

Boris de Zirkoff recalls his formative years in Russia

1902–1981

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The Wave (1895) Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky, Private Collection

Boyhood days

Naturally enough my recollections of the earliest part of my life are negligible. Apart from a couple of memories of my own, I have to rely on notes which my mother sent me in later years. I was born on February 22, 1902, according to the [Russian Orthodox]¹ church calendar. This corresponds to March the 7th of our own current calendar. Curiously enough, our apartment in the very clean and nice part of St. Petersburg was right opposite the city jail.

¹ Bracketed words throughout have been added by Compiler.



My mother, Lydia Dmitriyevna von Hahn (pronounced in Russian “Gan”) was a very strong person. She was extremely patient, very quiet, unobtrusive and long-suffering. As I learned later on, my maternal grandparents and the various other relatives were most kind and helpful to her in her tribulations. As to my father, Michael Vasilyevich de Zirkoff, I do not remember him very well. I have no picture of him, and his image escapes my mind. He was a very peculiar character. At first he was in military service, later in the bank business, and then in some private commercial enterprise about which my mother knew nothing. His greatest attraction was to prospect for gold in Mongolia, and he paid very little attention to his family. His attitude to money matters left a great deal to be desired, and so eventually my parents were separated, and when I was about nine years old they were divorced. I have no idea how the divorce was worked out, because the church was against it and it had to be done with some “pull.”

I have two distinct personal memories of that earliest period of my life. When I was about eighteen months old, after a year of excellent health I developed some serious digestive trouble, and the doctor told my mother to go with me to Austria for a few months. We went to Mödling, not far from Vienna; the house we occupied was on the slope of a hill with a dark forest right up against the house. On the other side of it was a little pathway into the trees. It appears that I escaped supervision, and eighteen months old, somehow or other succeeded in toddling down the pathway and around a corner so that I could not be seen immediately. I looked up and saw in front of me a large fir tree with the pictures of the Virgin Mary and some of the saints pinned on the bark. It must have been a little shrine. As I stopped and looked at it something rather definite and imperious said to me: “This is what you will be occupied with all your life.” I then was rescued by my nurse and of course was utterly unable to explain anything of my experience. The whole thing was forgotten by me, until the memory of it came back some years later. It is most likely that this was one of the earliest occasions when my Daimon impressed my astral monad with a specific message for me to interpret later on.

Somewhat later, when I was about three, St. Petersburg experienced the first revolution of 1905, and the house we were in was under cross-fire from fighting rebels. All transportation had been stopped, so my mother’s brother, Sergey D. von Hahn, who was a director of the Imperial Bank, sent us a horse-drawn covered carriage. One of my mother’s brothers-in-laws secured a safe passage permit from the general staff of the St. Petersburg district, and sent an armed escort. I remember distinctly our driving through completely deserted streets to the Imperial Bank, where my mother’s brother put us up on the premises of the bank in his own apartment. He was at that time in charge of the gold bullion. The revolution fizzled out and was not resumed until 1917, of which later.

One of the prominent men in our family was my maternal grandfather, Dmitriy Karlovich von Hahn. He became founder and Inspector General of the special frontier guards corps, which did not exist before his time. He was also a member of the Imperial Council.

It might be interesting to mention here the fact that my great grandfather on the paternal side, in other words the father of my grandmother, was Admiral Mihail



Dmitrievich Tebenkov. He was in the 1850's an Inspector General of the Russian possessions in North America, from Alaska down to Fort Ross. He was a man of considerable reputation, a Mongolian, and that is where my Mongolian blood comes from. He was the first man to prepare a complete atlas of the Pacific Coast of North America, with an explanatory text, the originals of these geographical maps are in the Library of Congress, and I have a complete microfilm of them.

Apart from numerous changes in our living quarters, I know nothing more about the period which ended in the divorce of my parents. Obviously enough my mother felt free. My father told her that he would not take care of me and my education, although apparently I was supposed to go with him, and that he wanted my mother to take me over. This was done, I must say with great relief.

It just so happened that twenty-two years earlier a young officer of the Imperial Guard wanted to marry my mother, but found that she was already engaged to my father. Now that she was free again he asked her to marry him. He had never married before. I understand from my mother's notes that she was not anxious to marry anyone after the experience she went through. But eventually she figured that this long-devoted friend would provide a home for both of us and exercise a strong but kindly supervision of my education. My mother was religious to some extent, but not fanatically so, and she knew by then that I myself was not inclined to any church activities. Her friend's name was Boris Petrovich de Bazhenoff, and my mother after due thought accepted his proposal and married him. I think it was done mainly for my own sake. She had figured well, as her new husband was quite liberal in his religious views, had no connection with any church and no antagonism to any. He certainly had some metaphysical leanings and understood my own, which were beginning to assert themselves.

My step-father was a military genius; he was a strategist who had finished the Academy of the General Staff *first*, and was given a government paid one-year long vacation to the city of Luneville, France, to study military art and horsemanship. One month after he married my mother he became a general, being then forty-two years old, and was appointed director of Military Communications of Petrograd's district.

