

Irène Micol, née Catoire

Born 30.11.1924, died 05.04.2020

Extract from personal memoir translated from the French by Andrew Rabeneck

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This engaging memoir of expatriate Russian life in Paris between the wars tells of the Catoire family, intermarried with the Rabeneck family. The memoir takes the life of Irène Catoire up to 1940 with Paris under occupation. Irène married a Frenchman Jacques Micol, living in Grenoble, where she taught Russian in a lycée for thirty years. She was great friends with Olga Rabeneck,¹ and often visited London in the 1970s.

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¹ Olga Rabeneck's mother, Olga Pavloff, née Trapp was the sister of Irène's grandmother, Marie Pavloff. Olga Rabeneck was thus was Irène's great-aunt.

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The Catoire family

At the age of 86 I have decided to tidy up my memoir, to the extent that my memory still holds up; I have neither written notes nor documents to serve as a check on what I write. Furthermore, my sight is now poor, and I am sure to make typos and to miss things out. However, Granny will try to do her best.

At the outset I ought to say a few words about the origins and history of the family that explain my choice of profession (I taught Russian in a French lycée for thirty years), as well as the way in which I have been able to grasp the reality of what happened in Russia. Irène Micol, née Catoire, has always tried to be objective, to avoid preconceptions and *a priori* constructs.

The *Catoire de Bioncourt* family is originally from Lorraine. The baronetcy of Bioncourt might have been acquired through marriage, or simply purchased? The Catoires, under the Ancien Régime, were part of the noblesse de la robe;² some of their forbears had been magistrates at Verdun. One of them, Jean-Baptiste Louis César Catoire, son of Nicolas, for some time managed the Saltworks of Lorraine,³ and was almost guillotined during the Terror. His faithful workforce pleaded for mercy at the Revolutionary Tribunal and secured his release.

A certain *Jean-Baptiste Nicolas Catoire* lost a fortune trying to build a canal on a tributary of the Moselle, the Seille I believe, without success. His grandson, *Jean-Baptiste Marie Auguste*, emigrated in 1817 to Moscow in Russia. At the time it was a place where, it was believed, fortunes could be made. Once there he married Anna Ivanova Levé, an extremely capable and independent woman. Widowed early on, she set up a trading company "Widow of A. Catoire and sons". Her business quickly prospered and by 1917 the Catoire family had become one of the best-known traders in Moscow. My grandfather was a councillor at Moscow city hall, and owner of an important modern textile factory and a brickworks the products from which were used in the construction of the famous Gum department store on Red Square, as well as many other buildings and blocks of flats throughout the capital. Leon Catoire was also a company director, an import-export trader for wines, tea and textiles, a landlord, etc. The Catoires enjoyed a lavish lifestyle as a result of their enterprise, their hard work and their foresight.

During the nineteenth century the family became more or less Russian yet remained catholic (a significant handicap under the Russian Orthodox tsarist regime). Léon Catoire was the first to marry a Russian, Marie, née Pavloff, in 1885. Earlier Catoires had married French or English spouses from within

² Under the Ancien Régime of France, the **Nobles of the Robe** or **Nobles of the Gown** (*noblesse de robe*) were French aristocrats whose rank came from holding certain judicial or administrative posts. Throughout the nineteenth century the Catoires also became related to the Trescas and the Audras.

³ almost certainly Jean Baptiste Louis César CATOIRE de BIONCO

Moscow's cosmopolitan colony. Catoires even founded, with other French contributors, the catholic Cathedral of Moscow, Saint-Louis-of-the-French, a neo-classical building now classed as a historic monument, located behind the Lubyanka, home to the Ministry of the Interior and the various secret services (Cheka, Guépéou, NKVD, KGB, etc.), a building with sinister connotations.

The company headquarters of "Widow of A. Catoire and Sons" was on the ground floor of a handsome three story building that they owned in central Moscow on Petrovsky Boulevard, near the church and ex-monastery of the Nativity. The family lived on the upper floors. When I first saw the building during the Soviet era, the ground floor was occupied by a dispensary; later it became an office building. I wonder if it's still there?

Léon Catoire, my paternal grandfather, was responsible with one of his brothers for the management of the company.⁴ My paternal grandmother, née Pavloff, had close German-Russian relatives, the Thals. Her sister had married an Englishman, Trapp, a trader in furs (I believe). Henri Catoire had married the daughter of a German baron. As for my paternal great-grandmother, she'd come from an English family, Forbes, wine merchants. I believe I saw one of their tombstones in the Anglican cemetery at Funchal on Madeira, where there was a large English presence.

My grandfather's third brother, to the annoyance of the family, was interested only in his vocation.⁵ He became professor at the Moscow Conservatory and a quite well-known composer in Russia during the 1920-1930s. His wife was also of Germano-Russian origin.

As for the fourth and last brother,⁶ he was rarely mentioned in the family: he lived unmarried with a little Muscovite dressmaker with whom he had two or three children that he supported. We lost contact with him, and he stayed in the USSR. I later heard from friends in Moscow that there was a General Karyapp (Catoire) in the current Russian army.

My grandfather also had seven (!) sisters. One of the sisters married a French Muscovite, Armand Dutfoy, who owned a major glassware shop that still exists in Moscow (it had been confiscated during the Revolution, had since changed hands several times, but is still in business thanks to French investors). Soon widowed, Dutfoy went off with one of the younger sisters (there were plenty to choose from!). Another sister married Lord Shanks and went to live in Windsor; I was presented to this ancient grande-dame, apparently very miserly, when visiting London in 1945. A fourth sister ran away with a Dutchman, van Bursma, also very miserly. He was known as "my bourse" in the family. This great-aunt lived in La Haye, I

⁴ Henri Catoire

⁵ Georges Catoire

⁶ Louis Catoire

believe. Two other sisters married Russians and have been lost sight of in the upheavals . . . The youngest remained a spinster and died young in Russia. This long, and perhaps over-detailed run down at least shows how cosmopolitan the Catoires were, bi-lingual in French and Russian, abut also speaking passable English and German.

Over time the family became ever more Russian. My father and his six brothers, all born in Russia, were the first to be baptised into the orthodox faith. Two of them died bachelors.⁷ The oldest of my uncles⁸ married a German Lutheran, a miss Sophie Rabeneck, connected as far as I remember to the von Ribbentrop family (one of them, a champagne merchant, was Foreign minister under Hitler). Sophie became an ardent Orthodox Christian, more or less renouncing her German origins, despite the fact that her father (whom I met as a child), hardly spoke Russian. My aunt became so Russian that she would only see white Russian émigré priests and intellectuals; guests who consumed many cups of tea (and sometimes little glasses of vodka!) in the dining room, discussing Russian literature and orthodox theology. . . During the occupation some cousins of hers who were German officers tried to visit in Bourg-la-Reine where my uncle and godfather lived with their family, quite near us. My aunt wouldn't let them into the house, she chucked them out.

