to me, “Get out — go to England — get out immediately. God knows what will happen.” In two hours we fled to Dieppe to catch a boat to England.<sup>148</sup>

Dieppe was solidly packed by fleeing English people.<sup>149</sup> As we sat in the station restaurant in Dieppe, and train after train was disgorging fleeing visitors caught in France, I was overwhelmed by a tragic premonition. It had nothing to do with my personal losses. A 6-year contract in Vienna, my five trunks which I sent there full of furs and expensive costumes — it represented for me a small fortune. That never even crossed my mind. I saw the *horror* of what is in store for the world. I began to cry, and somehow I wasn't ashamed of my tears. It was like being present at the funeral of one with whom I grew up, dear to me, and the birth in agonies of a new age — a dreadful horrible age.

Within a few days, Europe became an armed camp, with decades of artificial hatred planted into friendly nations by their governments, turning men into beasts and animals. My pianissimo high notes were drowned by cries of the wounded and dying, bombs and guns.

The crossing to England was awful. It took six hours instead of the usual three. The wind was howling as if all the demons were loosed on the world. I have always been a bad sailor, but as the boat was packed like sardines I decided that I must not be ill. I solved that problem. I stood on the stairs in the middle of the boat, and as the ship plunged down I mounted the

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146 Vaslav Nijinsky was not put in a camp. He was under a sort of house arrest in Budapest. From America Diaghilev secured permission in 1916 for Nijinsky to leave Hungary and, after a period in Vienna, come to New York. Nijinsky did not enter the Bellevue nerve clinic in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland until 1919.

147 The Franco-Prussian War was fought 1870-71.

148 Mobilization started in Russia on July 29, 1914 and spread within days to the rest of Europe.

149 Dieppe is a French port on the English Channel.

stair, and when it plunged up I descended the stair. This way I kept myself on the same level. I made it, and since I have never been sick again — as if I have found my sea legs.

### August 1914 — A Huge Madhouse

We found London a huge madhouse. You would have thought that England was celebrating a festival. Streets were full of cars, with people riding on top of them — singing, shouting, waving flags. Lord Kitchener was the hero of the hour.<sup>150</sup> Notices were constantly being issued from the War Ministry and the State Department.

There were celebrations, parties all over the city. One could have imagined that this war was a picnic, a ball. I was disgusted, and we decided to go to Bournemouth.<sup>151</sup> I soon became interested in serving in the Red Cross, and we organized a Serbian Red Cross Day. We collected money in the streets and gave two symphony concerts by their well-known orchestra in which I took part. The London committee was jolted into life by our activities, and I was called to London to explain my credentials.

As the only son, by Russian law I was exempt from military service. I did not have to return to Russia, so we decided to remain in London. I wanted to be of some service, so I joined the Russian Red Cross at the Russian embassy. Count Benckendorff was our ambassador, a typical diplomat of the old school — a snob — narrow-minded and ultra-conservative.<sup>152</sup> After my interview with the board, I was officially transferred to London to serve in the Red Cross organization. I established a program for its activities involving all the best talent that found itself in London. We organized markets, bazaars, and every kind of charitable entertainment — theater, and concerts that included recitals of Russian song in which I particularly participated.

The gay London suddenly took a new aspect. Everyone was working at some war work. The London at war was very different from the London at play of 2 months ago. Gone was all the snobbishness. There was an amazing camaraderie suddenly between all classes. Zeppelin raids were expected daily. Even a raid by planes was considered a possibility. Night life continued to be gay, with parties given for returning or departing soldiers and officers. Theatres were packed. Restaurants were busy, except that one needed coupons for meat dishes.

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<sup>150</sup> Lord Kitchener was appointed Secretary of War by Prime Minister Asquith. Kitchener knew what a long and costly war this would be for Britain. He was not to see the end of it. Less than two years later he perished at sea while he was enroute to Russia on a diplomatic mission.

<sup>151</sup> Bournemouth is a resort town in that sprang up in the 19th century. It was particularly popular with artists and writers of the era, and a colony of Russian exiles and Tolstoy devotees, led by the aristocratic Vladimir Chertov, also lived there. The town boasted a cast iron Victorian Pier, Pleasure Gardens and a fine orchestra.

<sup>152</sup> Count Alexander Benckendorff (1849-1917) was appointed ambassador to the Court of St. James in 1903, a post he held until his death in January 1917, just a few weeks before the revolution. His brother Paul was the Grand Marshall of the Court of Nicholas II.

One day as I was reading postcards from Russian prisoners of war in Germany I came across a shocking situation. The Serbian Army of 60,000 men, defeated in the first few days of the war, was kept in army prisoner camps — starving, as there was no one to help them — and their own government was defeated and in exile. The Germans were not living up to the Geneva Agreement. It ended with an appeal to help them. Without losing a minute I went to see Benckendorff. With his usual pompousness he informed me that it's not his business, that I should appeal to the British government. Within half an hour, I was at the foreign office, and by the end of the day I had obtained the needed money from the British government to feed 60,000 men daily. With the help of the Serbian Embassy, I began to establish contact with the units and compose a list of the foodstuffs so that the men would have the needed calories and enough variety. It became a very important work for me.

I felt I was contributing to the war effort. I organized many large war concerts. I very soon became the most popular singer and very much lionized by the society. Outside the artistic world, I socially became friends in the political world with Sir Alfred Mond, Lord Reading and C. P. Scott, owner of the Manchester Guardian, a truly great and wonderful man. His friendship was and is one of my most cherished memories. He lived in Manchester on a modest income which he paid himself as the editor of the paper. The rest of the income of the paper he put back into the paper to make it greater. He made the Manchester Guardian the most respected paper in Great Britain. I met him at a friend's house, Mrs. Mathews, who had a most wonderful salon of all the most interesting and celebrated people in London. We called her 'Loving Mully.'<sup>153</sup>

London was a beehive of activities, and it was hard to believe that the front was only a hundred miles away. After the first defeat of the small expeditionary British army, Great Britain grimly set to defeat Germany in a *war to end wars*. It became my dream — my call. We must destroy brutal imperialism. We must make the world safe for democracy. We poor befuddled Russians hoped that our alliance with Western democracies will bring liberal reforms in Russia and make her, like England, a constitutional monarchy. To that I dedicated all of my strength, all artistry, and all my efforts. I worked hard for the first time in my life: 8 a.m. at the office, till 5, then the evening devoted to concerts, entertaining troops, munitions workers, and sometimes night shifts. Those nights I didn't get to bed sometimes till 5 a.m.

### May 1915 — Young and Stupid and Unafraid

By now, I began to think that I have a great mission in the world. With that my singing began to take on a deep significance and great depth. Emotions of quite incredible intensity began to demand an outlet in my voice. I wanted to create — to realize my school room

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<sup>153</sup> Muriel Lee 'Mully' Mathews was a gifted pianist and musician, and a close friend of C. P. Scott, G. B. Shaw, and Charles Ricketts. Her husband was William Lee Mathews (1862-1931), a successful business executive. He was also chairman of the Incorporated Stage Society Producing Committee, of which Shaw had been the preceding chairman. The Stage Society had been formed in 1899 to produce plays of artistic merit that had little chance of performance in commercial theaters. "Mully" Mathews was a member of the society, as was Arnold Bennett, Komisarjevsky, Granville Barker, and T. Sturge Moore. The society produced about two hundred plays until it dissolved in 1939 at the start of World War II.

dream to be an opera general manager. I always believed that if I wish long enough and strong enough, then it will come to me. And so, the dream unexpectedly came to be — but its realization took a very different form than I anticipated.

Oscar Hammerstein the 1<sup>st</sup> was a great operatic impresario. He first became a thorn in the side of the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York when, in opposition to them, he organized the Manhattan Opera Company and had as great stars as the Met, which included singers like Bonci, a young Mary Garden, and many others. So the Met board decided to buy him off. I do not know the exact details of his contract, but we know he received more than a million dollars to relinquish his Manhattan Opera enterprise. To understand such an extraordinary deal one must understand that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century opera was the most glamorous theatrical enterprise — like great film. Today such a deal would have never happened, because opera has become sheer deficit — but not in those days.

Opera was considered difficult, and was the legitimate child — and very loved one — of all the crown heads and nations of Europe. It was deemed a necessity for the cultural life of that country. It was also considered as a great commercial theatre — and there were many famous impresarios who made large fortunes off the bastard child of the theatre: the tour company of Aborn, Gallo's San Carlo, Carl Rosa in England, and Prince Tzeretelli in Russia<sup>154</sup>.

The condition of the contract was that Hammerstein would not give opera in New York for a number of years, so he decided to teach London how to give opera. He built an opera house which he named the London Opera House, and having been victorious in New York confidently launched his Hammerstein Opera Company in London. I attended a number of his performances and saw the American stars Orville Harrold and Felice Lyne. She was truly adorable as Juliette. I stood at the stage door to get a glimpse of her lovely face. Her large dark eyes haunted me for a long time. I will honestly admit I was always romantic and susceptible.<sup>155</sup>

But Hammerstein made a bad miscalculation. He wanted to run the London Opera House as he did the Manhattan, but London conditions were very different. In New York he could draw from a huge cosmopolitan population of opera-loving Italians and Germans, besides Irish. But in London the main paying opera public was the high society — which led a small group of opera goers in London — and the high society was faithful to their own traditions of Covent Garden and refused to patronize Hammerstein. Then to make things quite impossible, he — in his anger — became rude and one day insulted some faction, which put a finishing touch to his million dollars which he received from the Met.

Covent Garden was also closed on account of the war. I heard that I could rent the London Opera House, which Hammerstein had sold and was standing empty. Being young, stupid,

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154 Prince Alexei Tsereteli (1864 St. Petersburg – 1942 Paris) was a successful Russian operatic impresario.

155 Hammerstein received \$1.2 million from Otto Kahn at the Metropolitan to not produce operas in New York for 10 years. He spent much of the money to build his London Opera House, which opened on Nov 13, 1911. Romeo and Juliet opened a 12-week summer season on April 21, 1912. Felice Lyne was Hammerstein's 19-year-old American discovery from Kansas City.

unafraid and ignorant, I became certain that if I could get backing I would make a little fortune.

In a Bridge club I met a charming young English broker. We became friendly over Bridge, and his admiration for my playing Bridge led him to become also enthused about my opera scheme. He gave me £5,000 to add to some little money that I had.<sup>156</sup> I rented boldly the London Opera House (the operatic morgue) and proudly announced to London that I will give them an opera season.

I walked on the air. At last I am an opera director. My childhood dream has been realized. I gathered a fine company and called it the Allied Opera Season. I had important singers of all allied nations: Marguerita Silva, the great Carmen; and I introduced for the first time into operatic history a Japanese prima donna, Tamaki Miura, as Butterfly. She was great, and took London by storm.<sup>157</sup>

I felt very important. I strutted around inspecting the making of scenery, props, etc. I didn't do anything that was helpful, nor understand much, but it felt good to look, and important to inspect. I equally didn't know much of how to run the business end of it, with the result that I spent most of our money on the first three productions and did not leave enough to protect the running of the first week — as I was so confident of the receipts which will give all the money we needed. Everything seemed to have been well thought out except for one thing — the first air raid over London.

We opened the season on a Saturday night [May 15, 1915], and except for a long wait before the second act when machinery got stuck (and I swore like a trooper with words not permissible even to a General Director), the production was a success — in which we all bathed on Sunday. On Monday all went well with the *Lakmé*, which starred Mignon Nevada (daughter of the famous Emma Nevada who came out of that state and took its name).

On Tuesday we were to have a repeat of *The Queen of Spades*. I was lying on my bed resting when from somewhere near I heard the Rachmaninoff *Prelude in C# Minor*. I can't explain why, but suddenly fear gripped me, as if something unpleasant is looking just around the corner. I became depressed, and I attributed that to my disappointment that our box office was not better, but I was sure it will improve. I had an early dinner, and then suddenly without a warning the wailing sound of the first air raid alarm signal pierced the air. Everyone ran into the cellars. In comparison with the future it was a very mild affair, but at that time it was exciting and frightening, the first contact for civilians with the real live ammunition — real war. The raid was over by 7:30, and by 8:30 the curtain went up, but the house was practically empty. Few brave souls dared to come out, being afraid of a second raid.

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<sup>156</sup> Esmond H. Wiley was the likely investor. £5,000 in 1915 would be the equivalent of over \$400,000 in 2009.

<sup>157</sup> Tamaki Miura (1884-1946) was the first Asian woman to play an Asian character in the West. She was an instant sensation. Miura brought Cio-Cio San to the U.S. later in the year, debuting in New York on Oct 29th 1915 with the Boston Opera Company, which ironically was performing at Hammerstein's old Manhattan Opera House. She sang in Butterfly more than 2,000 times during her career.



The next day was *Butterfly* with Tamaki Miura, and the Japanese colony turned out to give her a great welcome, but after that the public stayed at home, and we were forced to close the season at the end of the first week. It was a bitter, bitter disappointment to me, and a total loss of my friend's and my money.

It was a setback for me, my pride, and my growing prestige. There are always ill-wishers, and I know that all people connected with operatic presentation in London were delighted at my fiasco, especially Thomas Beecham, who resented my bringing a Russian operatic work, *The Queen of Spades*, for the first time to England. He felt that he had full monopoly to do so, having brought to England the great Russian production of Diaghilev's ballet and opera.

But I was undaunted. I made some experimentation in production. I thought them good — but wasn't sure. The artistic baby was growing, but it had a jolt. The failure did not harm me, but aroused sympathy and good comments.

### A Political Figure

England needed a strong man. Asquith, the Prime Minister, was too soft. He stepped out to Lloyd George, the lion of the 1<sup>st</sup> war.<sup>158</sup> Sir Alfred Mond was made cabinet minister (Office of Works), and with him as a close friend, Lord Reading and C. P. Scott giving me tremendous publicity and support for all my activities I became not only a celebrity as an artiste but also a political figure whose knowledge of Russian affairs must be listened to.

My connection with the governing circles in London rapidly became amiable — and made me also popular with the Russian Embassy and political circles. For some reason, even the Communist Litvinoff, and friends of Communists, such as Tchicherin, admired me as an artist and made every effort they could to seduce me to their way of thinking.<sup>159</sup>

Fred Gaisberg was in England, making records of artists that were in England, and he took mine from *The Pique Dame* of Tchaikovsky [May 23, 1915]. Those were the last I made for HMV, and began a decade of my artistic and political fame. Within a year I became a celebrity, and probably the most popular singer in London.