He was a great admirer of Napoleon and had in his library some magnificent looking editions of Russian works about Napoleon and his career. I was interested in him also, but only in a mild way. He also had in his beautiful mahogany bookcases the complete works of Shakespeare in Russian translation which I certainly would like to see again. There was no question that he had some metaphysical leanings, otherwise he wouldn't have been reading a French book on palmistry by the famous Des Barolles, which I still have. But he never talked to me about metaphysics and I had no reason to bring it up. He exercised on me a very considerable influence in steadying my scientific studies and in expanding my view of history and philosophy. He was very good to my mother who was most of the time rather ill. Speaking French fluently, he was able to maintain excellent relations with my Swiss governess, who came into our house when I was about five, at the time when my Swedish-Finnish nurse left us. She had been a wonderful person who helped my mother through thick and thin. It was on my fourth birthday that my mother got tragically ill with peritonitis, which is usually fatal; but she was nursed along and somehow or other pulled



through. But she remained very much of an invalid for many years as she could not walk upstairs without pain and had to go to bed for a day or two every now and then. In addition to that she had frequent migraine headaches, which I thought I would inherit but actually never did. As my mother says in her notes, my step-father must have really loved her, because he never showed the slightest impatience with her almost constant illnesses. As to myself, my health in the early years of my life left much to be desired. I had frequent fevers and digestive troubles. After a couple of years with my Swiss governess I began to develop jerking nerve motions, and the doctor, one of the finest homeopaths, advised my mother to take me to the high mountains in Switzerland every Fall.

We went to Switzerland by train, which was a very pleasant journey through Berlin and Basel. The thing that I always remember was on the way back to Russia, after a night's stop-over in Berlin, my step-father, my mother, and my Swiss governess, were on the platform of the famous Friedrichstrasse Bahnhof, under the tremendous glassed-in roof to protect the passengers from inclement weather. The express train, pulled by a monstrous locomotive and consisting of several sleeping cars, was coming in fast. When it stopped every door in every car opened right in front of the porter assigned to that car. The porter helped us in, and threw the small baggage behind us. The whole operation had to be completed at once, as the train stopped there only two minutes, because another express was coming right behind. The efficiency, organization, and accuracy of the Germans was beyond description. Somehow or other one of the porters remembered my step-father, and was always on hand there to greet him.

My healing excursions were done with the financial help of my grandmother who had given almost all she had to see that I was well. Curiously enough my grandmother told my mother to be sure to teach me languages. He will need languages all his life, she said. My mother followed that advice, and I am most grateful for my grandmother's attitude. She must have been psychically sensitive and saw maybe the future years of my life in some way or another. Switzerland helped a great deal, and very soon my nervous troubles were brought under control. My mother tells me that I would temporarily lose consciousness, and she would be sitting next to me holding packs of ice on my head. It was not a case of epilepsy, but somehow or other resembled it. I still remember the dreams I had, when in that condition. I was supposed to walk on a thin wire strung between tall posts. It finally disappeared.

After my mother married my step-father and our homelife became stabilized I could register in myself various cycles of interest. My step-father was very fond of trains, railroad engineering, signal systems and I began to be seriously interested in preparing myself for railroad engineering. I had miniature trains and stations in different rooms of our home, and nobody was ever critical of this or tried to take them away. After a while my interest shifted to chemistry, and the books I read both in Russian and Spanish were certainly on the borderline of alchemy. My stepfather was very interested in what I was reading, but did not influence me in any way. I had quite an array of chemical apparatus, salts of various kinds, acids, mild and strong. I succeeded upon one or another occasion in setting off a couple of small explosions which fortunately didn't hurt anybody.



About nine years of age I distinctly saw my mother's worried look when I told her that a little man about one foot tall in a multi-colored dress and a night-cap was coming out of the fireplace and played with me. We talked about the fire and the twigs in the fireplace. I was interested in whether I could meet some other gnomes or salamanders, but he never brought any. He just walked back into the fireplace after we had chatted about ten minutes in Russian. These visits lasted for about six months. My mother never found fault or did anything to be critical about this. Naturally, gnomes were part of the Slavonic mythology, but whether she knew much on that subject I do not know.

There certainly were plenty of remarkable books in both the library of my step-father and of my maternal grandfather to which I helped myself freely, including those on alchemy, theology, and priestcraft. I will never forget my special interest in the books of Gustav Le Bon which were on the very verge of atomic energy. I felt that that man had an intuition of tremendous energy sources, but it was a number of years prior to any research by recognized scientists.

I remember the four large beautifully bound volumes on natural history and allied subjects. This set had a description of the lives and discoveries of well-known scientists prior to the 20th century which fascinated me. It was written in beautiful Russian, and curiously enough we took one volume of that set with us abroad. A scientific figure which appealed to me more than any other was Sir William Crookes, the famous chemist, contemporary with H.P.B., and who actually read some of the chapters of *The Secret Doctrine* manuscript. Present-day scientists recognize the fact that he laid the very foundations of later atomic research, but they do not know that he received special attention from Master M, and possibly another adept in his research. This can be ascertained both from *The Mahatma Letters* and H.P.B.'s *Letters to A.P. Sinnett*. I had a little machine generating static electricity and producing sparks between two steel balls. I could adapt to it one or another of Crookes' cathode vacuum tubes and watch what proved later to be streams of electrons producing beautiful colored glows, the nature of which I felt was on the very verge of the physical and non-physical worlds. That was prior to the discovery of the electron. My interest in chemistry never died down.