On the other hand she was a courageous supporter of Jews (she was posthumously declared a "juste"). She was also close to the famous Mother Marie, who died in Buchenwald and was canonised in the Orthodox church. Another of my uncles⁹ married a Russo-Belgian whose father, Monsieur Dees, had been a business partner of the Catoires working for a long time in the Shanghai branch (import-export of teas and textiles, particularly silk, as well as wine). My aunt had lived in China when a child but it didn't make a strong impression on her. My third uncle¹⁰ married a girl ten years his junior, the daughter of a Frenchman, Monsieur Corman, a trader in cereals, French consul at Rostov-on-Don, and a mother who claimed to be a Polish countess. It was a family of Catholics.

That aunt was a vivacious brunette who adored society and playing bridge, adept at cheekily fitting in wherever she found herself. These three aunts, bizarrely, were all called Sophie. The oldest among them, née Rabeneck, was known as Sophie Edouradovna, the second was "Sonia Dees" and the third "Zossia", the Polish diminutive for Sophie. My youngest uncle¹¹ married a Russian descended from the 'Baltic barons'. Her mother, very much a *grande dame*, had been a lady in waiting to the empress. This aunt was a typical White Russian emigrant, who even had a rather miserable brother with lots of children. Another brother had

⁷ Alexandre and Dimitri Catoire

⁸ Vladimir Catoire

⁹ Georges Catoire

¹⁰ Serge Catoire

¹¹ Boris Catoire

emigrated to America, where he married another White Russian. My father, the second in the line named Leon like his father was no stranger to the tragic tribulations of the 14-18 war and the Civil War . . . On the Galician front at the moment of the Brest-Litovsk treaty,¹² he found himself a young captain at the head of an entire regiment, the Colonel and his officers having fled. My father had to manage the repatriation to Russia of what remained of the regiment, with hardly any trains and with very inadequate food supplies. His soldiers, who were fond of him, saved his life by removing his epaulettes and hiding him amongst them when the Bolsheviks intercepted the convoy, shooting any officers of the Imperial army they found. He managed to re-join, I've no idea how, the White Army in Siberia, doubtless hoping to defend his homeland from the Bolsheviks: extremely intelligent, he understood that they would only lead the country into ruin, decimating the nation's elite without doing anything for the people. His commitment can't be explained as devotion to the Tsar (of whom he held a low opinion, with reason!) - he had very liberal instincts, nor was it an attachment to Orthodoxy, he was horrified by popes and priests in general and never stopped despising the imperial military nobility and the Russian clergy, even though the motto of White Army officers was "For our faith, for the Tsar and for our country." His journey across Siberia and Manchuria was a dangerous odyssey about which he had little to say. He did tell us he had to swim across a Siberian river six kilometres wide! (could it have been the Ob, the Lenisseï or the Lena?); that during the summer the heat and the solar exposure at high latitudes allowed three watermelon crops a year; and that during the winter at Tsitsikar (Manchuria) it was so cold that birds fell frozen from the sky like stones onto the ground . . . He'd been thought dead from typhus on a train evacuating White Army troops to Vladivostok. But when he got out of hospital, without clothes, papers or money, he started begging and then got a job in a Chinese laundry whose clients included members of the American Red Cross. Thanks to his good knowledge of English he got taken on and was able to improve his sorry lot.

At the end of the Civil War in 1922, Lenin declared an amnesty for 'white' students, that allowed my father to return to Moscow. His parents, who had lost all their property, were still either in Crimea or had already escaped to Paris. In Moscow he resumed and completed his studies in engineering, that had been interrupted since 1914, when he had joined the army. In Moscow he found his uncle Georges, the composer, and his cousins living in the family home. The Bolsheviks had appropriated all the bourgeois apartments considered under-occupied, and had stuffed them with riff-raff plebs. It was known as '*ouplotnénié*' (the 'filling up'). To avoid being forced to live among the plebian strangers the bourgeois organised themselves to fill up the gaps. That's how a piano student from the conservatory, an accompanist of the violinist Pierre Catoire, my father's

¹² The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was a separate peace treaty signed on March 3, 1918, between the new Bolshevik government of Russia and the Central Powers, that ended Russia's participation in World War I. The treaty was signed at German-controlled Brest-Litovsk, after two months of negotiations. [Wikipedia](#)

first cousin, had come from afar to study in Moscow, sleeping on a mattress under George Catoire's piano in the salon. They hid the mattress during the day!

The young and beautiful pianist was to become my father's wife. He had met her at his uncle's and she had charmed him. How romantic!

My mother Valentine Kastorsky

My mother Valentine, née Kastorsky, came from an honourable ecclesiastical line (orthodox priests were obliged to be married before ordination, or else they had to become monks). My mother's father and uncle, orphaned very young, were brought up by a senior dignitary of the church. The Kastorsky family came from Yaroslavl, an ancient city famous for its ramparts dominating the cliffs of the right bank of the Volga (the left bank is flat and often floods in springtime).

The two brothers received an excellent and very musical education. My maternal great-uncle Vladimir Kastorsky became a well-known opera singer in his own country, almost as well-known as Chaliapin; however Chaliapin fled to the West, while Vladimir made a career at the Leningrad opera with his superb bass voice. As for my maternal grandfather, Alexis Kastorsky, he became choir master and leader of the orchestra at Penza, regional capital of a province in the South-West of Russia, situated on a tributary of the Volga whose name escapes me for the moment.¹³ My mother was born at Tsarskoye Selo, the tsarist Versailles near St Petersburg, renamed Pushkino by the Soviets in honour of the great romantic poet Pushkin, who had studied at a lycée there that is still visited.

In parenthesis I should point out that the alternative names of my mother's birthplace caused lots of difficulties later on. All the more so because my mother, wanting to knock a few years off her age, gave 1893 as her birthdate on several documents, while others carried the true date of 1891; furthermore, her civil status (at the time recorded in Parish registers) gave her birthdate as March 25 according to the (Orthodox) Julian calendar, whereas in Western countries it would have been April 6! On top of this she chose to change her surname from Kasorskaia in her original passport, which she thought too Polish (Russians don't get along with Poles), to Kastorsky which seemed more properly Russian. One can imagine the looks she received from officials faced with such surprising differences for the same person! It caused us no end of trouble! But it all got sorted out in the end. . .

I seem to remember that Alexis, my maternal grandfather, once visited Tsarskoye Selo accompanied by his wife, yet another Sophie, née Fleischitz, daughter of a German family from the Volga, quite Russified but demonstrating German virtues of organisation, discipline and scrupulous work ethic. The Fleischitz family owned a major shoe business in Penza. My grandmother was considered very beautiful with blonde hair and blue eyes, well-groomed and an excellent housewife, if a little retiring. She embroidered very prettily but had no musical education and didn't get involved in her husband's artistic work. He, in addition to his official job at the conservatory, was an expert musicologist; he used to visit

¹³ It was the Soura

the local countryside by coach, collecting folk songs to work into his music, and at the same time collecting mushrooms, berries, raspberries, strawberries, black currants, red currants. (Apparently in the time of serfdom landowners and estate managers made their serfs sing during the fruit harvest to prevent pilfering - it's hard to eat when you're singing. A historical detail that just might be true). In any event my grandfather managed to put together a thick volume of folk songs. He was well-known as a musicologist and his work has real value. He sent a selection of folksongs to Paris, destined for his grand-daughter, me, soon after I was born - a touching detail.