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<sup>158</sup> Asquith's coalition government was formed in May 1915 and was announced in the middle of Rosing's Allied Opera Season.

<sup>159</sup> Maxim Litvinov (1876-1951) was a Russian-Jewish revolutionary who had been in exile in London since 1906. He had married Ivy Lowe, an Englishwoman from a prominent Jewish family. Later, under Lenin, Litvinov became the Soviet's official representative in England. In 1930, Stalin appointed him Foreign Minister, and then Ambassador to the United States from 1941-1943. Georgy Chicherin (1872-1936) was a Russian aristocrat who was also a revolutionary. He fled to Western Europe to escape arrest during the Revolution of 1905 and joined the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. The British government arrested him in 1917 for his anti-war activities. Val used his contacts in the British government to help arrange for Chicherin's release and return to Russia. Chicherin then became a Bolshevik and was appointed Commissar for Foreign Affairs, a post he held until 1930 — when he was replaced by Litvinov.

### Summer 1915 — Called Up to the Army

That summer the Tsar announced in an edict that all 2nd Reserves [had to] join the Color. It had never been done since the war with Napoleon in 1812.<sup>160</sup> It meant my immediate return to Russia

It also accentuated the problem for the British Government of what to do with the large Jewish Russian colony in the East End. They considered themselves refugees from the Tsar's persecution of the Jews, and had received for a number of years the hospitality of Great Britain, while still retaining their Russian nationality. They considered themselves enemies of the Tsar's government and refused to fight for him. The British government maintained the position that, as they gave them refuge, it was their duty to join either the British army or go back to Russia — which they refused to do. Meanwhile, it was creating bitterness among Englishman who had to give up their work and their jobs, enter the army, and sacrifice everything — while the Russian Jewish colony prospered on the war efforts.

The Jewish colony was led by a number of Bolshevik agitators. Their leader, Lenin, lived in comfort and safety in Switzerland and guided the agitation from there. Among the leaders in England were Maxim Litvinoff, Tchicherin, and a number of lesser lights.

Litvinoff was proclaiming himself as being a pacifist, yet at that time ironically himself worked in the Tsar's Russian War Commission and was under the pay of the Tsar's government. He was in the drug department, and I tried to obtain for him from the British government medical supplies for the Russian army at low prices — yet the same Litvinoff refused to serve on the committee to help war victims among Russian political refugees. Communists have always two measures: one for them, the other for the others. At the same time he clandestinely led the Bolshevik section, inciting the Jewish colony against Russia and the “imperialistic” war, while at the same time taking hospitality and protection from England, and getting the full benefit materially from the war effort. The situation was extremely explosive in the district which was called Whitechapel.

And so I was again thrown into the political arena to fight the Bolsheviks on a much larger scale than I did in the University. There were constant meetings, and I became known as a pro-Britisher and pro-Tsarist. The first was true. I loved and admired England and its people, and I knew her great generosity, loyalty, and devotion to the cause of freedom. The Bolshevik leaders would heap on my head — as before — every imaginable lie and sarcasm. I was a *dirty bourgeois*, a *leech capitalist* who lived on the sweat of my peasants. I was a *traitor to the Russian workers*. Yes, our debates were terribly bitter — and anti-British feelings ran high.

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<sup>160</sup> The Second Category of the Opolchenie (a kind of Reserve or Home Guard) consisted of untrained men between the ages of twenty-one and forty-three who had been exempted from regular service whether as students, only sons, or as physically unfit. These numbered about 10 million men when the decision was made in the summer of 1915 to call them up. The decision was widely viewed as an admission of Russia's desperation. The Opolchenie had only twice been called up, in 1812 to fight Napoleon and in 1854 for the Crimean War.

In August I had to leave the debate and go to St. Petersburg (now Petrograd) to arrange official appointment to the Serbian Red Cross. The Serbian government had requested my service from the Russian War Ministry to be officially delegated to the Serbian Red Cross, as my services were indispensable. I was very proud and happy over such a request, as it was unsolicited by me. And to show the Russian government my importance for the Serbian Red Cross they [later] decorated me with a high Serbian order for saving thousands of Serbs from starvation.<sup>161</sup>

### **“Train! Train!”**

This was an exciting journey. The only way to get to Russia from London was by the North Sea on a British ship.<sup>162</sup> It was under the attack of German submarines. Rumors went around that German submarines had a habit of stopping the British ships, taking off male passengers belonging to their enemies, and then letting the ship go — because the other men were all German spies. I was in luck, and though I hid myself for 36 hours in some kind of a hold, our ship wasn't stopped. It was a great relief to finally reach a neutral country.

In Norway there were no wagon restaurants,<sup>163</sup> and the passengers were obliged to take their meals at certain stations announced beforehand. A magnificent smörgåsbord was laid out before the hungry and greedy eyes of the passengers. Unfortunately, my embassy wanted to make use of me to the fullest extent, and gave me a number of dispatches, under oath of never letting them out of my hands — and they had extracted a promise that I would keep them by my side all of the time. It resulted in a pitiful lunch, as one of my hands was occupied by guarding the dispatches. With the other, I made a negligible fight to obtain food against the hordes of hungry passengers. The result was that by the time dinner arrived I was ravenously hungry. I decided that I would lock my dispatches in my compartment and would have both hands free to fight for my food.

At the buffet station, I met a friend who was coming from Russia. It was an amazing coincidence. He was giving me all the latest news, and occupied with his interesting news

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<sup>161</sup> The five classes of Order of St. Sava were primarily awarded for services rendered in the sciences or arts and letters, and for relief or social work. Recipients of the honor included Helen Keller. The award was extended to include military service during the First World War. St. Sava was the son of a Serbian king in the 13th century who renounced his right to the throne, entered a monastery, and devoted his life instead to relief work and the founding of institutions of learning. The Serbian motto on the badge said ‘By His Labours He Acquired All.’ Val was awarded the Order of St. Sava Fifth Class; the medal was made Arthus-Bertrand of Paris.

<sup>162</sup> In pre-war times the direct way to Russia from Western Europe was by rail through Berlin, a pleasant journey of a few days. Val's tortuous route took at least a week, going first by steamer from Newcastle-on-Tyne in Scotland across the submarine infested North Sea to Bergen, Norway. From there it was overland by rail to Christiania (now called Oslo), then across in Sweden and up the entire length of the country on the “Lapland Express” to Haparanda, which is at the top of the Gulf of Bothnia near the Arctic Circle. A ferry had to be taken across the river at the Finnish border to Tornea. The rest of the way was traveled by rail, down the entire length of Finland to the Russian border, and on to St. Petersburg.

<sup>163</sup> Wagon restaurants are dining cars on the train.

review — and my appeasing of my hunger — I neglected to check the time passing by. When the restaurant manager rushed to me and said, “Zug zug!” I looked through the window and to my horror saw the rear of my train leaving the platform.<sup>164</sup>

I rushed to the platform hoping to stop the train. I raced down the platform with all the speed my body was capable of towards the train. I yelled at the conductor, who was standing on the rear of the train laughing at me — shouting, yelling in every language I could muster. I ran for about half a mile at least. Then I decided that I could get a car and race more efficiently to the train at the next station. I turned around, and with hardly any breath left I ran to the other end of the platform — and found that I was racing the wrong train, as my train was switched onto another platform and was standing there waiting for me.

I was the laughing stock of the train, but my dispatches were safe. While I was running — trying to catch the wrong train — I prayed to God with all of the religion that was in me to help me catch it, and when I had to give up, I must admit that I was guilty of passing an unkind remark to God for not letting me catch the train.<sup>165</sup>

### A Sad Farewell

I found Petrograd very different from the St. Petersburg I left four years previously. Gloom pervaded everywhere. Food was scarce. A violent epidemic of flu was raging. To make things worse, I was a messenger of tragic news to my sister Vera. Bertie, Marie's brother whom Vera married, was killed in the Dardanelles.<sup>166</sup> It was a terrible thing to [have to] do.

Everything seemed to disintegrate. Natalia was dying from a strep infection of the liver. Aunt Matilda was in terrible distress. Father wasn't feeling well. And Liuba and her husband were on the point of divorce. It was a sad reunion after four years.<sup>167</sup>

The Russian army was retreating, and no one knew how and when the German advance could be stopped. The streets were full of beggars and soldiers that had nowhere to go. The war minister, Suchomlinoff, was accused of betraying the Russian army, was imprisoned, and

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<sup>164</sup> “Zug! Zug!” in German means “Train! Train!”

<sup>165</sup> Arthur Brown Ruhl published a book called “White Nights” in 1917, an account of his journey to Russia during the same period as Val's last trip. Ruhl's comments help explain why Val had the experience he did: “Swedish trains do not whistle or ring a bell when they leave a station, but steal away like an Arab. ... One of our party was thus left on the platform in a remote village staring at the sunset.”

<sup>166</sup> The deadly Dardanelles Campaign on the Gallipoli peninsula was still going on. It lasted from April 1915 to January 1916. The Allies wanted to take Istanbul and to control the waterway into the Black Sea to facilitate getting supplies to the Russian Eastern Front. There were over 44,000 Allied forces killed and nearly twice that many Turks, but the Turks still prevailed and forced the Allies to withdraw.

<sup>167</sup> The Rosings had moved to 6 Solyanoy Pereulok in 1913. They owned the building, located on a small street behind the old Law School, across the small canal from the fashionable Summer Garden.

his aide, who used to come often to our house, was hung.<sup>168</sup> The Tsaritsa was accused of being pro-German and wanting a separate peace. Rasputin was at the height of his power. He dominated the Tsar through his uncanny influence on the Tsaritsa. His orgies became more and more offensive. In disgust, the aristocracy began to turn away from the Tsar. Alienation was reaching even his own family.

The Tsaritsa, blind to the rising storm around her, was obsessed by spiritual and religious fanaticism, adoring the “messenger of God” — the disreputable dirty monk Rasputin. Nothing more fantastic or idiotic ever happened in the history of the world. This degenerate illiterate monster literally ruled Russia — advised and appointed ministers, predicted false events of the future, [was] eagerly listened to by the Royal Family, and made decisions for the Tsar as if it was given to him from God — and those nice poor pathetic souls believed everything he said, refusing to believe anything that was said against him. The horrible scandal spread throughout Russia, shocking people. The illiterate monk was the ruler in Russia, and the equally illiterate peasants were prey to political propaganda.

But in those days the entire strength of the country was being mobilized in the Liberal party, and the minor Socialist Bolsheviks had a very tiny voice. Besides, their Duma section was discredited and disgraced by its leader and friend of Lenin, Malinowsky, who was exposed to be a police agent provocateur. The Royalists were still loyal to the Tsar, but were revolting against the Tsaritsa. The patriotic Mensheviks and solid Liberals were trying to save Russia.

My two months spent in Petrograd let me see that the artistic life was strong. The government, realizing the power of music and theater, exempted all artists from military service. The theatrical life was not interrupted. The life was most depressing in Petrograd, though the theatres were full and privation had not yet hit the town.

I visited my alma mater, the Music Drama, and saw again most of my comrades. They were worried, and envied me for being in London. The tenor, A-----, it seems had mended his ways and was having a hot affair with a very attractive girl from the Ballet. All my little flirtations and romances also had made romantic and marital changes. Everyone was warm and friendly. All the same, I felt already an outsider.

I went to my university but found that most of my Liberal comrades [had] finished and were practicing law or in the Army. Comrade Abram had become an ensign in the Army, spreading there his poisonous propaganda. My Liberal leader, Gerasimov, was also in the Army. In four years of absence so much had changed — and all for the worse. Still, there was no revolution in the air.

There was a great amount of discontent in the liberal circles, and very open criticism among the members of the Duma of the Tsar's circles — especially that of the Tsaritsa. She was openly accused of being pro-German and of betraying the Russian army. But it was never thought of when I was there that a revolt was brewing to demand the abdication of the Tsar.

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<sup>168</sup> Vladimir Sukhomlinov was relieved of his post as Minister of War in June 1915. His close associate Colonel Miasoedov was convicted of being a German spy and executed. The evidence for the case continues to be controversial.

St. Petersburg was wallowing in political filth: pro-German traitors around the Tsaritsa, royalists still loyal to the Tsar but revolting against the Tsaritsa, the filth party of low down vultures around Rasputin. From the left the Bolsheviks were also creating mud, or rather a kind of slime of the head. The patriotic Mensheviks were solid liberals who were trying to save Russia.

I was selfishly glad when all my papers were in order, and I was able to leave St. Petersburg.<sup>169</sup> My father and mother came to see me off. It was a sad farewell — as if we had a pre-sentiment that we should never see each other again. I was leaving a tragic country — how terribly tragic no one could have guessed — and of the tens of millions whose life was closing to an end, how extraordinary that fate chose to spare me all the ghastly suffering that I would have had to endure in years to come. As the train pulled out of Finland Station (that same station which will greet the arrival of Lenin) I waved goodbye to my parents.<sup>170</sup> There were tears in all of our eyes. The curtain came down for me on my old beloved Russia, and it lifted on great years in London.

In the next compartment sat a middle-aged man with a bristling moustache reading a book. To my amazement, I found that that book was a medieval score. He was the great Russian conductor Safonoff, going to London to conduct symphony concerts.<sup>171</sup> We liked each other and became friends, and planned to meet again to do great symphonic concerts in London and in the provinces in aid of Serbian prisoners of war.<sup>172</sup>

I still had an unpleasant journey to make through the North Sea, but hoped my luck would hold. Again I escaped the German submarines, and arrived in a foggy cold-but-friendly London. And thus I escaped the great holocaust which was to burst open over Russia so unexpectedly.

### April 1916 — At the Front

I had a large assignment: to feed 60,000 Serbian prisoners of war in Germany. The British government made all the practical arrangements for me. Living now in safety (and even luxury) in England I felt I should at least acquaint myself with the living conditions at the front, and [as] I was being sent by the Serbian Red Cross to Switzerland to organize the

<sup>169</sup> Val's passport indicates that he left Russia at the end of September 1915.

<sup>170</sup> Finland Station is the station which would greet the arrival of Vladimir Lenin upon his triumphant return to St. Petersburg on the night on April 3, 1917.