I began to be especially interested in the religious struggle of the Russian Orthodox Church in former centuries and to study their history in a critical way. I felt very strongly that great changes should occur in the Church of even my own day, and I remember writing fiery sermons imagining that someday I would be able to deliver them. I have no idea what became of them. That was another phase.

There was another subject which most growing young men had to study: the religious background of the Church, the Old and New Testament, liturgy in the ancient Slavonic language used in the Church even today. For this they usually had the help of a priest who would tutor them. My mother invited one such priest to the house. He was a kindly, compassionate and unselfish individual, probably the pride of his church. But one day he saw my mother and told her that he could not continue to tutor me because I was asking questions that he could not answer and I seemed to know on some subjects more than he did himself. That was the end of that.



In addition to my Swiss governess, who was part of the family, I had a tutor whose name was Constantine Gustavovich Tingas. He was from the Baltic provinces and was a student in the University of St. Petersburg, well past the age of graduation. I think he preferred to keep on studying, and tutoring on the side to make a living. He was a very kindly man who spoke German and Russian and who helped me every day with my studies. In the summer months he would live with us in our summer home.

I never went to school. After being tutored all the year around I went in the spring to the Gymnasium which was the name of the educational institution covering everything from the age of twelve through high school and first year of college. There I went for several days of oral and written exams, and if I passed them I was registered in the next category of class. This I did, including the spring of 1917, which was the last spring for us in Russia.

The list of subjects was rather formidable and of course was increasingly so as the years went by. They included: Latin and Roman history; Greek, which was my own choice, and the history of Greece; History of Western Europe, History of Russia; Natural sciences, such as Geology, Anthropology, plant physiology; Chemistry and Physics, Russian and French languages and literature; Geography; Mathematics; etc.

Much of the above was supplemented by collateral reading. You must bear in mind that there was no television, no radio, and very few other distractions; both parents and growing children read a great deal, some of it aloud to each other. Among the subjects that I loved to read were Oriental stories; one of them became a favorite, and that was the story of Nal and Damayanti. I attribute that as my first touch with Oriental philosophy and with ancient Oriental languages.

From 1913 on we lived in the building of the Staff of St. Petersburg District on the Winter Palace Square, which is a tremendous area between the building just mentioned, the full length of the Winter Palace, the Admiralty Garden and the building of the General Staff and of the foreign office. In the middle of the square is the tall Alexander the First Column, made of one piece of granite. As a boy I saw a great many parades, ceremonies, and festivities in that square when the Emperor Nicholas the Second was in residence.

We lived together with the older sister of my mother who was married to General Fyodor I. Kniyazhevich, whose offices were upstairs in the same building. It was a government-owned apartment, free of rent. In the summer we spent several months at Krasnoye Selo, about thirty miles out of the capitol, where the Emperor was staying off and on in the summer. My uncle was a lover of music. He could not read the notes of the score, but he knew by heart some of the finest compositions of the great masters like Brahms, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Chopin, and others. He would come home in the evening, sit down at the piano and play for quite some time in semi-darkness. Being that kind of man he was placed in charge of a summer theater at Krasnoye Selo and supervised all its activities. He let me attend some of the rehearsals performed by outstanding Russian artists, some serious, some very humorous, which I enjoyed immensely.



When my mother married my step-father, who had at the time a rather high position in the military, we were assigned another free-of-charge apartment in the same building just around the corner from the other one. Curiously enough our summer residence was just below the one occupied by my uncle and my aunt, mentioned above. So we had some wonderful times together. It is very strange to realize what events I witnessed without any definite reason or definitely defined purpose. But there I was in the summer just a stone's throw from all kinds of Imperial ceremonies. I saw Nicholas the Second just a hundred feet away, together with his officials and a vast group of foreign ambassadors and military attachées in their gala uniforms crossing the street from the palace to some other kind of hall for either dinner or some other engagement. The same sort of thing would take place once or twice in the summer when the families of the military personnel were observers at the Grand Parade, on one of the fields where the Emperor stood astride his horse for at least a couple of hours in perfect quiet. His horses must have received special training. Infantry, cavalry, and artillery passed by, and as they did so their bands turned to the left and joined other bands in playing the National Anthem. It was quite impressive.

Another thing I was extremely fond of was to watch almost any day some of the Cossack cavalry regiments returning from their barracks. Most of the men on horseback were singing some national folk songs as they went by, accompanied by two or three instruments. This was very exhilarating and uplifting; I hated ever to miss it.

My aunt had developed a rather large vegetable garden which supplied much of our food; some of the products could also be stored for winter use. I think that most of my lunches were made up of chewing raw vegetables, and of some berries that grew in profusion. These were the surroundings where an Englishman from the city would come twice a week and teach me the rudiments of the English language; it was not much and I was not very proficient, but it helped me a little later on when I started for America.

I'm sorry to say that some of my studies with my tutor who lived with us in summer resulted in my making a little collection of butterflies pinned to a display board. I couldn't think of myself doing it now. In August we had a month or two in Switzerland, as explained elsewhere, and then we settled for the winter on the great Palace Square. In the night the temperature would be about twenty-five below, but the heating was quite satisfactory. Every one of the large rooms had a fireplace and one or two of them had a Swedish "kakelungen," which is a stove built in the corner of the room out of bricks and tiles. It burned wood, and the tiles radiated heat throughout the night. The only trouble, and it was a serious one, arose when the logs to be used in the open fireplaces had been out in the snow and were not dry and they smoked. The only way the smoke could get out was to open the window. That sounds very simple, but it was really quite complex. The windows in that old building were about seven feet tall. They were made of three consecutive thicknesses with space in between, and the space between the outside window and the next one was wide enough to store perishable food. In addition to that the entire window, from top to bottom, was securely fastened with putty and remained that way for several months. The only way to open that window was to open one square-foot pane, three in succession, and you could not keep it open more than ten minutes because of the weather out-



side. Somehow or other it was done, and after awhile the fireplace was going full blast.