Grandfather Kastorsky was a very handsome man, well-groomed and with a short brown beard trimmed square, framing his face with its intelligent eyes and regular features. He was a keen member of the "Anglisskii Kloub", as were most of the masculine elite in Penza. He was open to Western ideas and even visited the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris. He had liberal ideas and even ultimately became a professor at a local college, convinced that the ignorant masses had to be educated. His fine democratic opinions weren't enough to prevent the Bolsheviks from later arresting and imprisoning him, his daughter having left already to find a husband outside Russia.

My mother and her younger sister, Assia (diminutive of Augusta) grew up in Penza. They played in the courtyard of their building with the local children, including the son of their *dvornik* (concierge) who, aged twelve, fell in love with his pretty playmate with her dark eyes and long curly blonde hair. The two sisters went to school at the Penza *gymnazia* (lycée). These establishments were much more democratic than is commonly believed; the fees were minimal, affordable by *dvorniks*, shopkeepers, skilled workers, etc. and not reserved for the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. But they were only found in major towns, and there weren't enough of them. Chekhov's charming story, *The Steppe*, deals with the issue telling of when he left his home in Taganrog to study in a large town.

Girls and boys were taught separately at the *gymnazia* (no mixed classes then), all essential subjects, particularly languages: Latin as an option (my mother was soon put off and quickly dropped it but my father could still recite passages from the Aeneid fifty years later), but also foreign languages particularly French and German, always taught by native speakers some of whom had not yet mastered Russian. Pupils were taught good manners; respect for the Orthodox religion, patriotism towards Tsar and country. My mother used to tell how during the 1905 revolution her class was overrun by people in the middle of a religious studies class. The teacher remained calm and managed to talk the crowd into leaving the classroom with their red banners, breaking nothing and harming no one. My mother, who must have been thirteen or fourteen at the time, carried away an enduring hatred of the 'people', with their caps and big red noses. Above all she hated the words 'revolution', 'freedom'. etc. keeping a reproduction of a well-known portrait of Nicholas II on her night table. It made my father sneer . . .

Later, when she was a student at the Moscow Conservatory during the Bolshevik years, she refused to take part in snow clearing in the streets. She thus forfeited her ration card, preferring to go hungry. Fortunately, my future father was on hand to provide his darling with black-market goods and hunting produce (hares, birds). He'd always been very enterprising in the countryside around Moscow, remaining so during the occupation in 1940-45.

Having finished her studies in Penza, my future mother was sent by her father to the capital (which one? Moscow or St Petersburg), to pursue her musical education as a pianist. At first she was looked after by her uncle, the bass singer. But she found it less hospitable than her cosy family home where 'papotchka' and 'mamotchka' spoiled her. She didn't really get on with this authoritarian, pernickity man, excellent musician though he was.

At the Moscow Conservatory she met a first cousin of my father, son of the composer Georges Catoire: Pierre was a violinist and his two sisters, my mother's friends, had married a good Ukrainian tenor and a cellist respectively. During the Bolshevik era, Valentine was able to stay with the Catoires, as I mentioned above.

The Bolshevik authorities wanted to introduce the provincial masses to the beauties of classical music, sending groups of young musicians from the Conservatory on tour, on missions. Pierre Catoire and Valentine Kastorsky as his accompanist, but also playing solos, were part of this sad undertaking; they travelled by train with one small wood burning stove per wagon, and the recitals took place in all sorts of badly heated spaces, barracks, factory warehouses, barns, etc The audience chattered away, eating pickled cucumbers and sausage or spitting sunflower seeds husks onto the floor, while the performers warmed their half-frozen fingers! Such were the charms of the Bolshevik era.

Getting back to Pierre Catoire, the violinist, he was a notorious skirt-chaser and girls often fell for him, despite his quite ordinary looks. More or less blond and with blue eyes, he was of medium height and a bit pudgy, he looked quite German. Hardly surprising since his mother was German. I think I could have been his daughter, except that my mother switched her affections to his cousin Leon Catoire. As for Pierre, he had two or three wives in quick succession each of whom loved him and looked after him, even sometimes supported him. What won't one do for a great artist?

Pierre also left the country for Germany, out of opportunism rather than political conviction. He ended up a member of the Nazi party and first violin at the Berlin Opera under Hitler. I remember him very well; he came to Paris in 1937 to visit his aunts and cousins. Towards the end of the war he hid out in the Brandenburg countryside to avoid the bombardments of Berlin in 1945. When Berlin fell, the Red Army appointed him mayor of the town where he was hiding because he

spoke perfect Russian. He narrowly escaped being shot at least ten times because he couldn't supply the Soviets with enough cows, hayricks or other provisions. I saw him again in 1946 in Berlin, for the first time since 1937, where he had returned with his wife of the moment and their daughter aged nine. He was skinny as a rake and must have weighed no more than 50 Kilos! Since then he emigrated to Turkey, still playing first violin, whether in Constantinople or Ankara. He lived there with a new wife, and died there.

My parents' marriage and escape from Moscow to Paris in 1924

Once installed in Moscow, doubtless around 1914, Valentine continued her brilliant studies at the Conservatory, winning a gold (or silver?) medal. She continued to pursue her artistic activities (piano, singing, acting, the last under the baton of the famous director Stanislavsky, known even abroad).

In the winter of 1922-23 at Christmas Leon and Valentine went to Penza, where they were married on January 5th, in the presence of and with the blessing of the Katsorsky parents.

Once back in Moscow they each took up their activities. I've been told that my father worked for the Nansen organisation, a sort of NGO of the time that procured papers for emigres and exiles who had none, no longer Russians since the fall of the Tsarist government, but not having Bolshevik passports either, having run away or tried to run away from that paradise, where they had lost everything and risked being shot! The founder of the mission, the Norwegian Nansen, was awarded a Nobel Prize for his efforts.

Despite the uncertainties, the difficulties and very real dangers, life went on. During the summer of 1923 my parents and a group of happy friends made trips to the country, picnics, boating and bathing by moonlight . . .

My mother, pregnant, showed no signs of tiredness or illness, as in a bygone era. Her swelling stomach was hardly noticeable and her condition was kept secret. But then she had a miscarriage; apparently the baby would have been a boy. In fact, I believe my father always regretted that his firstborn was a girl and not a boy, but it's impossible to be sure; my mother was always reluctant to talk about such worldly subjects.

