CHAPTER 1

The Artist’s Roots and Formative Years

I am a self-loving person...
N. ROERICH, From a letter to a friend

Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich was born in St Petersburg, Russia's imperial capital, on 27 September (New style: 9 October) 1874. His father Konstantin Feodorovich was a notary at the city’s circuit court, his mother Maria Vasilievna Kalashnikova came from a merchant's family in Pskov, an ancient Russian city. There were three more children in the family – a girl Lydia (born 1867) and two boys – Boris (1880) and Vladimir (1882).

The Roerichs were fairly well off. They lived in a typical 19th century apartment building, dokhodnyi dom, on Nikolaevskaya Embankment (University Embankment today), facing the river Neva. Their apartment was on the first floor and had a corner balcony from which opened a panoramic and most breathtaking view – a long row of magnificent buildings, symbols of the empire, on the other bank of Neva, including the smart palaces of Russian nobility, the Ruling Senate and the Most Holy Synod, St Isaac’s Cathedral, the city’s foremost Orthodox Church, with its lavishly gilt dome glinting in the sun, the elegant spire of the Admiralty shooting up into the sky and further down the baroque-styled Winter Palace, residence of the tsars, the Romanovs. And there were steamers on the water, with smoking funnels, anchored along the embankment.

Nikolai Roerich’s ancestral roots are largely shrouded in mystery. The artist himself claimed that he was of Scandinavian descent, that his Roerich lineage in general was very old and ramified, that his ancestors lived in many countries around the Baltic Sea and elsewhere in Europe – in Norway, Sweden, Friesland, France, Courland, Latvia and Russia – and numbered some distinguished military figures as well as clergymen. Among his forefathers were bellicose Vikings, known as Variagi in Russia, and he made hints in private about

1 Dohodnyi dom is a privately-owned “income bringing” building with apartments for rent in the 19th and early 20th century Russia.
2 The exact address is Nikolaevskaya (Universitetskaya) Naberezhnaya 25, flat 8. See Anikina, Sobolev 2003.
the Roerichs having direct kinship with the legendary Varangian chieftain, Ru-
rik, the ruler of Novgorod, who founded the Rurik Dynasty which ruled Russia
until the 17th century. Nikolai was particularly proud of his time-honored fam-
ily arms – its shield was decorated with palm leaves, which indicated that there
were diplomats among his ancestors, and it was crowned with a turban that can
be usually seen on the Crusaders’ arms.3

A contemporary Latvian researcher Ivars Silars, however, disclaims these
statements as totally unfounded. According to him, the family name Roerich
presumably comes from the German word das Röhricht (reed scrub) or from
the male name Roderich and definitely not from Scandinavian Rurik (Hroerik).
The artist’s closest forebears – his father Konstantin, grandfather Friedrich and
great grandfather Johann all come from Kurzeme (Courland), the south-west
part of Latvia, which was under the Russian rule since 1710. Roerich’s great
grandfather Johann Heinrich Röerich (1763–1820) was born in Vetzieskate (Alt-
Sexaten in German), a small town in the Kurland Dukedom. He was a shoe-
maker. The grandfather Friedrich (Feodor) Alexander (1806–1905) served as a
steward of the Paplacken country estate in the Courland province (gubernia)
owned by Baron Johann von der Ropp and his wife Laura.4

As for Nikolai’s father, Konstantin Friedrich (Feodorovich) (1837–1900), he
did not belong to the Roerich family at all, being born of a liaison between
Eduard von der Ropp, son of the owners of the Paplacken estate, and Charlotte
Constantia Schuhschel, their house-maid. The child was baptized on 7th July
1837 and named Konstantin Christoph Traugott Glaubert. His family name as
given in the parish records was that of his mother. According to Silars, Konstan-
tin’s real father Eduard von der Ropp, captain of the Engineer Corps of Com-
munications in St Petersburg, seduced the young woman during one of his
occasional visits to his parents’ estate, or this could have been a love affair
with no hope of a marital union for the lovers, given the social abyss separating
them.

Be that as it may, at the age of 12 (in 1849) Konstantin was sent to St Peters-
burg where he was taken care of by his biological father Eduard von der Ropp.
It was him and not Friedrich Roerich who pleaded with the administrative com-
mittee of the Technological Institute to admit the teenage boy in the school as
“a boarder” and who paid his tuition. He also forwarded to the same committee

3 The Roerichs’ family arms is discussed in an article by V.G. Kirkevich, see Kirkevich 2002,
328–332.
4 See Silars 2005, 61–80. Evgenii Pchelov in his recently published monograph about Rurik and
his descendants noted only the etymological affinity of the names Rurik and Roerich, see
Pchelov 2010, 287.