It would be impossible for me to say what happened to all our furniture and belongings after we left for Sweden. We had some wonderful Oriental rugs, most unusual Gobelin tapestries at least fifteen feet tall, beautiful furniture, and a considerable number of paintings by some of the Russian masters. As far as I remember, the elder sister of my mother sold some of them, placed other items in museums, and stored others in churches where she had connections. Among the priceless paintings we had were about half-a-dozen oil sea-scapes, no larger than four by six. The great seascape painter Ivan K. Ayvazovsky lived somewhere in the Crimea not very far from an estate owned by my grandfather. Occasionally he would drive over to visit my grandfather, not knowing whether he was home or not, and on several occasions he missed him. So he would sit down and paint a seascape with a sailing boat and all the riggings — a master production, which he would leave as a visiting card. What became of these paintings I have no idea. It is interesting to note that the painter's brother was a high church official in the Caucasus, and H.P.B. and her sister in their younger years met him, as they were travelling with their family to the Caucasus in about 1859 or '60. The patriarch had been greatly impressed with H.P.B.'s psychic sensitivity and general outlook on life, as well as her experiences in other parts of the world where she had just come from. He was very kind to her, very sympathetic, and understood what kind of a person she was. He said that she would have a great future, which was most encouraging to H.P.B.

My last year in Russia

The year of 1917 started ominously. Sporadic shooting went on in various parts of the city, but it was controlled. Remember that the war with Germany was still going on. I remember my mother and some of our relatives reading in the evening the newspaper which printed transcriptions of the speeches and statements made in the Parliament that day. Some of our finest statesmen tried to convince the authorities that ominous events were coming unless some drastic reforms were put through. These speeches became more and more outspoken and they were given by individuals whose knowledge was considerable and who could be trusted.

On the 15th of December, 1916, Rasputin was murdered, and this event seemed to precipitate all sorts of changes. Very soon afterwards the Revolution engaged in various violent actions which I will not pause to describe. Eventually, the Czar had to abdicate to meet the demands for a constitutional change, and the power passed into the hands of the Provisional Government. It is obvious that this government was very mild in contemplated reforms, as it was headed by a nobleman, Count Lvov. They were able to control violence and to reorganize the armed forces in other aspects of Russian life according to a better pattern. Nevertheless the Revolution was on, and nobody could have said where it might end. The man who emerged very suddenly out of nowhere was one of the members of the provisional government, by name Alexander Kerensky, who became the strong man. I don't think he was strong enough, but he definitely was a very able individual who had the pulse of the nation under his finger. Kerensky's portrait began to appear everywhere, and his name had some kind



of a magic which for awhile unified the nation. This lasted for some time, but, as appeared later on, events were too strong for him.

Going back now for a moment to the day of the Provisional Government taking over: All officials military and civilian were given a little red rosette to wear, pinned to their lapel. My stepfather, of course, hated to have to do it, feeling it was almost a sacrilege, but he realized that that was only a symbol. When, the next morning, he went out of the front door of our apartment on to the staircase that would lead him to his office he found right up against the door a six-foot soldier of the imperial guard, standing with rifle ready. So he said to him, "May all be well with you," and the guard responded in the usual official military way. So we knew that we were protected and that all would be well.

We spent the summer of 1917 in Viborg, Finland, where my step-father was temporarily stationed in connection with the military setup between Russia and the semi-autonomous Finland. We returned to our apartment sometime in July. In August of that year the Russian garrison in Viborg mutinied and started killing their officers and throwing them into the bay. Most of them perished. It was a local upheaval for which the Provisional Government was in no way to blame. They missed my stepfather. One of his orderlies told him: "General, if you want to be safe, dress warmly and start walking on the railway track; walk on as far as you can, and some train will pick you up."

Knowing nothing of what had happened, we suddenly one day saw my step-father coming in through the door, and heard the tale of his return to Petrograd. That convinced us that it was about time to leave the country, and we began to prepare for it. The government was organizing a commission for the control of exchange rates, and it was to be centered in Scandinavia. So we prepared to go to Stockholm, Sweden, with the little money that was left, although we had some funds abroad. The question was, how to cross Finland without my step-father being recognized. He was taller than most anybody else and stood out in any crowd. However, we managed to cross Finland on train right up to the northernmost border, where in semi-darkness we walked across the frontier carrying our bags. We picked up the train in Haparanda, on the way to Stockholm. Our journey took at least four days and three nights, but we felt safe and free. We stopped at the Strand Hotel in Stockholm waiting for what would happen next.