As life got ever harder, with little prospect of a future life for the son of a bourgeois capitalist, my father decided to leave Russia and to re-join his family already installed in Paris (impasse George Sand, in Auteuil). His Nansen passport and/or his connections allowed him to get out in 1924. But unfortunately it had proved impossible to get the documents and visas that would have allowed my mother to accompany him. Both would have risked their lives if they left together, but a separate departure might run fewer risks. Once my father was safely away my mother, once more pregnant, set about applying for the necessary permissions. It was extremely difficult and very worrying. My mother showed lots of initiative and a cool head. She managed very well. It turned out that the son of the *dvornik* from Penza, the lover boy, had become a commissar of the people (!), what's more he was a commissar of the people in Moscow. Mother visited him at his office and, reminding him of their childish games, managed to extract the necessary documents. It was practically a miracle. But how did she manage the voyage?

My mother had to use her maiden name to get out of the country. One can imagine her anxiety. On her departure from Moscow her father had come to see her off and get her installed, then she saw him on the platform, handcuffed to a couple of Red guards and being led away. It's the last she saw of him. She adored her father, and she never saw him again. Would she be able to cross the frontier? Mercifully she did, but she never spoke about it. It was a very long journey across Poland, Germany and finally France and the Gare de l'Est. Mother was expecting to find her husband and to feel loved and protected. He was there on the platform alright, but he was not alone. The wife of his older brother Vladimir thought it was a good idea to come with him and he couldn't talk her out of it. That particular aunt Sophie (née Rabeneck) had a strong personality and was a powerful influence not only on her husband but also on her in-laws. She wanted to witness my parents' reunion. Mother felt bitter about it, for her it was a great disillusionment.

My paternal grandparents had arrived in Paris almost certainly in 1920 or 1921. The Bolsheviks had plundered all their assets, factories, trading companies, country properties, etc. but fortunately the family had overseas bank accounts. Their exile was thus less dramatic than it must have been for many other emigres. They managed to get out a large gouache by the painter Yon showing a bridge over the Moskva river with the Kremlin in the background, and the quays of the river bustling with shops, carriages and passers-by. It was very animated, and it was large, about two metres wide and almost a metre tall.¹⁴ The picture is presently in Tolvon where my son now lives. My grandparents also bought with them an enormous oil portrait in a heavy old-fashioned gilt frame, a portrait of my great-grandmother Elisabeth Levé-Forbes, the one who had eleven children. It shows an old woman, very thin and with cold blue eyes, in a white bonnet. Her dress is black embroidered in jet, very severe. She looks dignified but without a glimmer of warmth. My father inherited the portrait as well as the view of Moscow. I gave the portrait to my cousin Olga, the daughter of Serge Catoire and his wife Zossia, the Polish one. She lives in a nice house better suited to the portrait than my modest abode.

My grandfather had just died in tragic circumstances. He expired in the train from Combo in the Pays Basque, where he had been on a cure. That was at a time when people believed humid atmosphere was beneficial to consumptives. A further tragedy seldom spoken of in the family was when Dimitri, the one-but-last of my father's brothers, hanged himself in despair over his exile and the death of a father who had been very protective towards him, traumas that only added to his chagrin at being rejected by his charming cousin Tania, a few years older, who didn't want his love, and who mocked him.

After all these tribulations my grandmother remained alone with her youngest

¹⁴ for many years this Moscow picture held pride of place at Charles and Olga Rabeneck's flat in London.

son, Boris, aged about fifteen, in the large apartment on the impasse George Sand. My granny, 'Maria Dimitrevna' (later irreverently dubbed 'Marmite' by the new young French members of the family) was a lady of a certain age, well-built and with chestnut hair pulled into a slender chignon, with no white hair and a good complexion. She often wore a wide ribbon around her neck and was always in a long black or grey dress according to the season. She was good-natured and generous but very reserved, rarely sharing her thoughts with those she loved, let alone with those she disliked. I think she enjoyed having my parents to stay while they were getting established.

My mother and her mother-in-law got on well from the outset. However, that wasn't enough to put her at ease with her in-laws. She'd always lived among artists and musicians, and here she was among grand bourgeois businessmen. She found it hard to adapt, particularly during her pregnancy and after I was born.

My early childhood in Paris

I was born at the Clinic of the Assumption in a street of the same name and was registered at the town hall of the 16th arrondissement with the names Irène, Helen and Tatiana. I later abandoned the last name in my identity papers; it caused all sorts of problems with officials who invariably wrote Titania, even Catina, or anything else, come to that. I also held a grudge against my parents for landing me with Irène, which seemed so Slav to me. About three quarters of white Russian children born at that time were called Irène, but I got over it; it pleased my friends and I came to realize that not all Irènes were Russian either.

During my first few months I caused all sorts of upset to my mother. She'd been thrilled and happy to have a baby but was quite stunned by what it involved. She'd only ever sat at a piano keyboard. She was quite unprepared for changing and feeding a baby, whereas for my granny who'd had seven children, one baby more or less made no difference. She must have thought it would be the same for her pianist daughter-in-law. Certainly, my mother expected to experience the same warmth and tenderness as in her own family, but that wasn't the way with my grandmother who showed little warmth. My mother had to put up with unwanted attention and practical tips. The baby made her feel distraught and incompetent. It was hard for her.

I spent the first two years of my life in the apartment on the impasse George Sand. My first memories are neither of my mother nor of my father, instead I clearly see Lisa with her big black eyes, my granny's Portugese cook who looked after me. She was maternal and happy to put me on her knee for a cuddle. Thank you Lisa for surrounding me with kindness. Thanks, too, to my dear 'baboushka', my granny whom I remember vividly from long ago and even more recently. She surrounded me with love and didn't hesitate to spoil me.

My mum is sitting at the piano with her back to the window. It was an upright placed on the left-hand wall. Another person is standing, playing the violin. A third person sits playing the cello. The window is open. Opposite, silhouetted against the bright blue sky one can see the zig-zag shapes of the Citroën factory roofs on the rue de Javel. That's the only impression I retain of the flat my parents moved from, leaving the 16th arrondissement where the Catoires lived for the less distinguished 15th.

We didn't stay there long either, soon moving to the southern bourgeois suburb of Bourg-la-Reine, where my uncle Vladimir and his family were already installed (he had three children: the two eldest born in Russia, Cyril and Marie nicknamed 'Mouich' - Russian for mouse - by her mother Sophie Rabeneck; they'd been born at a property they called Samariádevo (ignorantly translated as Saint-Maria-de-Vaux by the French authorities). They lived in a vast two storey pavilion

surrounded by a huge garden. My uncle had made a vegetable garden there that he visited on Sundays.



The house where Vladimir Catoire and Sophie Rabeneck lived from 1923 to 1965 and where Edouard Rabeneck wrote his memoir of life in Russia

He grew cucumbers ('agourtsky'), tomatoes, lettuces, radishes and horseradish ('khrène'). It reminded him of their great country property near Moscow. The family had had a station built there the 'stantsia Katouar' where the Moscow-to-Kursk trains used to stop. The station is still there but their property is now an orphanage.