<sup>171</sup> Vasily Safonoff (1852-1918) made annual trips to England to conduct, and did not let even the war disrupt his artistic schedule. From 1906 to 1909 he had been conductor of the New York Philharmonic, succeeded in that post by none other than Gustav Mahler. Safonoff, the son of a Russian Cossack officer, was unusual for his habit of conducting without a baton.

<sup>172</sup> Val gave the first benefit concert to aid starving Serbian woman and children on Dec 15, 1915 — in which Safonoff participated. A year later, on December 19, 1916 he produced and performed in another benefit concert for the benefit of Serbia. Safonoff also conducted in this concert.

transmission of food, I begged Sir Alfred to take me with him to inspect the front.<sup>173</sup> Marie went directly to Switzerland and was to meet me in Geneva.

I was accompanying Sir Alfred, who came to inspect the front line, and in our enthusiasm [we] went a little too far ahead. There was a tremendous explosion. It seemed as if the entire world shook. All of us, petrified, ducked into a protective trench. When the sound of the explosion died down, cries of agony filled the air. The medic rushed to help the wounded. Sir Alfred took me firmly by the arm. "Let's get out," he said in a trembling voice. "Being killed won't help the war."

From my infancy and childhood I could not stand suffering — or even killing a fly — and here I was with death all around — with mental, moral, and physical suffering permeating every foot of the ground. I was selfishly glad to get away. What I have seen in the last two days has filled me with horror, pity, and hatred for Kaiser Wilhelm who provoked this dreadful war and plunged the world into a period of unimaginable (and at that time unpredictable) hell.

Sir Alfred and I crawled toward our car and breathed a sigh of relief as the distance between us and the front line began to increase. At the same time over me came a feeling of terrible selfishness and cowardice. At that minute I would have enjoyed to blow out Kaiser Wilhelm's brains.

Sir Alfred dropped me at a station, and finally after waiting several hours I got the train for Geneva.

Geneva was the center of espionage and counter espionage and of every imaginable kind of intrigue. Terrible red tape. Bureaucracy. No one trusted anyone. After beating my head at many doors, I finally was sent to Baron Z [in Berne], who was forming a neutral committee to execute our project. It is not a small matter to feed 60,000 people a day, especially when the prices for food was rising, criminally pushed by war profiteers. The parasites must live and fatten on other people's agonies. Fortunately, Berne was a little saner town than Geneva.

### **May 1916 — The Desire to Kill**

My wife and I boarded the train in Berne and had a second-class compartment to ourselves. At the next stop two men and two women boarded the train and invaded our privacy. They all were shabbily dressed and obviously belonged to the Russian intelligentsia class. They were discussing some political debate they attended. I further classified them as political emigrant refugees.

As I met my wife in the day when I didn't know English, our courtship was done in French. We often spoke by habit both languages. The intruders on the other hand spoke Russian. One face seemed familiar, but I could not place it.

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<sup>173</sup> Sir Alfred Mond (Lord Melchett) was a prominent member of the Liberal War Committee, and later that year became the First Commissioner of Works when David Lloyd George took over as Prime Minister.

After a while they began to discuss us. What intrigued them was our speaking in two languages. They debated that point. One said we were French, but the other said, *no, no, we speak too good an English, and for English we speak perfect French.*

Then, the two ladies turned their attention on my wife. One said *she was very pretty*. The other disagreed, because *the face was too pale — besides the feet were too large*. The man with the familiar face interrupted this critical outburst and said that *the ladies should be careful of what they say — because maybe we are Russian*. At that I lifted my hat and said *this time their guess was correct*.

The woman who was so critical became terribly confused — apologized — but we gushed laughter and made her feel at ease. After a few preliminary polite phrases, we began to introduce ourselves. The man with the familiar face introduced his party as *Mr. and Mrs. Zinoviev, my wife, Krupskaya, and I, my name is Lenin*.

Now I knew, now I recognized the hateful cruel Mongolian slightly slanted eyes, the little beard, the receding forehead. It was Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik party. Lenin, of whom Plekhanov (first teacher of Marxism in Russia) had said, "Of this dough Robespierres are made."

I had never met Lenin, but I hated him as much as I hated the Tsar's counselors. I can't explain the feeling of fear that came over me. *Why? Why? He never did me any harm.*

Suddenly, instead of the people before me, I saw dozens of mutilated bodies lying in the city square, a broken carriage, the torn carcasses of horses. I could hear cries of agony as the sound of exploding bombs died away and the robbers escaped with their loot.

The robbery of the bank in Tiflis in 1907, staged by an unknown man (later identified as Stalin) was what Lenin had called *justifiable expropriation*. In spite of the edict passed by the great majority of the Social Democratic Party forbidding such robberies, Lenin had sanctioned the act and had used the money for the benefit of the Bolshevik party and his own needs.<sup>174</sup>

Among those killed was my school chum, Lieutenant Suloev, who was in command of the escort delivering the money to the bank — dear Sascha — such a good looking fine young officer, darling of the ladies, bright and gay, and who was so happy with his assignment, who went unsuspectingly gaily on his assignment, not suspecting that his life was ending. When the news reached me I could not believe it. Already, I disliked the Bolsheviks for their conceited air of superiority, their arrogance, and cruel views. That disdain turned into hate that day. Now — eight years later — fate had placed me opposite the instigator, the sanctionist of that horrible massacre as if by assignment. I wanted to kill that man.

How right Plekhanov was when he saw the likeness of Robespierre in Lenin. How many thousands of lives might have been saved during the French Revolution had someone killed Robespierre in the early stages of that revolution? But who knew that the little lawyer from

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<sup>174</sup> The robbery netted the Bolsheviks several hundred thousand roubles, a sum which funded their activities for some time.



Arris would have the power to drown the French Revolution in a sea of blood? Yet I knew that this man opposite me was grasping at the same power.

I am sure at some time or another in almost every one of us exists the desire to kill. When this submerged desire rises to the surface of consciousness, takes possession of our thoughts, nerves and muscles, we are in danger of committing a crime. It is opposed to my nature to kill a fly; I would first go to any length to help it escape from its predicament. For snakes, scorpions and black widows I have less compassion, but again, I would rather give chase than to kill. This seems to contradict the fact that on at least two occasions I have been insanely possessed with a great desire to take a human life.

It was in St. Petersburg in January of 1905 that the first such impulse possessed me. That memory of the Red Sunday had grown dim when a number of years later in London I met Prince Yussopoff, the man who had killed Rasputin. His faithful attendance at my concerts had led to a close friendship between us. One day he showed me the great masterpieces of art which he had smuggled out of Communist Russia. When he unfolded one of the pictures he said, "This picture looked upon the killing of Rasputin." Then he related the details of that incredible murder which had required poison, bullets, and drowning for its accomplishment. It was murder, yet one cannot question that the motive was to save the throne, to save hundreds of women whom Rasputin was despoiling with his insatiable passion, and to save Russia from a dishonorable peace with Germany. Listening to his story, it was difficult to believe that this handsome delicate young aristocrat had been able to soil his hands with the blood of another person — yet I almost envied him that opportunity.

And then I suddenly realized that if I were to accept such rationalization, I had the opportunity to perform an even greater service — not only to Russia, but to the entire free world. This was a moment I could use to change the course of history, to prevent additional Tiflis massacres, to save the people from the enslaving ideology of Communism.

At the moment I was a master of destiny. My feelings I had during the Red Sunday massacre came over me, and as if by long forgotten habit my hand went into the pocket where I used to carry a revolver. I found there only a pencil and some coins — the revolver was in my bag.

I got up, brought down my bag, and sneaked the revolver into my pocket. I felt better. Just at that moment the four resumed their debate on the question of socialism in Germany, France, and England. The voices in the compartment became background music for the drama I was ready to enact.

Lenin was laying down the law on the question of Socialists in Germany, France, and England who had voted for the war budget. He was saying, "They are traitors to the workers. Instead of staging a revolt in creating a revolution against an imperialistic war, they lick the boots of bourgeois governments. This war must be turned into a world revolution. It is the opportunity for Bolshevism to completely destroy the bourgeois class and the puppet socialists who support them. We must install dictatorship of the proletariat and wipe out capitalism once and for all."

He was looking at me with his piercing eyes as though he were making the speech for my benefit. There was disdain in that look, the same disdain I had read in the eyes of Comrade Abram, my Bolshevik rival on the University Student Council. I, as deputy of the Liberal Party, had fought bitterly with him for three years. In his eyes there had been the same fanaticism, unscrupulousness, and lack of principle. I could remember his dogma, that *always the end justifies the means*.

Could I have been aware, as I sat opposite Lenin, that Abram would one day become his Commander-in-Chief under the name of Krylenko... Could I have known that he would become a prosecuting attorney in the first purge trials, where he would condemn his own comrades (including Zinoviev, who now sat eating a piece of chocolate)... Could I have known these things, it might have given greater courage to the moment. Here was my great chance to save the world from any danger of Communism.

My hand instinctively went to my pocket and held the revolver. Just a little more courage, a little more determination, a little more faith that I was getting rid of danger for Russia — when suddenly the spell of hate was broken by Lenin. He said, “So, you are a tenor. Good, very good, I love tenors. Zinoviev's cousin is a very good tenor also. But when Zinoviev sings himself — and he just loves doing it — it sounds like battle of tomcats.”

He laughed. So did the women — and I joined them. He proceeded to imitate Zinoviev. I came back to my senses. My impulse was gone. An impulse that at that time would have been acclaimed as an act of futile madness — but history might have been changed.

The train was coming into Lausanne. The quartet hastily gathered its suitcases, wished us a quick farewell, and laughingly departed.

A number of years later when the beautiful Dora Kaplan carried through with such an impulse — wounding Lenin with a shot from her revolver — it was too late. Lenin was in power, and in revenge a dreadful wave of terror was unleashed in which thousands upon thousands were shot in the cellars of the Soviet secret police.

Yes, I had the opportunity — and I muffed it. I lost it. I fucked up.

### **“Madame, it’s the Madman!”**

At that period a recital singer was very formal. [He stood with] a stiff immobile back, immaculately dressed in tails — or a Prince Edward with a carnation in his lapel if it was an afternoon concert — wearing white gloves, patent leather shoes, and [holding] — God knows why — a little black book in his hand containing the words of each song. I used it only for the addresses of admiring females.

What helped me a great deal in reaching the peak of fame in London was that I had no competition from any other singers from any other countries. The English market was closed to the singers of France, America, and naturally Germany and Austria. But I happened to be there, and therefore was extremely welcome, with no competition offered. As my popularity grew, so did my repertoire. In one season I gave twenty-five recitals in London alone.

As I began my recital career at the age of 23, I soon came to the artistic conclusion that one cannot sing with the same pure tenor quality of voice the “Dream of Manon,” “Chevelure” or “L’Invitation” of Debussy and Duparc as the “Song of the Irish Starving Peasant” or the “Song of the Village Idiot (Savishna).”

Being a rebel against every old outworn form and tradition, I immediately began to break them for the concert stage. It was fairly gradual. First I discarded the white gloves, the buttonhole adornment, and the little black book. Next, I developed vocal colors, to paint in sound every character and human emotion. To achieve that I had to find a new body technique, and when I achieved that, I discarded the tails and accepted a lovely black velvet jacket designed and made by Monsieur Poiret, the Dior of that period.

The great change in me from a singer of high notes to a great interpreter of song naturally took many months of work and thought. A very outstanding natural voice was getting dramatic and dark under the Sbriglia method, which I faithfully continued with the help of Marie. I developed a tremendous central voice, and high notes up to Bb, but nothing higher. I developed a stunning pianissimo, performed extraordinary acrobatics of lyric singing, but had no real mezzo voce — so some songs I sang like no one, and others I avoided.

So I was obliged to shift my songs to songs demanding vocal color and interpretation, which I mostly found in Moussorgsky’s *Two Grenadiers*, Schubert’s *Ich Grolle Nicht*, *Der Erbkönig*, Mephisto’s *Song of the Flea*, the marvelous *Death Cycle*, *Famine* of Cesar Cui, *Savishna* (the Village Idiot Love Song), Moussorgsky’s *Goat*, etc.

They were extraordinary, so different from anything I had ever sung before, requiring a new concept, a new approach to singing, to voice — songs that demanded sacrifice of beauty of tone to portray the true emotion, where singer became a painter in vocal color of human emotion. The problem thrilled me — the problem that opened a new world in singing, where high notes were only meant for the height of emotion they had to portray.

One day I went to the music shop Chester, who represented all the Russian composers, finding songs appropriate to the subject.<sup>175</sup> I was surrounded by a mountain of discarded music. It was at Chester where I ran into the problems of interpretation that were beyond the sphere of a pretty tenor — how to do the songs justice. The first time I was faced with this problem came when I discovered the comparatively unknown Mussorgsky masterpiece “Savishna.” I tried to sing it as a tenor because of the French proverb *stupid as a tenor*. But the traditional postures of a *tenor parfumé* just did not fit Mussorgsky’s music of an idiot.

Then the question, not of what to do, but how to do it resolved itself. Suddenly I got the idea that state of mind produces a corresponding reaction on the nerves of the body, which in turn reacts on the muscles and joints, producing motion and shape. The deduction followed: if the state of mind reacts on parts of the body controlling shape and movement, it must react also in the nerves controlling and producing sound.

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175 J. & W. Chester at 11 Great Marlborough St. W. billed themselves as the “Central Depot for Russian Music.”

When this far-reaching idea was born in my mind, I was sitting prosaically on a London bus on my way to Piccadilly Circus. No sooner did this exciting thought take shape — being an extrovert with a highly developed power of concentration — I immediately put it to the test then and there amidst all the passengers of the bus. The result obtained was instantaneous. As I filled my mind with emptiness and chaos, my body sagged and my features drooped. With vacant eyes and half open mouth, I sang a few phrases of the song and found that my voice took the silliest sound imaginable. I made myself look and feel an idiot. My face sagged. I had an idiotic meaningless smile on my face. My brain was empty. It seemed to swirl around. My entire body seemed to have lost control or steadiness, and was wobbly and shaky. I did that with thought and conviction of my nervous system — by living it. The conviction was so great that I *became* a village idiot in a fraction of a second — and retained the character that I sung. I was elated with my experiment and I knew I had found the key to a new style of singing. The key was to color the voice by becoming the character bodily, since you cannot completely feel the character and react with your voice without the same process taking place in your muscles. I was so delighted that I was completely oblivious of the reaction on my fellow passengers. A woman next to me changed her seat.

