

EXCERPT

Ayn Rand and the World She Made'

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Chapter 1: Before the Revolution

1905–1917

If a life can have a theme song, and I believe every worthwhile one has, mine is a religion, an obsession, or a mania or all of these expressed in one word: individualism. I was born with that obsession and have never seen and do not know now a cause more worthy, more misunderstood, more seemingly hopeless and more tragically needed. Call it fate or irony, but I was born, of all countries on earth, in the one least suitable for a fanatic of individualism, Russia. —"Autobiographical, Sketch," 1936

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

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

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

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

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

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

hired a cook, a maid, a nurse for her daughters, and even a Belgian governess to help the three girls improve their French before they entered school, French being the common language of the Russian educated classes. The girls also took music and drawing lessons.

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

Anna came from a more privileged background than Zinovy did. She seems to have been born and raised in St. Petersburg, which was a marked advantage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this gave her an air of sophistication and social polish that her husband lacked. Anna's father, Rand's maternal grandfather, was a prosperous St. Petersburg tailor named Berko (or Boris) Itskovitch Kaplan who owned a factory that made military uniforms for the czar's guards, an occupation that would have afforded the family some protection in times of trouble. Anna's mother, Rand's grandmother, named Rozalia Pavlovna Kaplan, was a pharmacist, just as Zinovy and Anna's sister Dobrulia's husband were. All lived within a few streets of one another, including the Konheims, the Guzarchiks, and two of Anna's brothers, Josel and Moisha, called Mikhail. Since many members of Anna's extended family also lived nearby, and at least a few of Zinovy's eight brothers and sisters eventually joined him in St. Petersburg, Rand grew up surrounded by a sizable Jewish clan.

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

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