Bourg-la-Reine was bisected by the Route d'Orleans (the RN20), at the time lined with old two and three storey buildings and paved! Beyond stretched houses and gardens, and avenues of lime trees; there were even meadows and fields, with market gardens towards the south in the direction of la Croix de Berny, Antony and the magnificent Parc des Sceaux with its pretty chateau. The park and chateau are still there. The houses and gardens are still there, too, but now surrounded by massive modern buildings. The town spilled out from Paris's Porte d'Orleans and spread some twenty kilometres south, if not more. The fields and woods have disappeared. It's just as well my father can't see this transformation, he who always wanted to get out of town and who very much missed the great open spaces of Russia. Had it not been for my mother, whose musical tastes would be constrained in the country, I think my father would rather have emigrated to Canada rather than to France.

My parents got installed in a modest semi-detached pavilion. At the front there

was a cramped little garden protected from the neighbour by a brick wall 2.5 metres high, embellished by a tunnel of white and mauve lilac with a shady bench.

At the time my father was working as an engineer-technician at a construction company managed as far as I can recall by messrs. Gabillon and Demancy. The station on the Sceaux line was nearby and the train took just twenty minutes to Denfert-Rocherau in Paris. it was pretty handy.

From that time, when I was an only child, I have few memories. A walk with mum and dad; no houses, out in the country; we went beyond the railway line. Was there a level crossing? I don't think so. My father hoisted me onto his shoulders and strode off on his long legs. I must have been about three and I was too small to keep up. Comfortably perched on his shoulders I felt safe and firmly held; I could see all around and I was very happy and secure. Mum is nearby. It's a lovely memory of my early childhood.

Later I lost sight of my mother. She, who lived to be 94, was often away, extremely ill even before the birth of my brother (at last, a male heir!). Pneumonia, followed by loss of a kidney, then several years of sanatoria at Davos in Switzerland. I don't have too many details and my mother didn't like talking about her illnesses and her suffering, even after the fact.

A succession of Russian nannies and carers

The result: there was always someone looking after us; always a Russian recruited from an employment agency set up by white Russian emigre philanthropists. These well-meaning women were neither sensible nor competent, and their charges were not much better. The only good one (who practically brought up my brother Leon and I) was our 'Tiotia', our 'tata', madame de Joltanovsky, the widow of a general in the imperial police force, used to giving orders. She'd had six children herself, a house to manage, servants and properties . . . and a husband often away on duty. Her exile had forced her to become a governess! She was a descendant of the Countess of Ségur, née Rostoptchine (see: the general in *Sophie's Misfortunes*).¹⁵ My brother and I owe much to our Tiotia, and she loved us as if we'd been her own grandchildren. Thank you, thank you.

She was kindness itself. My little brother and I adored her. For sure she was a bit disorganised, and her room was always in a mess. But unlike most white Russians of my acquaintance she had plenty of common sense and her feet on the ground. She managed the house efficiently and inspired obedience in the servants as well as in us children. But when my mother returned from a three year stay in Davos, she took umbrage at this power of authority, jealous of the affection shown by my brother and I towards our darling Tiotia.

So my mother fired her. Where did she go? First to her daughter, a ballerina , married to an honourable Swede. Madame de Joltanovsky didn't care for it; she found her son-in-law overbearing and Swedes generally buttoned up and lacking in fantasy, thoroughly Lutheran. Our governess then went to her son, married to a charming Romanian brunette with dangly earrings. he was an engineer from the Arts et Métiers school. He worked for the Société Générale d'Electricité which later became the E.D.F., electrifying the countryside. The jobsites were in the Aisne, around Fère-en-Tardenois. Our families stayed in touch; my parents even went to see the Joltanovskys in Fère.

Quite a few years later I was invited by the Joltanovskys to spend three weeks holiday with them at Bandol, where Joltanovsky was supervising electrification work in the Haut Var. My old governess had been dead for some time. It was while staying with them that I met my future husband, Jacques Micol. He was Joltanovsky's assistant. What a romantic holiday, I was head over heels in love! I was warned off by my hostess on account of his health (he was a supposedly 'stabilised' consumptive); but thanks to my inexperience I laughed them off and followed my heart!

Getting back to my earlier childhood, we always had men or women handymen

¹⁵ *Sophie's Misfortunes*, a children's book written by the Countess of Ségur, was published in 1858 by the publisher Hachette.

(my mother preferred the stronger sex) to do the cooking and the housework, with governesses to look after us children. As I said earlier, these were Russian emigres from every social class and they were all a bit touched (later on my husband claimed that my mother-in-law was a magnet for nutters).

Even before the arrival of our Tiotia, the first to be hired (and the last girl), there was a young illiterate Ukranian with a vigorous love life; She often got dumped and she cried a lot. The last of her lovers (and the cause of her downfall) paced up and down on the pavement outside our house, swearing in Russian with a revolver in his hand, demanding that she join him sharpish outside. My father saw him off with a wallop. Marianne, that was her name, was asked to leave the house immediately.

Marianne was replaced by Constantin. Fat and diminutive, of indeterminate sex (he had just a few hairs on his chin), with a piggy face and illiterate, he'd been the batman for a tsarist officer. He wore a big gardener's apron, blue during the week and white on Sundays. This rather folkloric personage must have been maltreated because he was clumsy, stupid and even grumpy. He could neither read nor write, but he was good with numbers, could count and was very miserly, hanging onto his money. He had nevertheless learned a few words of French which helped in his job. He even left our service on his own initiative for better paid jobs as a cook- maitre d'hotel. But he was frequently fired, returning each time to work for us.

He called my father 'barine' and my mother 'barinia' just like a serf in the pre-revolutionary days. Madame de Joltanovsky, working all the angles, taught him to cook. he could also do washing, ironing and housework. He really like polishing the parquet, and he also did the shopping. Much later during the occupation he took control of the black market with the Germans from whom he bought stuff to resell more expensively. These transactions took place in the corner café, where the soldiers came in for a glass of wine or a beer. Everyone in Bourg-la-Reine knew what he was up to (I don't know how Constantin managed to bamboozle the Germans) and it could have caused us a lot of trouble at the Liberation. We were accused of collaboration! Fortunately, a seventeen year old pal of my brother's, recently promoted to colonel by the F.F.I., corroborated our anti-Pétain credentials and patriotism, saving us from arrest and maybe even worse (I am not making this up, nor do I exaggerate).

Constantin's day off was Wednesday. Dressed in his waterproof mac and with a bowler hat on his head, he'd set off for Paris to see his Russian pals (where? which ones?) and above al to play the national lottery. Whenever he won something he'd put the money in a sock under his mattress in his room. He did not drink, unusual for a Slav, but adored sugar and above all fatty food, always finishing up leftover mayonnaise (he always made too much) with a spoon. This eventually led to death from liver cancer. He took his little stash of money with him to hospital, where it

was probably stolen.

Among other silliness he almost set fire to the house by spilling a bottle of oil onto the lit gas stove. Huge flames leapt up covering the walls in soot and the kitchen began to burn. It was on a Sunday and my father was home. He had the presence of mind to pull down the thick dining room curtains (woven in Morocco) using them to stifle the fire. I must have been about eight at the time and I'll never forget such a spectacle!