How I learned about Theosophy

One of the first things that happened in Stockholm after our arrival was that any appointment from the provisional government in Russia became null and void. And so my step-father had to look for another type of work in a country whose language was unfamiliar to him. I made every effort to learn Swedish and to establish some connections for him. As was customary, my step-father called on the Russian consul whose name was Kanaurov. At his home we met his elderly mother who was a member of the Adyar Theosophical Society. On her round table there were two books which apparently she was studying. One of them was *Les Grandes Initiates* by Eduard Schuré, and the other was H.P.B.'s *The Secret Doctrine*. After looking them over I asked if I could borrow them. There was an immediate and positive response. This



was my first direct contact with H.P.B.'s writings. I took them to the hotel where we were staying and returned them to the elderly lady as soon as I was able to take copies out from the Royal Library, where I became a steady visitor, spending there many hours of my days. In the meantime my Swiss governess in search for her type of work which was teaching French to children, encountered on one of the Stockholm streets the ladies to whom she had taught French twenty years before. There was an immediate recognition, which was quite extraordinary. That family became some of our closest and intimate friends while we stayed in Sweden. They were instrumental in placing me in various connections so that I could easily continue my studies in Swedish.

How I came to Point Loma

Now, how I came to Point Loma. It was in 1923. I lived in Baden-Baden, Germany, with my mother and her older sister who had recently escaped from Russia, where her husband had been killed. There were at that time probably half a million Russian refugees in exile in Germany alone. To expect to get any kind of employment would have been a wild dream unless you had some special "pull." I could see that after graduating from the College Scientific, in Lausanne, Switzerland, I didn't have very much of a future in Germany. My mother didn't know of any of my plans, and my Theosophical interests were rather foreign to her, and I hardly ever discussed them. Psychologically we had drifted apart. But otherwise, of course, our relation was always very amiable and peaceful, and she had been a saint to take care of me in my infancy, because of my various sicknesses.

While walking in the streets of this little community where I had been a couple of times before, I had met a Russian-American by the name of Nicholas Romanoff. He learned as a result of our conversations that I was a student of Theosophy and had entertained the idea of going to Point Loma, about which I had learned something from a printed pamphlet. He told me that he had had a son in the Point Loma school for a short time and was very much satisfied. He definitely advised me to write there, and to explain my case to either Katherine Tingley or some official. I followed his advice. Unfortunately I do not have a copy of my letter, but I received very soon an answer dated, May 15, 1923, from Dr. Joseph H. Fussell, secretary.

In the meantime my Swiss governess, who had remained in Stockholm after we left there two or three years before, acting together with some of her friends arranged for me a trip to Stockholm to stay for three or four months with a Swedish family and teach French and German to their son and daughter. It was not a salaried position, but it included board and lodging, and they were going to give me a certain amount of money when I left at the end of the summer. So it was from Stockholm that I answered Dr. Fussell's letter on the 6th of July, 1923. I answered very carefully and fully all of his questions, and gave him a complete picture of my circumstances. I sent it registered. On August the 8th he replied, and I append a copy of his letter herewith [Now in archives of T.S. American Section (Adyar), Wheaton, Illinois].

It would appear that he had had some correspondence with Mr. Romanoff and that Katherine Tingley was going to Sweden that very Fall. He suggested that I make every effort to meet her personally and talk things over. So I watched the dates. She was



going to speak in the evening of August 19, 1923, at the Grand Hotel in Stockholm. I was there to hear her. It is probable that I was introduced to her by her secretary, Iverson L. Harris, Jr., and was told that she was going to Finland right away and would see me in a week's time in Stockholm. I stayed overnight with some friends, and went back to my summer home with the Swedish family by boat the next morning.

A week later, on August 29th, I was again in Stockholm on a very stormy and rainy day, and presented myself at the apartment where Katherine Tingley and her party had their lodging. I was met by Madame Anna Wicander, one of the very prominent members of the Point Loma T.S. in Sweden. I knew nothing about any Theosophical Society. And so their personalities were unknown to me. I was ushered into a very small study, sat down, and waited for Katherine Tingley to come. Pretty soon the door opened and in walked a rather small person of about 60 or 65, who came up to me looking straight into my face as if she recognized me. The moment I saw her I knew I had seen her many times before. There was instant recognition and a feeling of mutual trust. She sat down and asked me to sit right in front of her, and said, "So you are a relative of H.P.B." I said, "Yes, the only living relative, as far as I know."

We talked for about ten or fifteen minutes, I in my very halting English, intermixed with French, which she understood quite well. She asked me whether I had any attachments, and found that I had none and was quite free and eager to go to Point Loma to work. She asked me about my mother, and felt a little bit surprised that she knew next to nothing about my plans. She asked me how did I expect to get to Point Loma. I told her plainly that if I dedicated myself to her work I thought perhaps that the Theosophical Society would pay my fare. She said, "Oh!" She also said that I could not return with her now, but that I should come in about three months. I said, "Well, I do not know how I would be able to stay here another three months." But she said, "Don't worry, it will all come out all right." She then got up, went through another door which had only a curtain. In that room Madame Wicander was waiting for her. She went straight to her and said, "Anna, we must have that boy; we must have him." That is all I heard. I then stepped out through the other door I had used to come in, and after a few words with one or another of the party I went right back home on the boat. I probably exchanged a few ideas with Madame Wicander. I also remember that Katherine Tingley told me to contact Madame Wicander later, when I needed the funds for my fare. Nothing of this was in writing. There were no other witnesses. Everything was based on trust.