The following Sunday I went to have tea at a friend's house. To my amazement, when the maid opened the door, she ran to the mistress of the house screaming, "Madame, it's the madman! It's the madman!" When it was explained to her that I was not a dangerous lunatic, but just a tenor, she quieted down, and it came to light that she had been sitting next to me on the bus the day I was making great discoveries in interpretation — and she had changed seats. When she reached home, she had told how frightened she was when she found herself sitting next to a madman who was making terrible faces and gestures and who started to sing like an idiot.

*Song of Death* presented a different problem. I had to create a death mask that would instantaneously change to a living person and back to death. They had to be done so sincerely as to never a doubt in the audience that you're living the situation. Each song became an interpretive problem, and a masterpiece of vocal painting.

### **I Sang as if I Was Possessed**

My first recital in the new series was to be called *The Soul of Russia* — as expressed in the music of her great composers, their Satire, Love, Comedy, Religion, and Politics — 24 songs in all. It was a wonderful programme, and I would say the best I ever constructed. The idea must have appealed to the public because for the first time the house was standing room only.

One has to be a conceited artist not to appreciate seeing that beautiful *Sold Out* sign at the entrance to the hall. Anyway, I did. It was a sad day about two years later when the war was over, and London was flooded by singers from the Continent, and I was not the only one in London. The sign disappeared, and I had to share the public proportionately — but I shall never forget the thrill of seeing the stage filled with extra chairs and people standing in the aisles.

The first [song] of the new style on the programme was *Savishna*. A gasp went through the audience when I made I made my physical transformation and then with the change of my voice sang *The Village Idiot*.

One of my great admirers (who thought that I could do no wrong) was the famous English painter Charles Ricketts. He never missed a single concert — always reserved the aisle seat in the second row. When a song especially pleased him, he would shout at the top of his voice, “Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!” three times to let me know that I must repeat the song. I was listening for that “Bravo!” when I finished *Savishna* — as it would tell me if my innovation got across. The impact on the audience must have been so startling that at first *Savishna* was greeted with absolute silence — and then Ricketts’ “Bravo!” came like a thunder. He stood up, he screamed, and the audience followed him. I myself was so deeply moved that tears came to my eyes. It took me a little while to recover. I had to sing it three times. Equal ovations greeted *The Flea* and the *Death Cycle*, which ended the programme.

It was an evening of triumph — unforgettable — an evening when for me a new art of interpretation was [introduced] in singing. That night, from an emotional singer I became the great interpreter, the painter of human emotion in the sound of my voice. My best compliment came that night came from an English lady who came to the green room after the concert and said to me “You were wonderful — but the village idiot suits you best.” What could I say to that, except say “Thank you.”

At my next recital I went one step further. I had found a song by an unknown composer, Nevstruev, called *Song of the Poor Wanderer* — a brilliantly conceived and written composition, rarely performed. It is a tragic picture of the year of famine in Russia. The composer takes an allegorical figure through a series of miniature pictures as he wanders through the steppes of Russia, where he hears the wind howling, “Wanderer, it is cold... it is cold.” Through the forests where the wolves are crying, “Wanderer, we are hungry... we are hungry.” Through the fields of wheat which are moaning, “Wanderer, we are cold... we are cold.” Among the cattle on the range who are mooing, “Wanderer, we are cold and hungry.” And when he reaches the village, a starving peasant cries, “I am hungry, Wanderer, I am hungry.” I spent hours analyzing and visualizing, bending the body to get the right sound for the wind, the wolves, wheat, cows and starving peasant.

I expanded the locale of my research to wherever I happened to be. I was a nuisance at home and abroad, but it paid off. I was excited and elated in the anticipation of singing this song. I completely lost myself in the song — in the kaleidoscope of pictures that I was portraying. The audience gasped at the incredible variety of tones that came out of my throat. Instead of the pretty tenor, in front of them stood the suffering of Russia. I received a standing ovation. The break with the old tradition of concert singing was complete.

From then on, I always had one or two groups of songs that were strictly interpretive and colorful, which included many tragic songs in English. I made popular *Lord Randall* and *The Irish Famine Song*. *The Song of the Flea*, *The Volga Boatman*, *The Drunken Miller* and *The Goat* were songs that I introduced in England and, since they had mostly been composed for baritones and basses, I had to transpose them.

As I developed as a singer, I soon became the most exciting one on the market. Bernard Shaw, who was still writing on music, wrote several flattering articles, and I was acclaimed generally in the press as a sensational singer and a rival of Chaliapin. Some felt that my interpretations of Russian song were superior to his.

They called my singing unique, great, and sensational. There were a few others, the purists in singing, who thought my singing ugly, distorted. I became unique — but not to everyone's liking. Taste is a peculiar thing. I have heard people rave about singers I would not listen twice to. But even those purists, after hearing me the second time, fell prey to my extraordinary magnetism — that made even the *wrong* sound with my voice sound *right*. I really believed I had a message I was bringing to the English people a better understanding of the Russian nation.

Some of the songs I sang as if I was possessed. Nothing fazed me. I loved making faces — as much as Mussorgsky loved writing songs about a village idiot, flea, goat, old man marrying a young girl, etc. As soon as I would find a song that gave me an opportunity to ham, off I would run to my accompanist — and I am sure that even Mussorgsky in his wildest imagination did not expect to find such a crazy singer capable and willing to do such crazy things with his body and his voice to portray masterpieces.

I came to the conclusion that singing depends not only on sound but also on coloring of mind, of the nervous system. The song first of all must convey to the listener the message of the poet, his precise pictures of the poem he had in his mind. The translation of these pictures into the melodic and musical idiom by the composer, and bringing it to life through the vibration of the voice of the singer, stirs the vibration of the listener.

My concerts grew, my popularity grew, and my enemies grew — who felt that I threw away the rules of classical singing for the sake of dramatic effect — but I did not care. I knew I was right. I knew that those great songs required a new vocal technique, a new style which will give the singer the possibility of interpreting them correctly.

### September 1916 — The Monster Zeppelin

The life for us artists was gay during the first war. The weekend parties in country homes continued as usual. Giving a few days relief to the men at the front, we used to get the benefit of entertaining them as much as was possible. Life was gay, social, uninterrupted.

I saw two Zeppelin raids on London. It threw London into a panic, but it was a child's play in comparison to the Nazi raids later on; and yet London survived with only a few scars and stands more dignified, and more beautiful and lovable than ever. In the first war, people were not afraid of air raids. They were small — in isolated places.

One night as we were having a sumptuous dinner in Coombe Bank House of Robert Mond (brother of Alfred Mond, Minister of Works in Lloyd George's Cabinet) the alarm blew.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Coombe Bank was the country home of Robert Mond (1867-1938). The house was the center of a distinguished literary, scientific, and political circle. It is likely that Rosing was a frequent guest there as much for his knowledge of politics as for his artistic merits. Robert Mond was a chemist, and founder of Imperial Chemical Industries. Mond sometimes used the 27-acre grounds of Combe Bank to try out new explosives. He was also a serious archeologist, with a sizable collection of Egyptian artifacts, many of which now reside in the British Museum. He was knighted in 1932. Robert's brother, Alfred Mond (aka Lord Melchett), was a liberal Member of

We all rushed to the roof instead of the cellar. The sky was illuminated with searchlight trying to locate the monster Zeppelin on his way to London. It suddenly found him and he became clear in the deep blue sky approaching London. The guns began their songs.

A silver speck appeared in the darkness — an English plane. He showered the huge Zeppelin with explosive bullets. One found its mark. A flame appeared. In a few seconds the Zeppelin was on fire, breaking in two, falling to the ground, with little dots — what we believed to be human beings — falling down too, living their last moment on earth. It was a dreadful sight, and one could not help feeling compassion for those men though they were German, though they came to hurt us. The searchlight accompanied the Zeppelin to the last moment of its existence when it fell to the ground. The fire engines were already there extinguishing its fire. There were a few explosions, but as it fell on an empty field outside London, it didn't do any damage.<sup>177</sup> We all went back to the dinner table, but somehow the atmosphere was less gay. War close by is not so glamorous. It will become even less glamorous. Oh, for a peace that will really end all wars.

After dinner came first the usual cigars, and then music. I did my share to excite hatred of Germans. I did that with the greatest conviction in my life. Funny, only the other day I sang some German song to rouse love and admiration for them forty years later. How often do we change. Why? For what? Must we always be puppets to our stupid selfish politicians?

### Sergeant Day

Every time we left London to go for a concert we had to get a police permit at a London station for exit, then register at the town of our destination, and after the concert get a permit of leaving, and report at the London station on arrival. If the Sergeant at the desk was not too busy, then the red tape was not bad, but if he had other business to attend, that much time was lost.

As my popularity grew, I received an invitation to sing at the Police Benefit Concert in Queens Hall. I was delighted, as first of all I like the English police, and secondly it would make me known in the force and facilitate my constantly getting exit permits. In France, I used to slip a few francs for speed, but in England that was unnecessary if the Sergeant at the desk knew you.

On that day [before the benefit concert], I was late for the train and in a great hurry. The sergeant was an obstinate red-haired Irishman — Sergeant Day — new to the station. For some reason, as may be for many, he took a dislike to me and in rude manner told me to wait, as he was busy with a complicated case of an Irish girl. Three times I interrupted him, saying that I have a concert in Hull that night, will miss my train and be in a mess. Every time he told

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Parliament. Alfred Mond's daughter, Eva, married Rufus Isaac's son, Gerald. Eva Reading took an interest in Val and helped introduce him to members of society. Isaacs (aka Lord Reading) was Lord Chief Justice of England 1913-1921 and Ambassador to the United States 1918-1919. The Isaacs and Mond families were Jewish.

<sup>177</sup> The zeppelin that guests at Coombe Bank watched being shot down was LZ74, which was intercepted by a British fighter pilot over Great Burstead in Essex on Sunday night, Sept 24, 1916.

me to wait my turn; finally on the third time of my interruption he lost his temper, took me by the collar and threw me bodily out, slammed the door and warned me to keep out.

My pride and dignity were outraged. I telephoned the incident to Scotland Yard and told them that I was leaving for Hull without an exit permit, and that I have no intention to sing for their concert in Queens Hall the following day.

On my return next day to London, I found a great basket of flowers from the Minister of the Police, begging me to reconsider my decision of not appearing at the concert and of accepting a humble apology from Sergeant Day at the concert before I sing.

I naturally went to Queens Hall, and the minister himself brought in the much-chastised Sergeant Day. Before he had time to say a word, I hugged him and said, "Sergeant Day, I must apologize for interrupting your work yesterday." Everyone laughed and the incident was closed.

The Sergeant and I became good friends from then on; so did the minister, who from then on consulted me on different Russians in London and their political integrity, for many devoted anti-communists began to change colors and became Red, damaging the Allied intervention which the Whites were instigating and supporting.

### **February 1917 — I Was Right, But Was Called A Fool**

In February 1917 the liberals and moderate socialists overthrew the Tsar. I was at that time in London as member of the Committee for the Repatriation of Political Exiles. We had Litvinov and Tchicherin and Maisky representing the Communists and Internationalists. Ten days after the February revolution I predicted to my comrades that unless immediate measures are taken there will be a Bolshevik uprising.

Having a small influence with the British government, I advised Lord Reading, Lord Melchet and Lloyd George to place at the disposal of the provisional government some British troops to bolster the Russian Front and support the democratic government of Russia against the Bolshevik party. It was turned down as a crazy idea — yet a year later the allies sent troops to support the White Armies. It was too late.

I state that the communist uprising in October 1917 would have failed had we allowed troops to help the defense of the legal government.

In September 1917, when it was obvious to me that Kerensky's government cannot survive without the allies' help — and as that was refused already in June — my one hope was the immediate separate peace with Germany, to beat the Communists at their own strategy. I cabled Kerensky from London, begging him to do so. I never found out what he thought about my cable, but no action was taken. Separate peace would have placed the army on the side of the Provisional Government and defeated the Communists, and given time to establish democracy in Russia.

When in October the Bolshevik party usurped by force power in Russia, to avoid civil war and its horrors I was willing to work with them. All my party comrades, including Miliukov



and Kerensky, were convinced that the Bolsheviks would be overthrown in six weeks and that the National Constitutional Assembly will restore democracy. I held that, like the Romanoffs, they who held by force all the vital center of Russia to war and rails will hold power indefinitely. Again I was right, but was called a fool.

I wanted to give the Bolsheviks a chance. My comrades would then answer — which Lenin hoped — that “Lenin will form a coalition government and we may still see a democratic Russia under a socialistic regime.” So when Trotsky demanded the release of Tchicherin, who was at that time — November 1917 — in Briston prison, arrested by the British government for peace propaganda, and Lord Cecil, Deputy Prime Minister, refused to liberate him, I went to see Lloyd George and persuaded him to release Tchicherin.<sup>178</sup>

In January 1918, M.P. [Joseph] King<sup>179</sup> asked Bonar Law in the House of Commons if there was a meeting between me and Lloyd George at which the question of liberating Tchicherin was discussed. Bonar Law denied that such a meeting took place — but it did take place.

Soon I realized that my hopes of coalitions were useless. Two of the most respected Liberal leaders, Shingareff and Konovaloff, ministers of the Provisional Government, were shot by the Red Guards as they were transferred from the St. Paul Fortress to a hospital.<sup>180</sup> The terror began, and all the horrors I predicted 10 days after the February Revolution came to pass — only in an infinitely greater scope than I ever could have imagined. Compared to it, the French Revolution was a picnic.

Meanwhile our great statesmen, who were supposed to save the world from future wars, were continuing their incredible blunders — and were preparing future troubles — at Versailles. The mountain gave birth to a mouse — the League of Nations.

I have no proof to give you, but I predicted every phase of that peace on the day of the Armistice. It was a very simple deduction. As long as the German army existed, France was agreeing with American Wilson’s 14 points. As soon as the German army ceased to exist also will cease to exist Anglo-American influence.

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178 Lord Robert Cecil (1864-1858) was actually the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs from 1915-1918 under Asquith and Lloyd George. He later won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on The League of Nations.