Here's another example of Constantin's silliness. Every two months he would clean all the mirrors and the glass top of the fine mahogany sideboard. When he'd cleaned it he put it on the big sofa out of harm's way, getting on with other jobs; once he was done he sat, or rather lay down on . . .the sofa forgetting about the glass, which of course broke in pieces. My mother cried out '*dourak*' (imbecile). However much we told him off this sort of thing happened several times a year. I'll never understand why my parents didn't get rid of him. However, we do need to recall that he looked after the house with our dog during the Paris Exodus. Following instructions from the factory at Maintes-la-Jolie who were doing National Defence work my father was ordered to Pau in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques where the factory was to re-locate. Our front-wheel drive Citroën was crammed full with the family (mother, granny, my two brothers and me) and off we went with daddy at the wheel, across France towards the South, at five kilometres an hour with frequent stops, surrounded by a mass of cars, pushcarts, cyclists and pedestrians fleeing from the enemy out of the gates of the city under a leaden sky, caused by burning petrol tanks. The sun only returned in the evening, when we were about fifty kilometres away. But that's another story.

It was June and we were astonished to hear of the Armistice as we reached Duras in the Lot-et-Garonne. We got stuck there for a couple of months in a rundown country house with no water (just a well) and no electricity. It had been assigned to us by the local Mayor.

My father, who spoke German, went to the nearest garrison headquarters at Duras (in the Free Zone, fifty kilometres from the Occupied Zone). We had just enough petrol left in the Citroën to make it. He was able to get petrol coupons from the German commandant as well a pass that would get us back to Bourg-la-Reine along peaceful plane and poplar tree-lined roads. What a change from the horrible outward journey! We found Constantin, the dog and the house intact. The villa (we'd recently moved into a vaster and more comfortable house closer to the centre of town) had been neither pillaged nor requisitioned by the Germans, thanks to our imbecile Constantin and the dog, who had mounted guard.

The villa 'Les Glycines' (Wisteria), 1, rue du Petit Luxembourg (more of a short cul-de-sac on the West side of the RN20), is the house we'd been renting since the early 1930s, large two storeyed and with a garden. Petit Luxemburg must have

once been a sort of park. There were now only a few venerable plane trees along one side of the street. and a few fine trees and clumps of lilac in the garden on our side. The cul-de-sac had been previously occupied by 'Etablissements Sellier Frères, wine, wood and coal merchants' on both sides of the street. Our garden was shut off to the East by a tall wall two storeys high covered in ivy occupied by innumerable tweeting birds. That was on the back of Etablissements Sellier. To the West the back of our house faced a rail siding that went into their works. A couple of times a day a steam loco pulling a few wagons delivered wine and coal. My young brother Leon dreamed of becoming an engine driver! A steep bank, as high as the house overlooked the siding, that connected to the Sceaux-Massy Palaiseau line and the Bourg-la-Reine station.

The house had earned its name; wisteria covered the garden fence and reached up to the first floor of the façade. The perfume was overpowering when it flowered.

So Tiotia had left us to rejoin her children. The agency mentioned above sent us a new 'governess', Russian of course, a great big thirty-year-old spinster with bulbous grey eyes, the daughter of an icon painter (the walls of her room were covered in them). She was terrified of men in general and of my father in particular; scared of his sarcastic comments, she refused to eat with us when he was there. She had no idea of how to bring up children, endlessly criticizing everything we did in an attempt to instil manners and telling us dreadful ghost stories at night. She had taken the place of our dear Tiotia, and we both heartily disliked her, going so far as to stuff her gloves with pins to prick her. It was my brother's idea, but I had to carry it out. Susanna, that was her name, didn't last long with us and left in a hurry. Good riddance! I have no memory of our mother at the time; maybe she was in Davos.

Soon after mother returned Constantin left us for other patrons; he just couldn't get along with the impetuous style of our inexperienced 'Barinia'.

The agency continued to send us duds. Constantin was replaced by two Russian odd job men in succession, very different from each other.

The first, Gavrila (Gabriel) was a placid giant with a round head, an ex-officer of the Imperial Army. He was extremely clumsy and broke a lot of plates; bottles disappeared from the cellar; he was drowning his exile's nostalgia in alcohol. After lunch, when he'd done his chores, he took his wine (wine had replaced vodka) off to a bench in the garden, in the shade of the flowering lilacs, where he'd take a little nap. Then when I came and disturbed him (I was coming up for eleven), he'd shyly tell me about his love life, his determined pursuit of the colonel's wife, the wild jealousy of the captain's wife he had rebuffed. Together with reading *The Three Musketeers*, this was my introduction to the life of romance. I had no trouble seeing myself as Madame Bonacieux! Poor Gavrila,

was soon sent off for drunkenness.

The next one, son of a kulak¹⁶ from the South of Russia, was called Ivan Danilovich or simply Danilitch. He was swarthy and short with a black mop of hair and dark slightly crazy eyes. He claimed to have been cursed by his father for having accidentally killed his brother during a hunting trip for which he was sent to prison. As things turned out he proved to be an unreliable person. Meanwhile, my mother had given birth to little André, my second brother. I was eleven. One day I was alone at home with the baby, now four months old, who was fast asleep in the large bedroom on the second floor, far from the noises of the kitchen. It was Danilitch's day off and he'd left in the morning. The 'governess' of the moment, Fraulein Äuder, whom we called Emilia Ivanova, was an old Germano-Russian spinster (another wreck of the tsarist era), bony and stooped, with her meagre hair pulled into a wispy chignon, and with a long pointy nose topped off with steel-rimmed spectacles. She always seemed scared and regardless of the weather, hot or cold, she wore a long dark winter coat, a little black hat, and on her arm a massive black umbrella. She was supposed to keep an eye on us and to teach us a little German.

"Guten Tag, gute Nacht, danke schön, steh auf, setze dich", und so weiter. Her main job was to look after the baby (my mother spent all her time at the piano - recently a handsome baby grand - probably wouldn't have known how to change him). E.I. was also responsible for getting my bother Leon, then seven, to school, and to get him back, crossing the dangerous Grand' Rue and Avenue Carnot intersection. My brother resented his strangely-clad guardian and wouldn't hold her hand in sight of his pals. He often got away from her, and she'd return home in tears, complaining "the kid's impossible, he ran away again . . ."

