CHAPTER 4

In the Asiatic Museum

1 Introduction to a Legend (to the memory of F. A. Rosenberg) (1903–1934)

One day in the winter of 1903, Boris Alexandrovich Turayev, during his lecture on the history of Abyssinia, said to me, as usual looking at some point over the heads of his two faithful students: “You ought to see this edition of Perruchon: I have not got it, but they have it in the Asiatic Museum. Ask Lemm”. It was not easy for me, a student of the first year, fresh from the provinces, to overcome my shyness and present myself at the new library, especially as it was rumoured that the director’s permission was required for students who wished to work there.

In those days the Asiatic Museum, which had long ago ceased to have much of the museum about it and contained only books and Oriental manuscripts, was situated in its old quarters near the main building of the Academy of Sciences in the Tamózhennïy pereulok, opposite the Anthropological and Ethnographical Museum. These premises were new to many, for the Museum had moved into them only two years previously from another wing of the Academy building.

The porter, clad in the Academy uniform of those days, hung up my coat and mounting several steps opened the door into a room to the right of the entrance. In the semi-obscurity I could not quite make out the interior. Most of the space was taken up by an enormous square table to the left of the door, and at the moment there was no one in sight. Facing the entrance stood a low but very wide filing-case with innumerable drawers containing the card-index. Behind it rose an imposing writing-desk | which resembled a professorial chair. In here it was dark even in the day-time and a reading-lamp was always kept burning.

Before I had quite got my bearings a somewhat ungracious voice asked from behind the desk:

“What do you want?”

Only then did I notice the man seated there. He was still young, tall and elegantly dressed; the most striking feature about him was the deformity of his nose. Taking him for Lemm, whom Turayev had mentioned, I stated that I wished to obtain the Director’s permission to work in the Museum.
“On whose recommendation?” the man at the desk asked in the same tone as before.

Though I had not expected this question, I replied that Professor Turayev, whose lectures I attended, had indicated to me a certain book.

“Have we got it?” queried the stern personage.

I again quoted Turayev. At this the man descended from his elevation and going to the catalogue started running over the cards. Apparently the search was unsuccessful for he kept up a discontented mutter. At this moment a grumbling voice, coming from somewhere at the back of the room where beyond the writing-desk began an enfilade of book-shelves, asked in German:

“What does he want?”

My interlocutor named the book. There came immediately the sound of rapid, slightly limping footsteps and a short, thin, grey-haired little old man, strongly smelling of cigars, came into view. Looking very displeased he shouted angrily at me:

“But this is from a series, one must give the serial number!”

He sought out a card in the catalogue and showed it crossly to the first man. This was O. E. Lemm, Turayev’s teacher, an Egyptologist and perhaps the greatest authority on Coptic studies in Europe, who was then the sole keeper of the Asiatic Museum. The other man, the distinguished Iranian scholar F. A. Rosenberg, was only a supernumerary attached to the Museum. A minute later Perruchon’s volume was in my hands and I sat down to the table to work. In reply to my question about the Director’s permission Rosenberg only waved his hand saying:

“We will tell him ourselves”.

I was not asked to produce any documents and all formalities ended there. I think that even my name remained unknown at the Museum for quite a long time. I do not remember whether on that day the Museum was visited by the Director, Academician K. G. Salemann, a lively elderly German from Reval, energetic of speech and gait, of somewhat dry aspect and always wearing undress uniform. In those days he was Director not only of the Museum but of the Foreign Department of the Library of the Academy of Sciences as well. Later, on his initiative the enormous new building of the Library was built, but he was not destined to see it completed. I well remember that there looked in, for something in a hurry, the young and lively S. F. Oldenburg, who in the following year became the Permanent Secretary of the Academy. He passed the table nearly at a run, but for some reason noticed the only reader there. When he got behind the writing-desk where the line of book-shelves began