So, having finished my assignment in the Swedish family, and having received from them one hundred Swedish crowns, I went back to Stockholm where my wonderful Swiss governess had arranged for me to stay in a little apartment for a very small fee. She could see me practically every day, and I could spend time in the Royal Library studying Theosophy. I was not interested in attending any meetings, as organizations did not mean very much to me. Very soon I found myself flat in bed with chickenpox, of which there were hardly any cases in town; having been vaccinated three times, it was a great surprise. The fever was high and the itching was limited to the scalp under the hair. I called in the doctor whom I knew very well from previous trips to Sweden, and he said, "Well, you might as well say nothing to anybody. If the landlady



knows about it, she will put you in the hospital. The most contagious period is long before it breaks out, and you can contract it at 150 feet distance from another individual. If you have to say anything at all, say you have a very heavy cold.”

My Swiss governess brought me meals and took care of several other things until I was restored in an unusually short time. As soon as I felt strong enough I began to do something about getting a visa to go to the U.S.A. This involved a quota, and I was told there was very little chance of my getting a visa. I owe a debt of gratitude to the American Consul, Robert F. Fernald, who looked favorably upon the situation. My close friend, John Thulin of the Royal Appellate Court, interviewed the consul and gave him a written statement about my character. He said the U.S.A. would eventually benefit by my being a citizen. The consul accepted his recommendation, and, without actually having to do so, gave me an immigrant visa, which I carried home in great glee. He was a key figure in the whole transaction. In a little while I developed a ghastly carbuncle in the middle of my left cheek, which the same doctor had to lance, leaving no scar behind. I truly thought that both sicknesses were part of my purification, before going to Point Loma. Very soon after that I went to Madame Wicander and told her I was ready now to receive my funds and to book my passage. I said that Katherine Tingley told me to come to her when I needed the funds. She looked at me rather whimsically and said, “Oh, did she?” I said, “Yes, she did.” She gave me a check. Again, everything based on trust; no proof or evidences of any kind. After a number of visits from various of my friends from former years, I left Stockholm on December 9, 1923, on my way through Denmark to Newcastle, England. I was met in London by friends who took me to their beautiful country cottage, where I stayed two or three days. Going back to London, I continued to Southampton, and boarded the Leviathan, flagship of the U.S.A. merchant marine, and one of the largest boats afloat, on my way to New York.

For a number of years, off and on, I had seen in my mind’s eye the crossing of the ocean, going west at sunset, with a golden light shining amidst scattered clouds. This picture would come up, over and over again, with slight variations, and I felt that it had something to do with my coming years. And here I was now sailing West, with a golden light, amidst scattered clouds on a rather quiet ocean. The passage was calm, except for one day when I watched that enormous ship tossing back and forth, a motion that I seemed to enjoy. And every evening it was the same sort of sunset I’d always visioned with Venus bright as a beacon light a couple of hours after sunset. It seemed to lead us Westward to the land of promise. I do not remember the class I was in, but I had a nice little cabin by myself and excellent meals, at which I made my first acquaintance with a grapefruit; I couldn’t realize whether it was an oversize lemon or a hybrid between a lemon and an orange!

On the 22nd of December in 1923 as we were approaching New York the ship got on to a sandbank off Statten Island, and could not proceed. Six hours later at high tide it was refloated. The majority of the passengers were taken off in smaller boats and barges. For some reason or other the custom and immigration officials came to the steamer from New York for their routine work. A couple of hours later we arrived in New York where everybody was meeting everybody else in great excitement. I was met by [Solomon Hecht] who was a brother of one of the teachers in the Point Loma



School [Julia Hecht, who taught piano]. He took me to a hotel for one night's stay, and the next day helped me to get on to a Santa Fe train bound for Los Angeles.

That was quite a trip. Although it lasted at least six days, it was very comfortable. There were very few people on the train. As far as I remember there was no Harvey dining car, but the company had arranged for three stops every day in small communities where everybody had their meals in little restaurants very close to the train. I admired the magnificent scenery, particularly further west, and saw my first people from Hawaii and my first American Indians, who were especially interesting, when we reached Needles, California. On the last day in the morning, approaching Los Angeles through San Bernardino County, everything was saturated with the fragrance of orange blossoms for miles and miles. We arrived at a very small station in Los Angeles where I was supposed to change to the Santa Fe train for San Diego. That morning and for the next two or three days there was what I later learned was termed a Santa Ana wind. The temperature was 85° Fahrenheit. The sky was azure blue and all sorts of shrubs were in bloom. On the trip to San Diego at San Juan Capistrano the train started running practically on the beach. The sight of the ultra-marine ocean and the tumbling surf on the beach and the brilliant sunshine was a sight which I will never forget. I certainly thought this was the land of promise. This went on for several miles. Soon the train pulled into San Diego station and I realized at that time that of all the money I had with me I was left with approximately one dollar and fifty cents, wondering where Point Loma was, and how I was going to get there.

However, I felt not worried at all. When I got onto the platform I could see some people who were looking for someone. I thought I recognized one of them. I went up to them and introduced myself. Oh, they said, here you are! It was Lars Eek, Iverson L. Harris, Jr., and one more who may have been Lucien Copeland, but I'm not sure of that. They took charge of me. Madame Tingley's private car with her chauffeur, Henry Layer, were waiting on the street, and I was taken over directly to Point Loma without having to spend one cent of my dollar and fifty cents. Curiously enough the room with a private bath which was reserved for me, was in the girls' school, which was called the Academy building. We laughed over that many times in later years.