That afternoon E.I. had left to pick up my brother from school. I was quietly doing my homework on the first floor when I suddenly heard a trickle of water. At first I didn't pay it any heed. But then the sound got louder and I wondered what it could be, going into the hallway to find out. I saw a stream of water coming from the ceiling. I rushed up to the second floor being careful where I put my feet, and what did I see? Boiling water coming from the hot water cylinder located above the door to my little brother's bedroom. The flow was increasing by the minute. Fortunately, E.I. came in at that moment and heroically, without taking off her coat, opened her umbrella and rushed up the two flights and got little André out of his cot. She carried him down under one arm with the umbrella in the other to protect him from the flow of boiling water, delivering him safe and sound (Thank you. thank you E.I.!), while I ran off to find help in the direction of the Sellier works (at the time no one had a phone). The foreman was there and I explained what had happened as best I could. He rushed over to the house, crossing the

¹⁶ Kulak in Russian means a fist (tightly clenched to let nothing escape), and by extension a rich land-owning peasant, a social class detested by the Bolsheviks, and decimated under Stalin.

street, and went into the cellar to shut down the damper of the boiler at the risk of getting burned. Eventually everything got back to normal apart from stains from the flooding, loosened wallpaper and water on the floor to mop up. My father was quick to warmly thank the foreman and give him a tip. He told us that the boiler had come very close to exploding. This is what happened; Danilitch, before setting off, had stoked the boiler with coal but had forgotten to close the damper, so the system began to overheat. Severely reprimanded for his carelessness, Danilitch denied any responsibility, claiming that it was I who had opened the damper just to spite him. He went around saying "ouboiu, ouboiu" (I'll kill you, I'll kill you!). I hardly need add that he was quickly fired. In those days you didn't have to give notice. E.I. and I became the heroines of the hour.

Soon enough our Constantin returned to take Danilitch's place, staying with us until the Liberation.

Hoping to place her, E.I. introduced us to a Miss Mount, an Anglo-Russian, and another wreck of the system, a very British old spinster, small and dimpled, tightly laced and with good deportment, meticulously coiffed and with a few black hairs on her chin. She spoke good Russian with a terrible English accent. It made us laugh, Leon and I, and we mimicked her mannerisms behind her back as well as her accent. I owe to her my entry into the sixth form knowing how to say "My name is Airiny Catoire" and knowing how to count to ten. She liked to tell us how, in her youth before the 1914 war, she had a fiancé, a subaltern in the Indian Army who invited her to the London Opera at Covent Garden. Before the curtain rose, while the orchestra were playing God Save the King, he gave a mighty sneeze. The poor chap had no manners. So she broke off the engagement (between us, he got off lightly). So she set off for Russia where she was engaged as a governess by a noble St Petersburg family. She stayed there until the Revolution. Miss Mount didn't stay long with us; our lifestyle wasn't aristocratic enough for her.

As for E.I. it turned out that she was short on certain German virtues like cleanliness and order. We noticed that instead of washing the nappies (no disposables in those days), she'd stuff them under her bed and sometimes forget them, whether by laziness, negligence, or just fatigue? She was no longer twenty years old . . . It was the smell that betrayed her dirty habit. Farewell Emilia Ivanova.

So the agency sent us a new girl, a real Russian 'Niania' (nanny), an illiterate peasant of uncertain age, pickled in religion, with a broad flat face with a large flat nose and the eyes of a scared rabbit. She was always dressed in navy Blue with a spotless white collar, cuffs and apron, and a headscarf covering her head (I never once saw her hair). She was devoted and conscientious, her speech peppered with diminutives in the Russian manner. Once again we heard 'Barine' and 'Barinia'. After twenty years in France she didn't speak a word of French,

apart from "moi habite Bourre lia Reine". She walked heavily and pigeon-toed. She tried to instil in us Christian principles of good behaviour, some of them out of date like little curtseys towards old ladies (when they addressed me), or kissing ladies' hands (when they addressed my brother), but also sound principles like love thy neighbour and honour your parents, all with a sententious delivery! She was possessed with a sort of religious fervour, which reached a paroxysm around Lent, during which she lived on tea and dry crusts. Good Friday saw the climax of her mystical crisis. My mother was in the salon at the piano. The 'Niania' threw herself on her knees, flattened herself and banged her forehead several times on the parquet, asking forgiveness for her sins, all accompanied by Orthodox signs of the cross (three fingers from left to right), each time lifting her body before hitting the floor again with her forehead. It was terrible, enough to make you give up religion. We begged her to quickly pack her bags, and we never saw her again.

In 1938 my little brother André was coming up for three years old and no longer needed nappies. My mother decided she would look after us herself, not least because I was now old enough to keep an eye on my brothers. Nevertheless, the empire of the tsars dragged on for some time.

A sympathetic giant, Vsevolod Mikhailovitch Bourda regularly came to the house to instruct Leon and I in Swedish Gymnastics. He'd once been an instructor in the Imperial Army. He and his family lived in Bagneux, near Bourg-la-Reine. He did odd jobs to make a living. Fortunately, his wife Sofia Vassilievna was a medical doctor (but her qualifications were not recognised in France). She worked as an assistant for a surgeon, also Russian, and supported her little clan; husband, mother-in-law, and three daughters.

This excellent surgeon, well known in France, ran a clinic where I had been operated on twice, first for tonsils and a bit later for appendix. Each time I awoke from the anaesthetic (in those days recovery was no joke) Sofia was at my bedside, maternal and reassuring. Thanks.

It's Tiotia who put my parents in contact with the Bourdas. The family name, Ukranian in origin, has a perjorative meaning in Russian; a rag-bag, a mixture ... my father sneered sarcastically every time he heard it. Madame de Joltanovsky and the Bourdas had met during their long-forced stay in Sebastopol, following the heroic defeat of the White Army in Crimea in 1920.

The six Bourdas lived in a cramped three-room apartment, which was always in a terrific mess with books and clothes all over the place, lacking space or perhaps domestic help who might have put everything away as in the time of the tsars . . . The Bourdas had given up their dear nanny (lack of space to put her up) to my uncle Serge and his Polish wife who liked to live a sociable life. This was the nanny who looked after my cousin Olga, a few months older than me. Whenever you opened a cupboard the linens, stuffed in any which way, fell out and went all

over the floor. There were always glasses and cups of tea on the kitchen table, and a massive teapot with very, very strong tea, almost black. You'd serve yourself, then top up the cup with boiling water to suit. The kettle was always on the gas, heating the water as needed throughout the day.

The Bourdas were very nice and welcoming. I was aware of this because I often went to play with Chourotchka, their middle daughter. She was a year older than me; a great big kid with round cheeks and glasses and two long chestnut plaits down her back. She was a lot of fun and we became friends, having good times together.

Primary school at the Lycée Lakanal

I believe I'm right in saying we were in the same class at the Cours Florian, located opposite the main communal school in Bourg-la-Reine. It was an annex of the Lycée Lakanal. In primary the classes were mixed, but in secondary girls only (this Cours Florian has become a leisure centre for retirees, where they play bridge and do watercolours).

There was another Russian in our class, Georges Zrialine, son of cossacks, a great big lad, not too smart, with a light complexion, a round head and blond hair in a crew cut, who wore the black school tunic of the time, with bare knees (no jeans in those days).

We had an excellent teacher, youngish (she had two small children). She knew how to get us interested and to make us progress. There must have been forty of us, the boys on the left along the windows, the girls on the right along the wall, CM1s in front and CM2s behind. order and silence reigned. Thanks, dear Madame Lullien. And what fun we had during recreation! I really enjoyed school; I loved going.