179 Joseph King (1860-1943) was a Member of Parliament from 1910 to 1918. On January 15, 1918 the House of Commons Debate recorded the following exchange: “Mr. King asked the Prime Minister whether he has had an interview with Mr. Rosing, a Russian musician, when the release of Mr. George Tchitcherine from internment was considered; and, if so, whether promise of his release was then offered? The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Bonar Law) replied— I am informed that no such interview has taken place.”

180 A. I. Shingareff and F. F. Kokoshkin, two Ministers of the Provisional Government, were murdered while they slept in their hospital beds the night they were moved from the Peter and Paul Fortress to the Marie Hospital. A. I. Konovaloff, Vice-President of Kerensky’s Provisional Government was also imprisoned in the Trubetskoy Bastion, but he was not the one murdered as Val described. Konovaloff journeyed to the United States in 1918 and lobbied for intervention against the Bolsheviks.

### June 1918 — G B. Shaw

One day a friend brought me a review of *Don Giovanni*, which was performed in Covent Garden — the role of the Don being sung and acted by a well-known French baritone, Renaud.<sup>181</sup> The review said that no one artist could perform this role; it would take the blending of two great artists. For instance, the acting of Sir Forbes Robertson and the singing of Vladimir Rosing: together they would make the ideal *Don*. The review was signed by G. B. Shaw.<sup>182</sup>

I had wanted to meet him for some time, so I wrote him — and not of thanks for his complimenting me on my singing, but to say he has never seen me act, and when he does one day perhaps he might change his desire, in creating a perfect *Don*, to saddle my voice in the body of Sir Forbes. My letter was humorous, and he invited me to lunch at his house on the Adelphi Terrace.<sup>183</sup>

It was a quaint 200-year-old house facing the river. The interior seemed to radiate the quaintness of GBS' mind. Everything seemed just slightly different: the furniture placement, nothing showy, everything cozy, comfortable, and quaint.<sup>184</sup> Nothing was ordinary, not even the food. He was a vegetarian. I liked him immensely, and we became good friends. His wit was priceless.

We had a mutual friend, Mme X., whom we called Mully.<sup>185</sup> She collected celebrities, had a great salon in London where somehow sooner or later every celebrity had to appear. She always had a new crush for a new celebrity. We all had our turn and very unkindly exchanged notes at her antics; but all the same, she was a wonderful person. We all loved her, and in reality we loved to attend her receptions, for it was a meeting place of the greatest talent of England. She singled me out at that time to a point of giving me some of her meat coupons as she felt my voice “needed meat.” G.B.S. laughed and told me that she must have an illegal

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181 Maurice Renaud (1861-1933).

182 George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) began his published life as a music critic. (His mother was a professional singer, as was one of his sisters.) Shaw's review was published in *The Nation*, June 22, 1918.

183 Shaw was a great correspondent, and Val's humorous letter to him was just the sort of back and forth badinage that Shaw relished. Shaw's private luncheons, such as the one Val describes, were a feature of his life, and typically included one or two special guests. Shaw was sometimes referred to as the Sage of Adelphi Terrace. He lived at #10 for thirty years beginning in 1899. The flat was just a two short blocks to London's theatre district. One of Shaw's neighbors at the time was J. M. Barrie.

184 Shaw and his wife occupied the second and third floors of #10. The dining room and a large drawing room were on the second floor. The kitchen, bedrooms, and study were upstairs. The offices of *The Nation* occupied the ground and first floor. The elegant row of townhouses overlooking the Thames was demolished in 1938.

185 Mme X is the same “Mully” Mathews that Val wrote about in another section about C. P. Scott.

supply of those coupons as she offered some to him, to Hugh Walpole,<sup>186</sup> and to Charles Ricketts.

Shaw became interested in me for my dual personality of being an artist and a politician. We talked a great deal of the political development in Russia.<sup>187</sup> He was always amusing and could be sometimes bitterly sarcastic. As a music critic and lover of music he deplored, as I did, the old outlived form of operatic acting. He called them the “singers with semaphoric gestures” — or “He is like a police Bobbie regulating operatic traffic on the stage” — or “Her voice wobbles to such an extent that it sings a duet with herself.”

He was quick as lightning, energetic in his movement, and a gracious host. He was at that period writing *The Perfect Wagnerite* in which he gave my most treasured praise in my singing career. He wrote, “Chaliapin and Rosing are the two greatest singing actors of our epoch.”<sup>188</sup> It’s an amazing sensation to see one’s name in a book for the first time. It makes one feel that one has arrived at the pinnacle.

After that lunch at which we took apart opera, concert stage, and world politics (and having the feeling of satisfaction of having well eaten — the lunch was delicious) and knowing what to do with the world, we parted warm friends. After that, we met many times.

### November 1918 — Days of Hope

The Russians were still very popular — à la mode. We were expecting the arrival in London of Gretchaninoff, Tcherepnin,<sup>189</sup> Coates, [conductor Emil] Mlynarski, also Safonoff, and Diaghileff. Everything about us was great. True a few lunatics calling themselves Bolsheviks overthrew the Tsar and have created Revolution in the country, but it will soon be over; such lunatics cannot survive for a long time. All the artistes are boycotting the government, who has declared, ‘Only those who work eat.’ Surely such barbarism cannot survive for long.

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186 Novelist Hugh Walpole (1884-1941) was also a friend of Rosing’s. Walpole had worked in Russia for the Red Cross during World War I, and he was head of the Anglo Russian Propaganda Bureau during the Russian Revolution. Two of Walpole’s novels, *The Dark Forest* and *The Secret City* are based on his experiences in Russia. Rosing’s friendship with Walpole continued into the 1930s when Rosing returned to England. Walpole’s country estate was at Brackenburn near Keswick, Cumberland in the Lake District.

187 Politically, Shaw was a Socialist, but believed in change by peaceful means. He traveled to Russia in 1932, met Stalin, and was unwittingly converted into a supporter of the USSR. During this staged visit he saw only what Stalin wanted him to see, the “hopeful and enthusiastic working class ...setting an example of industry and conduct.”

188 Shaw’s exact statement in the expanded 4th Edition of *The Perfect Wagnerite* published in 1923 says, “The two most extraordinary dramatic singers of the 20th century, Chaliapin and Vladimir Rosing, are quite independent of the old Metropolitan artificialities.”

189 Nicholas Tcherepnin, father of composer-pianist Alexander Tcherepnin, had been a conductor of Diaghileff’s *Ballet Russes*.

With the end of the World War One the rejoicing was great. The streets were illuminating, the throng on the thoroughfares immense. We thought that we have gone through the maximum in suffering that the world can go through. Little did we know then how much more the humanity is capable to endure without perishing. The mental giants gathered smugly in Versailles, including the powerless Wilson, and wrote a peace that was to end all wars.

The Allies had troops in Russia under the pretext that they were at war with the Germans — who made peace with Russia but still had troops there. But as soon as the war was over and peace at Versailles was made, there were no more excuses, and the Allies withdrew their troops and left the world to the ravages of Communism.

It would take a book to write how we begged the Allies and their great statesmen like Senator Borah (the arch political fool of the century) to continue the intervention and save the world from Bolshevism. They were blind. They refused. They brought Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, the Cold War! Let's pray they will wake up and avoid the atomic war and the end of the world!

Those were days of hope: English in Archangel, Americans in Siberia, French in Crimea, Germans in Ukraine, Denikin and the Constitutional Assembly on the Volga and the Don, Wrangel with his troops in the Baltics. Oh, this time the Reds will be finished.

C.P. Scott, the owner and editor of the *Manchester Guardian* and my close friend, had the only newspaper in England which took a sympathetic line toward them and believed they will succeed in retaining power. I loved the old man like my own father. I consider him one of England's saints. I was proud to have taught him the political structure of all new political parties since the revolution.<sup>190</sup> His sudden decision to take a sympathetic attitude toward Lenin was beyond my understanding. He tried to convince me that we will do more good by helping them than by helping the Whites whose cause was lost. I could not understand how he could accept the cruelties and barbarism of Lenin, even though the cause of Whites was lost and the Bolsheviks were to retain their power — of that I agreed with him.

But, there must be a way to change them and overthrow their cruel dictatorship. I believed that art can do it! Oh political innocence! From that moment, I believed myself an artistic messiah.

### **A Stupid Rivalry**

There was no one to equal me except Chaliapin. And, when Bernard Shaw wrote in his "Perfect Wagnerite" that Rosing and Chaliapin are the two greatest singers of the generation I was at the peak of artistic happiness.

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<sup>190</sup> Charles Prestwick Scott (1846-1932) was editor of the *Manchester Guardian* from 1872 to 1929. He also was a Liberal Member of Parliament. Scott took Rosing to meet the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, at Walton Heath on Saturday March 17, 1917 — the day after the Czar's abdication of the throne. Lord Reading was also present. Rosing lobbied for immediate British support of the Provisional Government. Scott wrote in his diary that "Rosing did a good deal...to kindle George's enthusiasm."

With great trepidation, I went to hear his first concert at the Albert Hall after his return from Russia.<sup>191</sup> I missed hearing him all through the years of the war, the six years of my own growth. I wondered; I thought that people exaggerate; I was nervous; could I really have developed so much as to be able to be even compared with him? And, I must be honest with my readers, after the first song I relaxed in my chair and looked at Marie as she said, “I prefer yours.” I answered, contented, with a hypocritical smile, “What nonsense — listen to his sound. It’s better than mine.” And thus began four years of singing rivalry — a stupid rivalry, because I never, never considered myself his rival. He became my singing god when I was ten on that famous gramophone father brought me, and he remains to the present day even after he has gone.

I loved your voice Feodor, as I have never loved anyone else’s. I stood in a freezing cold for hours to get a ticket to hear you; I paid ten rubles for it, which I could not afford; and many years later I cried when news of your death stunned the artistic world. There has been only one like you. I salute you with all my depth on the page of this book.

I was a little hurt with you when you came back from America and in an interview denied to the press even having heard of me; and in the same evening at a social gathering told my friend how often we met and that I am called in America a “Little Chaliapin.” All that quickly passed and I remained your deep admirer, and would give anything in the world to hear your wonderful voice now. Some of us were lucky to have lived when you have lived and [to] have known you.

Yes, it was a great vocal era: giants of the operatic stage, royalties of the opera houses, the heroes and heroines of nations, whose jubilees were national events. It would be hard to describe the tenth jubilee of Chaliapin in the Bolshoi Theatre, the hundreds of laurel wreaths, the stage full of flowers, the front full of precious presents, and from the hearts of the audience a shower of love and admiration — when the pitch of enthusiasm grew to such an extent that the horses of the carriage were unharnessed and the audience pulled it by their own hands to the hotel!

Yes, there were days when operatic art was revered to the point of adulation — passed in later years to the film stars, and as world progressed toward its destruction to Hitler, Stalin, Lenin and Mussolini, and now the astronauts. What next! But in those days of jubilation on a grand scale at the artistic, I was a very small little cog in the artistic wheels and never imagined that one day I may be counted as one of the twenty great singers of Russia in this century. That seemed stupid, so I went on my way to battle the operatic tides of the world. It tossed me about, it battered me, it bruised me, left me black and blue.

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<sup>191</sup> Chaliapin stopped in London on his way to America, where impresario Sol Hurok had arranged a tour, preceding Val’s American debut by only a few weeks. Chaliapin’s Albert Hall concert on October 2, 1921 was followed a week later by his first recording session since before the war.

### A New Russia Was Growing Up

With each season, I felt my responsibility more important, each appearance of more importance. Now I was faced with the old importance of keeping up my name to the high standard of Russian art. I gradually became cultural representative of the old Russia and its tradition.

A new Russia was growing up and began to show decadence in art. Our national popularity diminished greatly. The Ballet of Monte Carlo was losing its leadership.

The colors of human being were becoming distinctly red or white — some suspiciously pink. Then there was no argument that they can be overthrown. No, they came to stay. They are creating a new civilization, a new world, and new culture. Some of us who believed that they will not survive became more and more anti-communist, and those who believed that they will disappear became more and more pink, and began to see some good in them. It spread like a miasma. Today you can count them in millions — while before Hitler and Mussolini they were in hundreds of thousands.

### Spring 1921 — Opera Intime

GBS liked to talk to me about the great upheaval which was going on in Russia and about Opera. One day I had an idea. We were lamenting the fact that on account of lack of money, London would not have an opera season. "The trouble with Opera," I said, "is that it's too expensive."

"Yes," said Shaw, "It's too god damn grand." I heartily agreed and suggested that Opera should and can be reduced to theatrical proportion. After all, every successful opera is based on a great play — *Faust* of Goethe, *Butterfly* by Belasco, *Traviatta* on Dumas' *La Dame aux Camellias*, *Tosca* on Sardou's drama, etc. "None of those plays needs large choruses. In opera they're mostly included for padding and to make it damn grand."

"Right," said Shaw, "let's eliminate them, or reduce to a minimum of people needed for the story."

"And the orchestra — it's also syrupy," I said. "People are willing to pay to go to a recital to hear a singer with a piano accompaniment. Surely they will go and see a good opera production with a small orchestra."

By the end of the lunch, we were both agog with enthusiasm. I was to get Komisarjevsky to direct, Adrian Boult (now Sir Adrian) to arrange the orchestra and conduct and gather the singers. I was to be the star and sing three consecutive performances of *Queen of Spades*. Then we would give three performances each of *The Barber of Seville*, and *Pagliacci* together with *Bastien and Bastienne*. Shaw was to organize a reception at the Claridge Hotel with the London elite society and make the opening speech launching our project. Mully was to help him.

Everything was going well. Half of London came to Claridge to hear what concoction has been invented by Shaw and Rosing — unquestionably it was a curious combination, and the

anticipation ran high. Mully was in her element, fluttering there and yonder, receiving Duchess So-and-So, Celebrity So-and-So. GBS was standing, lionized by the admiring females — of which I had my share.

Tea was served, and then GBS took the floor. Operatic history was to be made. GBS was to announce the new idea on opera, sure that we'll be original. Then something went wrong. After describing the idea, the practical aspect of it, GBS launched to describe the first opera, which was never done in London. I soon realized that GBS had got hold somewhere of a wrong opera, wrong composer. When I suggested to do *The Queen of Spades*, I naturally meant Tchaikovsky's opera. I did not know of the existence of Smetana's *Queen of Spades*. GBS, on the other hand, did not know of the existence of Tchaikovsky's. As soon as I realized Shaw's mistake, I passed him a slip telling him that our *Queen of Spades* is by Tchaikovsky — not Smetana.<sup>192</sup>

It was quite a predicament for the leader of a new movement to not know about the opening vehicle — but not for Shaw. He stroked his beard and, with one of his Mephistophelean chuckles, said, "I have told you about Smetana's *Queen of Spades* and now Vladimir will tell you about Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*."

