In the course of time, Theosophy has experienced numerous schisms and the formation of new branches. Agni Yoga (also known as Living Ethics, a name adopted in the 1930s), founded by the Russian painter Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) and his wife Helena Roerich (1879–1955), is one of the most vital branches of Theosophy. The Roerichs formed their Theosophical system, involving elements of ethics and psychology, on the basis of the ontology, cosmogony, and anthropology created by the founder of the Theosophical Society (TS), Helena Blavatsky. Their followers have since then developed a dense network of Theosophical groups covering almost the whole of Europe and North America as well as several countries of South America and Asia.

**Background: Early Involvement in Theosophy**

An essential factor in the success of Agni Yoga is the personalities of its founders – Nicholas and Helena Roerich – who claimed to be channels of a new revelation. Though no documentary evidence has been found as to the Roerichs’ formal membership in the Russian Theosophical Society, there is no doubt that they were involved with circles of Theosophists active in their homeland. In Russia, Blavatsky’s teaching had spread at first to private salons, where small circles of people had taken the opportunity to form the Russian Section of the Theosophical Society. This organization was founded in 1908 thanks to the fact that freedom of speech and assembly had officially been proclaimed in the Russian Empire in 1905.

From which sources the Roerichs had acquired their first information on Theosophy remains, for the time being, unknown; when trying to address this question, one should keep in mind that Nicholas Roerich had become rather actively engaged in salon life. He was among the artists, scientists, and writers who frequented the salon of the sisters Varvara and Alexandra Schneider, and wrote an entry in their so-called questionnaire
In Russia, albums to record opinions, feelings, ideas, characteristics of friends etc. were popular at the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Following S. Diaghilev (1872–1929), the young generation of Russian artists formed the group *Mir Iskusstva* (The World of Art) in 1898. In 1900 Nicholas Roerich accepted his invitation to participate in the annual exhibition of the artists of this group.

Roerich, from time to time, attended *sredy v bashne* (“Wednesdays in the tower”) where the Russian Symbolists met regularly for poetry readings and philosophical discussions at the apartment of the poet, philosopher, and literary critic Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) (Korotkina 1985: 151). “Wednesdays in the tower” to a certain extent became a school of Theosophy for many intellectuals, as Ivanov was often visited by one of the most active Russian Theosophists, Anna Mintslova (1865–1910?) who was trying to emulate Blavatsky even in her looks (Bogomolov 1999: 23–110).

As Roerich regularly cooperated with the Russian ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev, he most probably visited the prestigious salon of Diaghilev’s aunt, Anna Filosofova (1897–1912). She was a leader of the women’s movement (in ways similar to Annie Besant; see Catherine Wessinger’s chapter in this volume) and a leading Russian Theosophist, and she provided financial support to the Russian Section of the Theosophical Society. Filosofova was a member of Maria von Strauch-Spettini’s (1847–1904) circle, and it is quite probable that Roerich was closely related to this group of Russian Theosophists. Maria von Strauch-Spettini herself was a member of the Berlin branch of the Theosophical Society, and a close friend of Marie von Sivers, who was then in Berlin working with Rudolf Steiner (cf. Carlson 1993: 56). Possibly under their influence, the Roerichs rejected the idea, proposed by the leaders of the Theosophical Society, that the Indian youth Jiddu Krishnamurti could be the vehicle of the World Teacher (Fosdik 2002: 299–300).

Another issue that has received little scholarly attention until now is the Roerichs’ early contacts with adepts of Western esotericism. The existence of such contacts is attested by Roerich’s meeting in 1920 with Rabindranath Tagore, who had heard of Roerich’s paintings in London from his old friends, painter William Rothenstein and poet William Butler Yeats, the latter a member of the Esoteric Section of the TS since its foundation in 1888. The successful or unsuccessful cooperation of the Roerichs with the Esoteric Section is a special point of interest.

Even more interesting is the question of the Roerichs’ contacts with esoteric circles in Paris where Roerich studied painting (1900–1901) under the French artist Fernand Cormon. It is noteworthy that it was in Paris in

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