And this is the way I arrived in Point Loma.

From then on

I do not remember meeting K.T. or G. de P. (Dr. Gottfried de Purucker) on the day of my arrival. The next day G. de P. took me on a tour of the grounds, and showed me everything he thought I might be interested in. It was the same sort of day, 85° F. in the shade and with everything in bloom. He then took me to Katherine Tingley's private home, that used to be called "Wachere Crest," for lunch. I met K.T. in the so-called "Egyptian Room," and she welcomed me with open arms. I couldn't help thinking, this is a reception more fit for someone with years of experience and service to the Cause, instead of to a total stranger seeking to establish a link with it. I kept on asking myself, Why! Why!

K.T.'s lunches were more or less a stag party. G. de P. of course was there, but not every day, as he liked to eat quietly in his own cottage where the kitchen sent him his meals. I met that day Talbot Mundy, Reginald W. Machell, Frank Pierce, Feodor



Kolin (who did not stay long there), H.T. Patterson, and Dr. Henry T. Edge. Believe it or not, K.T. had me out for lunch every single day for over a month, during which time I was able to acquire some fluency in English, supplementing some sentences in French. I believe that K.T. was studying me very closely during these sessions, and I became a close friend especially of Talbot Mundy.

Several years later in a private and very significant conversation with G. de P. alone he told me: "The first day when you came here to Point Loma, we went on a walk around the grounds; this same day, K.T. told me never to relax my watch over you; keep a constant and uninterrupted watch, and keep my hands off also, whenever I recognized the workings of your own Daimon. That's when all training must cease; and *it* must take the lead."

In a very few days after my arrival I was given a beautiful room downstairs in Pioneer Cottage. This was an old farm house that was there before the property was acquired. A little covered-up passage led to the bathroom. My cottage stood next to Mr. [Henry Turner] Patterson's home and G. de P.'s own cottage. It faced the Egyptian room where I had met K.T. Across a small rose garden was the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Emil Neresheimer and the Bartons [Mrs. N's daughter and son-in-law]. It was in their home that I was shown for the first time the bound volumes of *The Theosophist*, *Lucifer*, and *The Path*, and was allowed by them most kindly to borrow any of these volumes for reading and study. Some of these volumes are in my library today [now in Library of Point Loma Publications, Inc.] as the Bartons wanted me to have them after their people had passed away.

On the 15th of January, 1924, on G. de P.'s birthday, I joined the Theosophical Society and was given my diploma. While browsing through the above mentioned magazines later that year I took a resolution to compile H.P.B.'s works into one uniform edition of many volumes as source material for future work. Knowing well what H.P.B.'s published volumes were at that time, I realized very soon that there was a great deal more material available, and that it would take much time and effort to put it together in chronological order. Only then could it be said what was the scope of her writings, and what they contained. I believe it was sometime in December of 1924 that I started compiling her writings.

I lived in many different places in Lomaland, all of them very pleasant. I probably enjoyed more than anything living on the bluff half-way between the main building and the press. There were a few scraggly eucalyptus trees there and only one other house [though in earlier years there were some dozen tents there, the nucleus of the Literary department, called Camp Karnak] occupied by Harold Williams the plumber. There was nothing but sheer space there at 300 feet above sea-level looking over the blue ocean. During storms I felt a few times I might go out sailing, house and myself, into the canyon to the south. But nothing ever happened. It was well built.

My occupations [over the years] were quite varied, as was also the case with a lot of other comrades. I will mention a few. Opening the Front Gate and maybe closing it at night; taking my two-hour shift there; taking visitors around the grounds, explaining to them the purpose and work of the Society, selling them literature; parking cars for the Sunday afternoon meetings, and patrolling the grounds to observe that every-



thing was all right. Sometimes I ushered visitors into the Temple, or attended to their seating; taking my shift in serving at the cafeteria counter and also in washing the dishes; trimming with a curved saw dead leaves off the palm trees on a high ladder, gathering everything that was cut and burning it up at a special location. I'm not mentioning the press, the laundry department, Exchange-and-Mart [departments] where I did not work. Everything was done by volunteer workers with the exception of one Mexican boy who was paid to fill holes in the pavement [also one carpenter and in the early days a plumber who worked at the Construction department]. The most pleasant period was when I was helping in the forestry with most of my day occupied trimming, cutting, burning, and irrigating. For several years I worked in the office of the Secretary General, Dr. J.H. Fussell, who used to be private secretary to Mr. Judge; and for a long time I was associated with Helen Harris, assisting in the E.S. Office where for a little over a year I was in charge while G. de P. and staff were in England. A most pleasant work almost any day was in the early hours when I gathered ripe fruit in the orchards and carted them by wheelbarrow to the kitchen.

One of the most important and spiritually significant events was on July the 11th, 1929, when K.T. died in Sweden and G. de P. took over. Hardly anybody knew just exactly what would take place in the evening when G. de P. had called a very special private meeting in the Temple of Peace. The tension that day could be sensed by anybody, and anything could have happened, and probably did! At about 7:30 p.m. I helped to park the cars, and when everybody was in the Temple, both from Lomaland and San Diego, I just patrolled around the balustrade of the temple, assuring myself that all was well. And when the meeting had actually started I opened the door, quietly stepped in, and sat down near the entrance. The Temple was full, and the only light was from two seven-branched candelabras. There was a little bit of organ music and a brief announcement or two by Dr. Fussell. The spiritual atmosphere of the place could have been, metaphorically speaking, cut with a knife. There was total silence. After a few moments of it, G. de P., seated on the platform together with officers of the Cabinet, got up, took a few steps to the large oak chair beautifully carved by Mr. [Reginald] Machell, which used to be K.T.'s chair, and knelt down on the little cushion in front of it. . . .

