

FROM CHAPTER ONE:BEFORE THE REVOLUTION 1905–1917

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

This was not the world she was born into. Ayn Rand was born Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum, a Russian Jew, on February, 2, 1905, in St. Petersburg, then the capital city of the most anti-Semitic and politically divided nation on the European continent. Later, she would say that she loathed everything Russian, and while this was not entirely true— she retained her appetite for Russian classical music and Russian sweets until the end of her life— she hated the passivity, brutality, and primitive religiosity of the Russia of her youth.

She had good reason for this. Her birth came barely three weeks after the brief but bloody uprising known as the 1905 Revolution, where, on a bright January Sunday morning, twelve thousand of Czar Nicholas II’s cavalymen opened fire on thirty thousand factory workers, their wives and children, labor organizers, and students who had walked to the Winter Palace to petition for better working conditions and a role in the czar’s all-powerful government. The protest was led by a Russian Orthodox priest named Father Gapon, and many marchers were said to be praying as they died. The slaughter gave rise to

days of rioting throughout the city and set the stage for the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, which would end not in the quick and brutal suppression of the rebellion's leaders, as this one did, but in a revolutionary coup that would shake the world and mold Ayn Rand's worldview.

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

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

In these years, it was dangerous to be a Jew. As the economy deteriorated and the czar grew more repressive, the brunt of popular anger often fell upon Russia's five million Jews. At Czar Nicholas II's court, as elsewhere in Europe,

Jews had long been identified with the supposedly pagan notions of a money economy, urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism. Given traditional Russian fear of modernity and fierce anti-Semitism, Jews were ready-made scapegoats onto whom the czar, the landowners, and the police could easily shift workers' and peasants' resentment for their poverty and powerlessness. . . .

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

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

Intelligent, self-directed, and solitary from an early age, Rand must have been a difficult child to raise in the first decade of the twentieth century. In spite of the era's violence and turmoil, the ambience was Victorian: the fashions were for frills, family loyalty, and the feminine arts, all of which went utterly against her grain. Some of her earliest memories were of being unreasonably treated in such matters by her mother, who was the dominating personality in the household and even at times "a tyrant." In one memory, during the family's move to the Nevsky Prospekt apartment, Rand and her younger sisters were sent to stay with a neighboring aunt and uncle, perhaps the Konheims. When they returned to Rand's new home, she asked her mother for a midi blouse like the ones she'd seen her cousins wearing. Anna Rosenbaum refused. She didn't approve of midi blouses or other fashionable garments for children, Rand recalled fifty years later. Anna was serving tea at the time, and— perhaps as an experiment— Rand asked for a cup of tea. Again her mother refused; children didn't drink tea. Rand refrained from arguing, although even then the budding logician might have won the argument on points. Instead, she asked herself, Why won't they let me have what I want? and made a resolution: Someday I will have it. She was four and a half or five years old, although all her life she thought that she had been three. The elaborate and controversial philosophical system she went on to create in her forties and fifties was, at its heart, an answer to this question and a memorialization of this project. Its most famous expression was a phrase that became the title of her second nonfiction book, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, in 1962.

Rand's first memory is worth describing here. The future author of *Atlas Shrugged*, a novel whose pulse is set by the rhythms of a great American railroad, recalled sitting at a window by her father's side, aged two and a half, gazing at Russia's first electric streetcars lighting the boulevard below. Her

father was explaining the way the streetcars worked, she told a friend in 1960, and she was pleased that she could understand his explanation. Although she did not know it then, the American company Westinghouse had built the streetcar line, in a gesture to the city's workers from the embattled czar. Such seeming coincidences— this one suggesting that even as a young child she showed an affinity for the bright beacon of American capitalism— abound in Rand's life, and later became the threads from which she and her followers would spin her legend.

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