After telling the audience Tchaikovsky's version, I passed the speech to GBS. He said, "Fortunately, for the rest there is only one *Barber* of Rossini and one *Pagliacci* by Leoncavallo. The audience laughed, realizing Shaw's mistake, and the reception ended with great enthusiasm for the project.

*Opera Intime* was launched into combat with the idea that opera doesn't have to be too *god damn grand* — and thus began my first revolt on the operatic stage.<sup>193</sup>

Yes, everything was going well. Aeolian Hall, seating 500, was transformed into an intimate opera house. Tickets, though [at] high prices, were selling out. I was elated with our plan. I could not help feeling proud that I was producer and star of a new operatic movement created by Shaw-Rosing. I have traveled a long way since my schooldays, when instead of listening to the lecture I amused myself by playing producer and creating imaginary operatic casts. Now my dream had its first realization.

During this following nine days of the season, we made operatic history in more than one way. One for the idea — very successful — and one for me personally — as the funniest in my career.

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192 Val had produced the English premiere of Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* at the London Opera House during his ill-fated Allied Opera Season in May 1915. It is unlikely that Shaw would have been unaware of it. Czech composer, Bedrich Smetana never composed an opera based on Pushkin's story *Queen of Spades*. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on the part of Shaw, as Smetana was greatly influenced by Wagner, one of Shaw's great loves. Also, the first performance of the opera outside of Russia had been in Prague in 1892, with the libretto translated into Czech. Perhaps that fact also stuck in Shaw's mind and he incorrectly made a connection with Smetana.

193 Rosing Opera Week at the Aeolian Hall began on June 25, 1921 and ran through July 2, 1921. It was a big success. At Val's invitation, Isadora Duncan attended one of the performances.

When six years previous I studied voice in Paris with the famous Sbriglia, he made me wear a special kind of corset for breath support. As years went by, I discarded those corsets as I was very strong and could support my breath without them. The Intimate Opera Week was a challenge to my endurance, singing the tremendously taxing role of Herman in *Queen of Spades* on Saturday, Monday and Tuesday, rehearsing *Pagliacci* Wednesday and Thursday (a role I was singing for the first time), and finishing our little season with singing Canio in *Pagliacci* Friday night, Saturday matinee and Saturday evening.

I naturally wanted to be at my best Saturday night and, doing a quite (speaking immodestly) successful first Canio on Friday, I decided to wear the corset for the Saturday matinee. I looked for them everywhere — in every cupboard, in every drawer. They were gone. But during my search I found a substitute — the corset of my wife. I was slim in those days and I found that they fit me. I took them to the theater...<sup>194</sup>

As a result, the Shaw-Rosing opera experience had a great influence on my future. That summer and fall, I took the little company to Ireland and Manchester. I was losing interest in my concerts and dreamed more and more of my own opera company, where singers would be actors and vocal painters. This idea became almost an obsession.

It was also a period of search for a new love, as I was separated from Marie, and having lost my — what I thought to be at that time — great love, I became very lonely. I tried to fall in love, and just could not. I still carried the torch for Audrey.<sup>195</sup> My one great consolation was the excitement and preparation for my first American tour.

### November 1921 — Vital, Original, Unafraid

Well, the frontiers were open and I began to visit other countries. My first ship to cross the ocean was *Cedric* — 19,000 tons. I heard so much about those great ships that it was a

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194 The rest of the corset story is missing in Val's manuscript, but it is retold by biographer Ruth Rosing in Val Rosing. "He was unable to find his own, and so he struggled into his wife's oblivious of the supporters attached. He also forgot to button his trousers, and when he removed his outer clown costume on stage, the two forgotten items coordinated themselves and brought down the house. Said one prominent socialite regarding Rosing and Shaw's Intimate Opera, "This is really quite too intimate!"

195 Audrey's identity is unconfirmed, but at approximately this point in one of Val's handwritten chronologies he writes "I fall in love with a dancer." It is purely speculation who this might be, but one possibility is Audrey de Vos (1900-1983), born Audrey Mullins, an influential dance teacher in London who ran a school in Notting Hill Gate starting in the 1930s. Audrey de Vos had a revolutionary approach to teaching ballet with a method of teaching movement that had remarkable similarities with the way Val directed actors and singers on the stage. De Vos was noted for being able to teach anyone to dance beautifully regardless of body style, and Val was known for being able make anyone look graceful on stage. De Vos saw the body as an orchestra with different tonal systems to be used expressively; Val's belief was that singers should be vocal painters using the different colors of the voice to support the character and communicate the story. It is easy to imagine that Audrey de Vos and Val Rosing would have found much in common.



disappointment.<sup>196</sup> I should have gone on the *Mauritania*, or *Aquitania*, or *Majestic* — but I had to economize so I took a smaller ship. On the eighth day of our trip, I was to hear myself singing *The Song of the Flea*. The radio people told me that they will be listening all the time and will call me immediately through the loudspeaker. The call never came. To my great disappointment, something went wrong with the transmission, and the broadcast originating from a WJZ station in New Jersey did not come off.<sup>197</sup> In my utter ignorance of broadcasting, I could not understand how can the voice be so strong as to be heard 1,500 miles away. I was to hear myself six weeks later and learn the miracle of the radio as I learned once 20 years previously the miracle of the gramophone — vibration. This time [the miracle was made possible by] Marconi and [Godfrey] Isaacs, whom I often met at Coombe Bank in England.<sup>198</sup> The ship trip as a whole was truly uneventful.

I stopped at the Carlton Hotel<sup>199</sup> facing Central Park, and from then on began the never-ending wonder of America; grandeur — everything thought and done on such immense scale, with so much idealism. I was completely conquered and only hoped that I equally will please the Americans. I did — I was vital, original, unafraid. Of course, I missed the cry of "Bravo!" from Ricketts, but soon I found a number of admirers, especially among the feminine kind. I soon found that they run the music in America. The saying was in France: a conductor must have lovers and they will give him children, and in America he must also have lovers and the women will give him an orchestra. For a singer it was a difficult situation. What would one do with an orchestra?

In my first season, I gave a series of recitals in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Washington. New York was at first cool — blasé. But Boston, led by H. T. Parker and Olin Downes, gave me the most glorious notices of my career, [one of] which was later incorporated in a book by Parker.<sup>200</sup> My new singing was accepted and praised beyond any

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196 The RMS Cedric was in service from 1902-1932, sailing from Liverpool to New York. For the first couple of years of its run it was the largest ship in the world, carrying 1525 passengers. Val arrived in America on November 22, 1921.

197 Formal standards for broadcasting service were not established by the US Government until December 1, 1921. During the previous couple of months there were a handful of stations already broadcasting, including WJZ in Newark, New Jersey who had first broadcast live reports of the 1921 World Series on October 5, 1921.

198 Lord Reading's brother, Godfrey Isaacs, had become Managing Director of Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Co. Ltd. in 1910. Through this inside connection, both Rufus Isaacs and David Lloyd George made profitable short-term speculative investments in the American Marconi Company in April 1912 just before the run up in its shares following the Titanic disaster. The "Marconi Scandal" led to an investigation by a Select Committee from the House of Commons. After more than a year of intense scrutiny the accused were exonerated of all misdoings and emerged with their careers intact.

199 Val means the Ritz-Carlton. The hotel, built in 1910, had already become synonymous with elegance and wealth.

200 Rosing's success is not overstated. The chapter about him in H. T. Parker's book, *Eighth Notes: Voices and Figures of Music and the Dance*, is based on Parker's review in the Boston Transcript of Rosing's first concert there on January 3rd 1922. Among other accolades, he wrote, "To such pitch has Mr. Rosing carried characterizing

further doubt. I was happy and felt that my mission has been accomplished, that now it was time for me to look for further development and growth.

My first love has always been opera. My creation of a new style of singing was really only a branch of opera — but my main objective was still opera. I abhorred bad operatic acting: fat tenors and sopranos playing leading lovers, coming to the front stage, bellowing high notes, and returning to their lover. Already in the Music Drama, Lapitsky discarded the old conventional routines and semaphoric meaningless gesture, but there was still something missing in the operatic acting, in spite of the excellence of his production. I did not know what that difference was, but I was eager to research and find out. Productions at the Met and Chicago — except for great artists such as Chaliapin, Mary Garden, Marcoux, Muratore, and Schipa — were appalling.<sup>201</sup> The rank and file did not know what to do with themselves on the stage. There was no artistic direction, and the old-fashioned style of acting was accepted by the press and the public. Feeling that I had achieved my goal in singing, I decided that my mission now was opera.

Gatti-Casazza — with his beautiful aristocratic beard — ruled the Met; and at its inept productions in Chicago, the McCormick dynasty were spending literally millions of dollars, giving the opportunity to the great lady of the operatic stage, Mary Garden<sup>202</sup>, and the most beautiful lady of the operatic stage, Ganna Walska.<sup>203</sup>

To sink the Chicago Opera to its lowest level there were artists attempting to bring art when the brilliant Prokofiev was commissioned to write an opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*. It was the most terrible flop. Owing to inept direction the satire was completely misunderstood and not ever brought out, and was put on a shelf after three performances. “It cost us \$50,000 an orange,” cried T----. “It wasn’t worth it.” Prokofiev thought differently and so did some of us when we produced it at the City Center 27 years later. I found the satire and style, and the audience, as they say, rolled in the aisles.

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purpose and projecting power that the listener forgets the song in the singer. A more ‘personal’ concert than one of Mr. Rosing’s is rare indeed. Not even Chaliapin’s are more pervaded by a single spirit.”

201 French bass-baritone Vanni Marcoux (1877-1962) sang at the Paris Opera, the Boston Opera, and Chicago Lyric Opera. French actor and operatic tenor, Lucien Muratore (1876-1954) was a principal tenor in Boston and Chicago during the period from 1913 to 1922. Italian tenor, Tito Schipa (1888-1965) joined the Chicago Opera Company in 1919 and sang there until 1932.

202 Soprano Mary Garden (1874-1967) had been made director of the Chicago Opera Association in 1921. She lasted only in year in that position but during this time she staged the world premiere of Prokofiev’s *The Love for Three Oranges* a production that put the opera company \$1-million in the red at the end of the season. Val was later to stage direct the triumphant return of this opera at the New York City Opera in 1949.

203 Soprano Ganna Walska (1887-1984) was married six times, surpassing even Val’s record. She is survived by “Lotusland,” her astonishingly beautiful 37-acre garden on her estate in Montecito, California — a labor of love on which she worked for over forty years.

That season New York was graced by the presence of Clare Sheridan, a wonderful sculptress who just achieved fame by going to the Kremlin and sculpting Trotsky and Lenin. Those two gentlemen — until her — were strictly off limits, and she took courage in her hands and went to pay them a visit. It was at the same time [that] Bill Bullitt, a young journalist, attended the Versailles Peace Conference; [he] went to see them [Chicherin, Litvinov and Lenin] and also created a sensation.<sup>204</sup> Naturally I, as a Russian singer, and they, two people who have made contact with the Kremlin — though all three having different reaction to the Kremlin — were keen to meet with each other. Clare provided for us that opportunity, and though we strongly held to our own opinions, we found much interest in each other.

I visited Bill Bullitt almost every evening, and he and I walked up and down his library trying to write a play on the Russian Revolution, but could not find the plot or agree on themes and finally had to give up. Claire and I tried to create a romance but could not; between social commitments and the play there was no time, so we ended up by my giving a special concert in aid of famine in Russia, Clare donating a sculpture of a child's head, sold at the interval by auction, and Bill being the M.C. Communists were not yet taken seriously. The concert was a huge success. Hoover, who was in charge of administrating the Russian Famine Relief, received from us 1500 parcels of food.<sup>205</sup>

### **Spring-Summer 1922 — A Romance Waiting for me in Every Capital**

Spring came, and our trio separated. Bill divorced beautiful Ernesta and a year later became the husband of the first American Communist; he married the widow Reed.<sup>206</sup> No doubt her influence on him made Roosevelt choose him as first ambassador to the Soviet. Bitter was his disappointment with them. When he and I walked his study up and down all night trying to invent plots — he to exalt the idealism of Bolshevism and I trying honestly to explain the truth about them — we did not find a solution satisfying at that time to both. When he left Moscow and tasted the Stalin regime, having seen his Bolshevik friends executed by Stalin, I wonder if he remembered days of our youth and his obsession with an ideal that cost millions of lives, untold suffering, and danger to our world.

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204 A former journalist, William C. Bullitt was actually a staff member of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace at the Paris talks. His secret mission to Russia to meet with Lenin's government was his own idea but was approved by President Wilson.

205 The \$200 winning bid for Clare's sculpture of the head of a sleeping baby boy came from Bill's wife, Ernesta, who had undergone a difficult childbirth and had lost her baby son after only one day. The beautiful Ernesta was now unable to have another child. This unfortunate situation added to the strain of her marriage with Bullitt. Ironically, Clare had also lost a young child. Almost \$1,600 was raised for Russian hunger relief. The funds were deposited with the American Relief Association through Val's American agent Antonia Sawyer. The funds went to "deliver packages of food to designated individuals in Russia ...intellectuals, doctors, and artists." In addition, Val provided a list of names he personally wanted to include. It took five months for the food to reach its recipients.

206 John Reed's widow was, of course, Louise Bryant. Bullitt married her in 1923. They were divorced in 1930.

As Bill in 1933 was crossing the ocean on his way to Russia, I sent him a cable offering my services.<sup>207</sup> He politely thanked me but declined. He probably was still full of idealism, and he will soon find out the arch treachery of Stalin, who betrayed his closest friends — but Reed still influenced Roosevelt, his widow, and poor Bill. We wrote to each other a few times during the war but never saw each other or renewed our friendship. I wonder if his bitter disappointment in the Bolsheviks was worthwhile. Ernesta, me, our unborn play! His Moscow bitterness! Those must have been for him tragic days, when his friends were shot down in the cellar of OGPU — men who befriended him and who were his hosts on so many occasions. Thank you Bill for having spared me this.<sup>208</sup>

So, in the spring 1922 each one of us went to his departing: Bill to the widow Reed, Clare to London and then Italy, and I to London, then to many other cities for a concert tour. It was a busy spring — concerts almost in every capital of Europe, and all over England, Belgium, and France — with a romance waiting for me in every capital.