Very little followed after this. After some silence and a bit of music, everybody left.

In 1931 and part of 1932, G. de P. and a skeleton staff went to England to establish a temporary headquarters and try to increase the work with the help of A. Trevor Barker. I was supposed to be a member of the party, and not being an American citizen yet, I applied for a re-entry visa, and was refused it on the ground that I was a six-month tourist who had overstayed his visa by eight years. A big scramble followed. All sorts of people were mobilized to have this thing straightened out, and with very little results. No other country would give me an entrance visa, except Sweden where I came from. That of course was of no use to me. Among the people who were asked to help this situation was Senator Hiram Johnson, a vociferous man who hated all officials and had no use for any of the departments of the Government. He took up the case but I never found out what he did, or what he intended doing. The Government started deportation proceedings against me, about which I did not do anything for awhile. After a few months of this rigmarole, with G. de P. and staff



already in England, I received in the mail from the ministry of the interior, what I could hardly believe — my first papers of citizenship! There was no explanation of any kind. I could present myself for full citizenship two years later. The uproar was terrific, as the Government found itself in the position of trying to deport an immigrant with first papers of citizenship already in hand; somebody realized somewhere that my entrance visa in 1923 had been recorded as a six-month tourist visa on the sandbanks of New York Harbor. I didn't do anything more about it and kept quiet, but of course my trip to England had evaporated. Two years later, Roosevelt, an entirely new official, was in power. I said to myself, I'm not in a hurry. I'm going to wait another two years, to be sure that all these troubles are in the past.

In 1936, I applied for full citizenship papers and was told to present myself at the Immigration office in San Diego with two witnesses, which I did. The officer turned to one of the witnesses and asked for his name. His name was W. Emmett Small. He had known me for some years and was in daily contact with me. That was satisfactory. Then the official turned over to my other witness and asked him for his name. He said, "Sir, I'm George Washington." "Oh, you are George Washington?" he queried. "Have you known this man for some time?" "Yes, I've known this man for about eight years, and have had daily contact with him," was the reply. "And you are George Washington?" The eyes of the official happened to wander to George Washington's portrait on the wall next to the American flag, and back to my witness, and back to that portrait. At that moment everybody started laughing. There was absolutely no difference between the portrait and the witness, and the official said, "How is this possible!" My witness replied "Sir, I'm the direct descendent from George Washington's half-brother." Everybody had a wonderful time over it, and I thought to myself, Good heavens this was a nice little revenge on my part for the tourist visa on the sandbanks of New York. From that time on my witness, George Washington, was called to many a festivity, celebration, march, or any other traditional event in San Diego, to impersonate the Father of the country next to the American flag.

Another memory is especially precious. When I lived upstairs in the Pioneer Cottage I used to go out in the evening for a little walk, and one day I noticed G. de P. standing outside of his own residence smoking and looking over the ocean. [This was before G. de P. became Leader of the T.S.] He greeted me and I returned his greeting. When I came back from my walk he was still there. He stopped me and asked a couple of questions. The same thing happened on another day, until it became almost habitual that I would stop with him for a brief talk. On one occasion he had been wondering what was that pillar of light near the Theosophical Library. I said I did not see any pillar of light, and he did not explain. Pillars of light sometime precede the manifestation of an adept, but in this case nothing was said on the subject. I vividly remember these brief talks with G. de P. which meant a great deal to me.

When I had learned fluent English, G. de P. wanted me to lecture, and wrote out some very specific instructions as to various points which I should be careful about organizationally and in regard to the finances if I were lecturing outside Lomaland. From that time on I delivered a rather large number of lectures in San Diego, Los Angeles, and desert communities under the auspices of the American Section of our T.S. When the Point Loma headquarters were moved in May of 1942 to a property



near Covina, California, where buildings were purchased which had belonged to a boy's preparatory school, I lectured there once or twice while living in Los Angeles with Dr. & Mrs. Sven Eek. On September 20th G. de P. delivered his last lecture, which is recorded in *Wind of the Spirit*. With others from Los Angeles I attended this meeting.

Next Sunday, September the 27th, I was supposed to lecture there, and when some of us arrived at the new headquarters property we saw Judith Tyberg running to meet us. She said that G. de P. had passed away earlier in the morning. So of course the lecture was cancelled. The last I saw of G. de P. was from some distance when his body was being carried by Dr. Wilcox and several others from the Medical Infirmary to his own home, where it stayed until cremation. (A full description of these events is contained in a letter to me written by Miss Elsie V. Savage — later Mrs. Benjamin — which is filed in my Benjamin correspondence folder. It is historically important and has never been published.) I very distinctly remember that two nights after G. de P.'s passing I vividly dreamt of him. We talked about the teachings and after a while he said to me, "I'm so glad to have had this talk with you. I must go now. I'll see you after awhile." His voice became indistinct as if receding in the distance and I woke up.

BORIS DE ZIRKOFF



Himalayas (1933) Nicholas Roerich