Marie fell in love with someone else and soon married him. I flitted from flower to flower. I became spoiled. It was high time for me to reform. I excused my excesses and freedom because I felt I had a mission in life, and to accomplish this I need feminine inspiration — and that seems easy to find. So my correspondence was vast, covering several countries. That was a new phase in my artistic life. I suddenly required feminine inspiration for further progress in my singing. Fortunately, that phase only lasted a short time, and even if I looked for feminine inspiration it was on permanent basis.

### January 1923 — Even Her Name Was Hope

Suddenly, for my second season in America, I got a terrible crush on a beautiful girl in Boston — and that changed the rest of my life. No, I did not marry her. I met her only six times in my life. The first time I was warned by the hotel not to bring a lady again in my room. The second time I was thrown at 3 a.m. from my hotel. The third time her two brothers came unexpectedly home at 7 a.m. and told me that next time they will kill me. The fifth time was sad parting, making plans that never came off; that night she sent me a wire from the train; she left Paris for good. I wonder if the audience noticed anything wrong with my voice.<sup>209</sup> But

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207 Bill Bullitt sailed for Europe on November 29, 1933. Rosing had been in London since August, and was restarting his life there.

208 Rosing tried to send a desperate message to the Pope through Ambassador Bullitt in August 1939, but Bullitt (now Ambassador to France) was not allowed by US law to send it. In 1940, Rosing sought Bullitt's help in getting an official position in which he could help the war effort. Bullitt referred him to the Council for Democracy. When this didn't pan out, Bullitt recommended Rosing to Colonel William J. Donovan who was then Coordinator for Information in Washington. "Wild Bill" Donovan's organization grew into the OSS, and subsequently became the CIA after the war. Rosing ended up instead as Director of Entertainment at Camp Roberts in California. One can't help but wonder what kind of turn Rosing's career would have taken if Donovan had accepted Rosing into the OSS during the war.

209 Val is counting the original meeting as one of the six times he met Hope. It is likely that the plan was for Hope to meet Val in Paris during his concert season there, and that she thought better of it at the last minute.

when I first met her the future seemed clear and full of hope and happiness — even her name was Hope.

I was insanely in love. I met her in Boston after my first concert [January 3, 1923] when I asked my friend, A — —<sup>210</sup> if he knows someone who would come and have supper with us. I was staying at the Copley Plaza, and Hope came and joined us after the concert.<sup>211</sup>

Once when I was very young I gave an audition in London for Chappell Concerts at Queen's Hall. The directors turned me down, with a message to my agent that they liked my singing but they did not think I would have sex appeal. Eight years passed since that and I have had enough proof that they were wrong, but I never lost an opportunity to prove them wrong again and again — so I did that night with Hope. She was a rare woman. I fell desperately in love with her. But as I toured from coast to coast that season, I saw very little of her, as she lived in Boston and New York.

When at the end of March it came time to leave America, I was in real emotional distress. My sailing was on the *Homeric*. I suddenly found that the *S. S. Paris* leaves two days later and will get [to London] in time for my first concert. I changed my sailing and went to Boston and spent two happy extra days in America. Little did I think that it will change my life, my future, my work — and how it will affect hundreds if not thousands of people.

### March 1923 — A Conquering Hero

It was a popular boat, and the musical elements of New York, Boston, and Chicago were sailing on it.<sup>212</sup> At our first meal, I soon found out a number of friends were also sailing on that boat. On the second day I was besieged to give a concert. I found that Ganna Walska was on board, and she lent me her large stateroom to rehearse. The following evening I gave my little concert to my friends. It was over by midnight.

I went directly to the radio operator to send a cablegram to my friend [Hope] in Boston. By the window was standing a young man, also sending a cable. He asked if my name was Rosing. I answered in affirmation. Then he introduced himself as Jack Warner, music critic of Rochester, New York, and said he was going to London to close the deal with Albert Coates and Eugene Goossens for the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and school in general. Both Eugene and Albert were friends of mine, so I became interested.

Then he told me that they wanted to create a Bayreuth out of Rochester. At that instant, I decided that Rochester is my place. I should make it the home of my new American Opera Company which I will create! It came as a flash. I did not lose time to enthuse Jack Warner with my idealism. I started my assault on him at five past twelve. I didn't let him to bed before

<sup>210</sup> The friend Rosing refers to is possibly his Boston concert manager A. H. Handley.

<sup>211</sup> The Fairmont Copley Plaza, designed by the same architect as New York's Plaza Hotel and Washington's Willard Hotel, opened in 1912.

<sup>212</sup> The SS Paris had been launched in 1921. The luxurious liner was a study in Art Deco. First Class staterooms even featured private telephones.

the sun began to rise. He went to the radio room to send a radiogram to George Eastman, the Kodak king, advising him to cable me an immediate invitation to come to Rochester.<sup>213</sup> I was in seventh heaven that my dream of my own opera company, built on singers who all would sing and act my way, could all happen so suddenly. In London I was received as a conquering hero, but I kept my possible invitation from Eastman a secret, in case it does not materialize. I finished my London week and went to Paris.

I was in Paris giving a series of recitals at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées.<sup>214</sup> Four weeks [had] elapsed since my return to Europe, and Jack [had] received no answer to his cable to Eastman. I was disappointed and gave up hope when one evening, just before going on the platform, I received a cable from Eastman asking if I would be willing to come over to discuss the opera plan, and in any case teach singing.<sup>215</sup> It's not what I wanted, but I decided to take a chance that when I meet Eastman we will come to a mutual understanding. I sent a cable of acceptance, canceled my July and August concerts, and in a week I was sailing on the *Berengaria*. Luck was with me. I gambled on everything. I could not lose. I even guessed the second we entered the harbor. In all, I won almost \$8,000 — a good sign.<sup>216</sup>

### June 1923 — From This Moment I Dedicate My Life

In Rochester, I was met by the Secretary of the Eastman Music School, Arthur See.<sup>217</sup> He was married to a French lady, and as I love all French we soon became friends. But when I told him my plan, which I was going to propose to Eastman, he felt that he would not accept such a proposition.

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213 A number of writers and journalists over the years have perpetuated a mistelling of the story by saying that it was George Eastman himself that Val met on the boat to Europe. Time Magazine published it this way on December 26, 1927. Even Pulitzer Prize winning writer Paul Horgan and conductor-composer Nicolas Slonimsky — who were in the original Rochester opera company — got it wrong in their memoirs. Even Elizabeth Brayer's definitive biography of George Eastman misstates the facts. Perhaps it made for a better story, but it was not the way it happened.

214 The Art Nouveau style Théâtre des Champs Élysées at 15, Avenue Montaigne opened in 1913, and within a few months achieved a permanent place in music history on the night Stravinsky's Rite of Spring premiered there.

215 It is probable that the invitation from Eastman was initially an offer to come teach voice. The rest, selling Eastman on Rosing's opera company dream, was a gamble.

216 The Ship's Pool on the *Berengaria* was a regular gambling event and the bets on sailing times often produced winnings at the level Rosing received. The bets were placed at open auction in the English Tudor-style Smoking Room at the forward end of "A" Deck, the auctioneer typically being some theatrical or sports personality on the passenger list. Val arrived in New York on June 22, 1923. At Ellis Island, he listed himself as a "friend of Mr. Eastman at Rochester Theatre." He said he planned to stay three months. His first name was bizarrely misspelled in the immigration record as Fladimis Rosing.

217 Arthur See had been piano teacher from 1914-1921 at the Eastman School's predecessor, the Institute of Musical Art. See then joined the Eastman School and served in Administration and as a Piano Instructor for over thirty years, until 1953.

I was to meet George for lunch at his office in the Penthouse of the Kodak building.<sup>218</sup> I went to inspect the Eastman School and the Theatre, which were the essence of luxury and beauty. The Theatre could rival the Grand Opera of Paris, and the school was a model of everything one desires. There was a small theater, Kilbourn Hall, holding 600, and the most modern hall of that period. Besides the buildings, there was sixteen million dollars of cash as an endowment to the theatre, school, and its activities. By the end of my tour of inspection, I was ready for any compromise as long as Eastman accepted the idea of creating the American Opera Company.

I arranged my books of my press clippings to impress him, and I must immodestly admit they were impressive. My plan also was businesslike, well-prepared. At one o'clock on the dot, I appeared at his office. He was small in stature, unapproachable in manner, cold in bearing. The utmost I can say is he greeted me politely, but not as one who came on an important mission across the ocean.

I immediately decided to act aloof and not to show any enthusiasm for his marvelous school and theater — and to let him lead the conversation. After a few polite remarks on my voyage, and [asking] if I had seen the school and the theater, the conversation came to a stop. Obviously, he expected raves — he got silence. "Well," he started after a pause, "what can I do for you?"

"Nothing," I replied, "What can I do for you? You have a building. It has to be filled with great artistic activities."

He was not accustomed to such tactics. Obviously, people came to him with propositions, which he, for the most part, rejected. As with his all-cold exterior, he was a man of keen perception and understanding of people.

"Very true. Do you have a plan?"

"Naturally, or I would not have come all the way from England. Do you want to hear it?"

George gave me one of his rare sincere sarcastic smiles. "Of course, of course, [or] I wouldn't have asked you to come all the way from England."

"So, in which case we can begin on equal terms. America is practically the only great country which hasn't its own national grand opera." I said. "Here, opera is imported. Everything American in classical music is looked down as second rate. The Met is run as social club for the elite, and is an event of the high society. With rare exception, there are no star singers born in America, and they that could be [opera stars], a lot sing at concert. Opera in English is looked down [upon] by the German and Italian directors. Attempts were made by the Society for Opera in English of Chicago to give amateur performances in English. Mrs.

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<sup>218</sup> Eastman's office was on the sixteenth floor of the Kodak Tower. It was the penthouse until 1930, when three more floors and a cupola were added, right at the time Rosing's American Opera Company dream was coming to an end for lack of funds.

Rockefeller McCormick was financing it as a pathetic answer to her ex-husband, H. McCormick, who was giving millions to the Chicago Opera Company. And so, the greatest art of all art, for it combines all arts, was in the hands of Italian and German general directors, with French dominating the Chicago company repertoire.

“I therefore propose that the Rochester Eastman Music School and Theatre form an American national opera company composed entirely of American singers who will all sing in English, where operas will be given in beautifully translated English, and where English diction will be on a par with the American dramatic theater.

“I therefore propose two years to train such an American company — composed of 24 to 30 singers. I shall train them in my style of realistic rhythmical action, blending music and drama as one entity — where singers will not only sing, but look and act their part, where action will blend rhythmically out of the music. Opera will become the greatest artistic expression for it combines and blends all arts in one. The more I visualize the perfection and magnificence of blending all components of art into one, the greater opera becomes. Instead of being a bastard stupid art, built on compromise, opera could and should become the greatest artistic expression.”

Whatever people say about George Eastman's artistic vision, his artistic taste, he quickly caught my vision — but in his usual sarcastic and sardonic way poured cold water on the plan.

"Why do you think you have the ability to create such an opera company?" I brought out my book of press reactions. Nothing seemed to move him to enthusiasm. He murmured, "Good... good. Prepare the budget for your plan with Mr. See. He is a good solid man. And remember, I don't correct mistakes. All in the budget will be covered. All omissions you will be responsible for. I give you two days to prepare the budget of four years. The operatic national future of America is in your hands. I believe in you." He offered me his hand. It was that simple.

It touched me to very depth of my being. Tears flooded my eyes, and as I shook his hand I said, "Thank you... I will not fail. From this moment I dedicate my life to the American Opera Company." And I did.

In the next room, Arthur See was waiting for me, and seeing my tears, he mistook them for a failure — which he was anticipating. "Oh, I am sorry," he said, "but I warned you. At least may I engage you for a recital at the school? Maybe next year he will change his opinion. He is tough."

By this time I had my emotion in hand, and I wiped my tears. "Sorry to be an emotional fool," I said, "but George has faith in me, in my plan. Our whole future touched me so deeply that I could not help myself. My whole future life has changed. It's goodbye to England and my old friends there, and I pledge my devotion, my life, my service to my new country, the United States of America, and its cause of national opera."

Arthur became equally moved. We embraced each other. We pledged our allegiance to each other and to the American Opera Company — which we faithfully kept against many



difficulties for almost eight years. Then life took us apart, but our close friendship remained undisturbed, unchanged.

We worked twenty-four hours a day and prepared a wonderful plan for organizing an opera department at the Eastman School of Music, after two years transforming it into an American Opera Company. The life of the next opera department will be three years. It was hoped to build three national opera companies: New York in the east, Chicago in the Midwest, and one in Los Angeles on the coast. It was a project of great magnitude, and we were moved by a fever of great national importance. We were rendering tremendous cultural service to the country, to its musicians, to its singers and composers, and the cause of opera in general, besides creating a new style of operatic acting and production. The horizon was very great. I felt capable of handling the situation.

Three days later the plan and the budget was presented at the board meeting, and George Eastman was highly complementary at the way I presented. He even asked Arthur See if I really did it. Arthur enthusiastically confirmed the fact that it was my plan — with all of the multitude of squares, of correlation between departments. The only objection Eastman found was my salary level. As the American Opera Company was more important to me than my salary, I did not argue. I came down.

It was a great day in my life. The famous contract was signed, and U.P. sent an article throughout the United States. It made front-page and was treated as an event of national importance. I was proud of my achievement.

### **A Dedicated Group of Operatic Pioneers**

Our first action was to offer 30 of the best young American singers a two-year scholarship at the Eastman School of Music, during which time we would teach them repertoire in English, with special translations prepared by us. Also, we would prepare them musically by our staff, and under my direction they would learn a new modern style of acting. By the end of the second year, the company would be sent on tour in towns nearby to test their talent. In the four years, they will build their repertoire in Rochester, and in the fourth year will prepare to do a season in New York or Chicago.

The plan got tremendous publicity, but it did not receive the blessing of the singing teachers — who did not want to lose paying pupils and give them away on a scholarship to an institution. That was my first blunder for miscalculation. All through August, September and October I held auditions in major cities.

The singing teachers of New York, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, San Francisco, and Seattle sent me their second best — only those who did not pay them! I was bitterly disappointed, but fortunately there were a few flashy talents — Mary Silveira, George Houston, Clyde Miller, Charles Hedley, Marion Keeler, Cecile Sherman, and Mary Bell — who very soon came forward and helped me, with their flashy talent, to hide the original lack of talent. And it was truly amazing how a group working together under the guidance of outstanding and devoted men soon absorbed their abilities and became a group of dedicated American artists. You could feel it the moment the curtain went up. It was a dedicated group

of operatic pioneers. Opera in English. Opera as a dramatic art. Opera *by* Americans *for* Americans. Days and hours did not exist. We worked as much as was needed.

I found already in the school Adelin Fermin, who was the wonderful vocal teacher of John Charles Thomas, the great American singer who was making a great international success.<sup>219</sup>

I brought in from London Rouben Mamoulian to be my general assistant.<sup>220</sup> I met him in London. He was a refugee from Russia, a pupil of Wachtangoff of the Moscow Art Theater.<sup>221</sup> He could hypnotize, do magic tricks, and was an excellent stage director. In private life he was brilliantly intelligent and a great egomaniac.

I brought also my accompanist from Paris, Nicolas Slonimsky, who was one of those phenomenal musicians capable to play any score by heart, at the same time read a novel, and at the same time correct singers for the slightest mistake. He has since written a number of books. He left me and Rochester after three years to become an assistant to Koussevitzky with the Boston Symphony — and became the plague of his life. After each rehearsal he would come down with a list of wrong notes that each player played during the rehearsal. First he began by stopping the orchestra, but that was impossible, so he adopted that plan — and finally Koussevitzky let him go.<sup>222</sup>

For body movement I had two assistants: Martha Graham<sup>223</sup> and Anna Duncan.<sup>224</sup> For English diction, I brought Mrs. Carrington,<sup>225</sup> a strange combination of American millionairess, sister of Walter Houston, and teacher of John Barrymore.

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219 Adelin Fermin taught at the Eastman School from 1921-1935.

220 Rouben Mamoulian (1897-1987) left Rochester to direct the original stage production of *Porgy* (1927) on Broadway as well as the subsequent Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935). He was the first to stage on Broadway productions of *Oklahoma* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945). Mamoulian also had a distinguished career as a film director in Hollywood, including *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), and *The Mark of Zorro* (1940). Ironically, he was fired from the filmed version of *Porgy and Bess* in 1959. He was fired again from *Cleopatra* in 1963.

221 Evgeny Vachtangov (1883-1922) was an Armenian/Russian actor and theater director who was a disciple of Stanislavsky. He preached a method for actors of action (what I do), aim (how I do it) and adaptation (how I do it).

222 Nicolas Slonimsky (1894-1995) had an illustrious career in classical music for nearly the entire 20th century.

223 Martha Graham (1894-1991) was invited by Rouben Mamoulian to come teach at the Eastman School. She co-ran the dance department for one academic year (1925-26), commuting to New York twice a week. When she started her own dance company in New York she took several of the most promising Eastman students with her.

224 Anna Duncan (1894-1980), born Anna Denzler, was one of the six original “Duncan girls” adopted by Isadora. Anna broke with Isadora in 1921 after an affair with Walter Rummel. She faithfully carried on Isadora’s style and teachings throughout her artistic life. Anna taught dance at the Eastman school during Val’s tenure there.

225 Canadian-born Margaret Carrington (1877-1942) became a voice and diction coach after her opera career was cut short by the effects of choking on a fish bone. Her students included John Barrymore and Lillian Gish, as well as her brother, Walter Huston. Her wealthy husband, William T. Carrington, was a patron of the arts who had

### **Rochester American Opera Company**

In 1924, the Rochester American Opera Company was formed, giving performances in and around Rochester. In April 1927, the Theatre Guild presented us to New York under its auspices.<sup>226</sup> Success was outstanding with the press and the public. A national committee was formed headed by Mr. and Mrs. William Carrington to take over the Rochester American Opera Company and to make it a national institution. The board of directors included Mrs. Christian Holmes,<sup>227</sup> Mrs. Rockefeller McCormick,<sup>228</sup> Mrs. Stanley McCormick<sup>229</sup> (who generously financed the company for Chicago seasons), Otto Kahn,<sup>230</sup> and many other prominent people.

### **American Opera Company**

The American Opera Company, as such, made its auspicious debut in Washington in December 1927 before President Coolidge. The movement of establishing a national opera was on the way. The company was making a success in every city it played. It stirred the music world. It made friends. It made enemies. It created controversy. But it received practically a unanimous acclamation from the press — "Operatic millennium has at last arrived" — "At last we have been taught how Opera should be produced," etc.

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made his fortune as a grain merchant. William died in 1930. Margaret later married scenic designer Robert Edmund Jones (another American Opera Company alumni) in 1933.

226 The Theatre Guild presented its productions at the elegant 900-seat Guild Theatre on 52nd St. The group had much in common philosophically and artistically with London's Stage Society, so much so that G. B. Shaw gave the Theatre Guild exclusive rights to mounting productions of his plays in America.

227 Betty Fleischmann Holmes was an heiress, grand-daughter of Charles Fleischmann, founder of the first yeast manufacturing plant in America. She married her husband, a prominent Cincinnati eye, ear, nose and throat doctor, in 1892. He died in 1920. More than just a philanthropist, Mrs. Christian R. Holmes was also an early investor in the Columbia Broadcasting System before it became known as CBS.

228 Mrs. Edith Rockefeller McCormick (1872-1932) was a Chicago socialite and daughter of Standard Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller. She was at one time reputed to have been the richest woman in the world. She was an eccentric who believed wholeheartedly in reincarnation. Harold F. McCormick (son of the mechanical reaper inventor Cyrus McCormick) divorced her in 1921 and proceeded to marry soprano Ganna Walska, becoming her fourth husband.

229 Katharine Dexter McCormick (1875-1967) married Stanley R. McCormick (youngest son of Cyrus McCormick) in 1904. After only two years, Stanley became mentally ill and was confined to a family estate. Mrs. McCormick worked tirelessly for the cause of women's suffrage, and was later instrumental, through her friendship with Margaret Sanger, in financing the development of the birth control pill in the 1950s.

230 Financier Otto Kahn (1867-1934) was a great friend and generous contributor to the world of the arts. He was the power behind the Metropolitan Opera in New York for many years.

The reason was simple. Operatic productions at that time were, in general, based on all outmoded, outlived traditions of the 18th century. The singers, with very few exceptions, neither could act nor look their part. (Unfortunately this is still the case in many instances.) There was no visual illusion, no dramatic sense, no unity in productions, and no teamwork. The American Opera Company swept the cobwebs off all traditions. Our singers were actors. They were cast not only by their voices, but also by their physical appearance. Our Margaritas, Carmens, and Butterflies looked their parts. The chorus, instead of being stilted, static and undramatic were young, alive and intelligent. It was a band of young Americans that carried success after success.

The company made great artistic strides after it left Rochester. I had for a musical director the brilliant conductor, Frank St. Leger;<sup>231</sup> and Robert Edmund Jones, the great scenic genius of the theater, designed some of our productions. For three years, the company toured in all the principal cities of the South, North, and Midwest. The receipts were increasing with every season, and the company almost began to pay for itself. Then came the crash of 1929. In spite of the fact that President Herbert Hoover, in a letter addressed to the Speaker of the House, endorsed the American Opera Company and asked all music lovers to support it, we were forced to abandon our season of 1930-31 as the Depression was increasing.

We hoped to reopen it later, but when the Depression was over, I was unable to do so as I was in England directing the Royal English Opera Company of Covent Garden. This company stopped its activities in September 1939 when the war started.<sup>232</sup>

### October 1939 — Hollywood

In October 1939, I came to Hollywood to start with Albert Coates the Southern California Opera Association, based on the same principles as the American Opera Company.<sup>233</sup> We gave some outstanding performances, but the war in 1941 forced us to abandon further efforts. From that company several artists became well known in the United States: Nadine Connor,

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<sup>231</sup> Frank St. Leger (1890-1969) was also the accompanist for a number of Rosing's recordings for Vocalion in the 1920s. St. Leger had previously been an accompanist for Dame Nellie Melba. His subsequent career took him to the Metropolitan Opera where he held various positions for eleven years.

<sup>232</sup> Val never wrote about the period between the demise of the American Opera Company and his return to America almost ten years later. The first few years of the Depression were low points for him professionally and financially, but once he returned to England things turned around. The English public embraced him again as a concert and recording artist. He made new records, and continued to stage direct, with the high points being his British Music Drama Opera Company season with Albert Coates at Covent Garden in 1936, and the Covent Garden English Opera Company season with Eugene Goossens in 1938. Val has the distinction of having directed the world's first televised opera, Albert Coates' *Mr. Pickwick*, broadcast on November 13, 1936 — scarcely a week and a half after the BBC began its first regularly scheduled television service.

<sup>233</sup> Val left Southampton on October 3, 1939 for New York on the SS George Washington, the last passenger ship to make the voyage after World War Two broke out. The boat was packed full, with people sleeping on deck and in the swimming pool. Somehow Val and his new wife, Vicki Campbell, managed to get a stateroom. Passengers included Arthur Rubinstein, Paul Robeson, Albert Coates, and the Russian Ballet.

Nan Merryman, and Jerry Hines. Charles Kuhlman and Miss Votipka became great favorites at the Metropolitan.

### 1945 — American Operatic Lab

In 1945, when the war was over, a friend of mine, Mr. Hugh Edwards, who was a captain in the Army during the war and a singer by profession, invited me to be the artistic director of an opera school for the veterans.<sup>234</sup> We named it the American Operatic Lab. It was started in a small hall in April 1946 with 17 young veterans. Within a year, through the exceptional qualities of the school, and with the opportunities it offered to American singers, the American Opera lab grew to be the largest — and one of the finest — schools of its kind in the United States. It soon grew to over 400 singers. In its first three years of existence, it produced 31 different grand and light operas, and gave close to 200 full operatic performances free to the public.

The success, and the wonderful development of our singers, encouraged Mr. Edwards and me to form the American Opera Company, which made its debut in September 1947 at the Philharmonic Theatre in Los Angeles. As guest artists, we invited Jerry Hines, Marilyn Cutlow of the Metropolitan Opera Company, and Anne Jeffries, the singing film star.

With the advent of television we felt that opera in English would have a great future for the video public, and we formed the Music Theatre Company which presented operas in condensed form every Sunday at the television station KFI in Los Angeles.<sup>235</sup>

### Postlogue

Vladimir Rosing went on to direct major operatic productions in the United States for a dozen more years at places like the New York City Opera, the Chicago Lyric Opera, and the Hollywood Bowl. In Canada, he directed for five consecutive seasons at the Opera Guild of Montreal, working with Emil Cooper, Julius Rudel and Pauline Donalda.

MGM called upon Val to direct the operatic scenes in four films: *Everybody Does It*, *Grounds for Marriage*, *Strictly Dishonorable*, and *Interrupted Melody*.

Starting with the epic *California Story* state centennial production at the Hollywood Bowl in 1950 he began a series of historical spectaculars. *The Oregon Story*, *The Kansas Story*, and *The Arizona Story* all followed. In addition to directing, Val would often co-write the scripts.

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<sup>234</sup> Val has also left out his stint during the war as Director of Entertainment at Camp Roberts in California where he met Hugh Edwards. He directed about twenty productions of musicals and light opera often involving leggy young starlets on loan from MGM.

<sup>235</sup> Val directed 46 weeks of Sunday afternoon broadcasts of opera for KFI-TV in Los Angeles in 1949. The program was voted Outstanding Musical Program of Local Origin by the Southern California Association for Better Radio and Television. Other than completing an outline, Val did not take his written memoirs forward from this point in time.

Organizations such as The Elks Club and the US Air Force also hired Val to direct their elaborate pageants.

His final projects were to be a commemorative spectacular for the centennial of the Civil War and then *The Freedom Story*, a goodwill production designed to travel the world spreading the story of America's liberty and freedom — Val's final political effort via art to halt the spread of totalitarianism in the world by infecting it with the message of democracy and freedom.

The year 1963 was his jubilee as an artist. As the year progressed, his health deteriorated and he could no longer work. Val entered the hospital for the last time on the same day John F. Kennedy was shot. He died two days later.

Hundreds of people packed the church at Forest Lawn in Burbank to bid Val goodbye. Composer Meredith Willson, who had been a collaborator on many productions, gave the eulogy, and ended by saying:

“Only a few leave the world, and those of us whose lives they touched, better for the goodness they ingenuously spread, more vitally and aesthetically alive for the brilliance they eagerly shared, and spiritually comforted by those values surpassing human understanding that exist in a great and beautiful talent. Val was one of these.”

### Editor's Comments

Vladimir Rosing worked on his memoirs over a long period of time, filling up numerous tablets and notebooks with his handwritten accounts of his life, often covering the same material a number of times. It was obviously something that he struggled with, but that was extremely important to him.

Learning to decipher his handwriting and then sequencing this material properly were the two greatest challenges. To preserve the chronological flow, or to make for a more cohesive narrative, I have often moved material out of the order that Val wrote it in. In those cases where he told the same story more than once, I have sometimes merged the two renditions, picking the best passages, or those with new information, and combining them.

Val rarely used punctuation or indicated where one sentence ended and the next began, so the choices of punctuation and paragraphing are nearly all mine. A great effort has been made to keep his phrasing as close as possible to the way he expressed himself, but words have occasionally been added or removed to clarify meaning or make for better reading. Added words are enclosed within braces. Tenses have occasionally been altered for better consistency.

Typed versions of most of his notes were made by someone at some point. I have wherever possible compared the typed versions to Val's original handwritten notes. The typed versions are sometimes exact transcriptions, but sometimes they sound like rewrites by another person. His last wife, Ruth, was assisting him with this project and I am almost certain the rewrites are hers. In some earlier instances Val may have read the manuscript to a transcriptionist, editing it as he went along.

The more intimate I became with his phrasing and word choices the more I could tell when the voice in a typed passage was not his, and wherever possible I have gone back — for better or worse — to his original wording. What is left here is as authentic and as complete as possible.

The annotations are given to provide additional background for understanding of subject and context, and also in some cases to correct minor factual errors.

The headings, indicating dates, and the phrases chosen to accompany them, are all my additions, and are provided to help the structure of the narrative.

Richard Rosing  
November 2009