I couldn't say the same for the preceding year in the preparatory class. Our teacher was a fat old woman, doubtless a war widow, and very xenophobic (xenophobia was a French trait at the time; Russians were 'Ruskoffs', Italians were 'Ritals' or 'Macaronis'). Her name was Madame Boivin - well-named we said; drowning her widow's chagrin in her wine; she had a double chin, lips so thin you could hardly see them, a ruddy complexion and a big veiny nose surmounted by glasses that hid her mean, furtive eyes. She had short grey hair done in a bad perm by some local Figaro. She really had it in for me; I was put in the last row, sharply questioned, getting smacked over the knuckles with a ruler, bad marks and punishments I didn't deserve, I felt persecuted. It's possible that I over-reacted and maybe Madame Boivin treated everyone that way? Why such an aversion? Because, without intending to be, I was different from the rest of the class; my family name might have been Catoire, but my first name, Irène, was certainly Russian. It stood out amongst the Simones and the Jacqueline's. Did I speak bad French? Probably not. I can't remember not speaking French, although it's true we all spoke Russian at home. But I'd always spoken two languages interchangeably except that in Russian I had a tendency to roll my 'R's like the French, only learning to roll them like a Russian later in life.

Unfortunately, my wardrobe was ill suited to the mild Parisian weather, damp rather than cold, I even had gaiters with tons of buttons, it was awful. None of the other girls had them, and I still can't imagine where my parents bought them. I hated Madame Boivin; she terrorised me. . . her hatred had a big effect on me. I really wanted to be like the others, to be treated like them, and not to be singled

out! For a long time I made an effort to seem like the others, carefully avoiding any allusion to Russian aspects of our domestic life. Only later did I find out that having double origins and being bi-lingual was very fortunate, an asset, and a richness that allowed one to grasp the world with an open spirit, to connect with the OTHER (modern jargon!).

Slightly thanks to Madame Boivin I learned to adapt to people, to feel at ease anywhere in France, my country since I'd been born there and brought up there, and was still living there, and abroad where I often travelled. It's possible this adaptability was partly innate, coming from the cosmopolitan Catoires. But my mother wasn't at all like that.

Whatever, I never later felt any animosity towards me. On the contrary, all I felt was goodwill.

The Bourdas had a young distant cousin, Anatole Berg, nicknamed Tolia, son of a Germano-Russian doctor who'd died prematurely and a dotty Russian countess (?), Zenaida Mikhailovna, a fine featured beauty with wispy hair. The family had been in Constantinople at the same time as the Bourdas, then moved to Nice, at the heart of the Russian colony. 'Zin Mikh' was then twice married, first to a violinist who played in a pseudo-gypsy Russian band in a night club, a band made up of musical ex-officers from the Imperial Army. He ran off without leaving an address, dumping her unfairly. The second died, leaving her with three children by different fathers, of which the eldest was Tolia. He passed his baccalaureat in Nice and dreamt of studying to become a doctor like his father. But he had to give it up and find work to support his family. Then Zin Mich suddenly decided to leave the Côte d'Azur for Paris where she thought there'd be more opportunities to make a living. Tolia had French nationality (heaven knows how?). So, he presented himself to the Conseil de Révision where he was declared fit for military service but was given a leave of absence to support his family, leave that made it impossible to find work because no one wanted to hire someone temporarily.

Probably out of sympathy my parents took Tolia on as a . . .teacher! He certainly lacked the necessary skills having experience only as an older brother. In any event he kept an eye on the morals of his pupils. He forbade my brother Leon's cheating and lying. He snatched away from my hands a story titled 'the Madonna of the sleeping' that I'd found it in a magazine left lying around and was enthusiastically reading. He said "that's not for little girls. He probably wanted to dip into this edifying literature himself!

He was mad keen on cycling, taking his bike with him everywhere. He could cycle with a ladder on his shoulder. To suit his favourite sport he wore brown plus fours and an old brown leather jacket. He had an enormous scar on his nose from some childhood accident.

My uncle Georges who had no children of his own, adored his nephews and always gave us terrific presents - whatever we wanted. For my tenth birthday he gave me a magnificent Peugeot bicycle, rather heavy and solidly built as they were back then, and I was proud of knowing how to ride it. Our young 'teacher' hoisted young Leon onto his crossbar, swung his leg over, and the three of us went off for a ride, Tolia and Leon in front and me behind on my smaller bike, puffing just to keep up. The nearby neighbourhoods were agreeably in flower, with long avenues lined with trees and gardens. Tolia whizzed up the hills, leaving me ever further behind, and once I even lost sight of them and got in a panic! I was frightened (where was I?) and out of breath, and I gave up and stopped, retracing my path. I got back to the main road and went home in a real state. A childhood lesson in the need to face the tribulations of the world.

My father was furious and gave Tolia a real dressing down that evening; he hadn't looked back to make sure I was following, and he'd left me all alone, a kid of ten! That was the end of the bike excursions. You could do that then, there was hardly any traffic.

His military service put paid to Tolia's stay with us. But his mother continued to visit. Zin Mich had become a dressmaker. She altered our clothes as we grew, and she did alterations for my mother. Claiming to be unable to stay upright for any length of time, our 'dressmaker' unfortunately often fell asleep during fittings; one had to give her a slap, throw cold water on her face or offer her a cup of coffee to keep her going!

Another of our regular visitors was Alexandra Mikhailovna (pronounced 'Mikhalvna') Petrounkevitch, a dignified old girl who wore a long necklace and cameo watch, daughter of an eminent professor at the University of St Petersburg in the time of the tsars. My mother had charged "A.M." with teaching us Russian reading and writing, starting with the Cyrillic alphabet. I owe them both a big thank you for that. But unfortunately, A.M. forgot to teach us any grammar; so for a long time I muddled along with a sort of phonetic writing full of mistakes; Russian writing is quite unlike the spoken word, and illiterate Russians are incapable of writing it correctly.

Mademoiselle Petrounkevitch was the sister of a singer who'd once been famous in Russia, whose stage name was 'Yanne Roubane', a very handsome woman with the demeanour of a queen who was known as 'Baguinia' (goddess). My mother thought she was wonderful and often went to Passy to take singing lessons with the 'goddess'. But she realised later that the pedagogic gifts of her teacher did not match her artistic gifts, effectively preventing her students from singing as well as she. Oh, the rivalries of artists!

Her husband, Vladimirovitch Pohl, was a composer and piano teacher who opened

new horizons for me; no more "jolly workman" or "ride a cock horse", or Clementi sonatinas; I.V. sat me down in front of the Clair de Lune Sonata, and I was thrilled to find I could play the slow part. There were also some waltzes, mazurkas and easy Chopin preludes within my grasp, great music at last! As for piano technique, I.V. had a very particular way to make it possible for amateurs; for example, for trills all you had to do was to hit the two neighboring keys simultaneously with one finger. . . no matter, he taught me to read music and showed me the pleasure of launching into real music without being put off by inadequate technique. Ever since I've enjoyed playing for myself, even if badly . . .thanks I.V.

Monsieur Pohl was a strange bird, skinny and gangling, with a prominent Adam's apple, almost bald and with a grey beard and big bony hands with arthritic joints. He was keen on yoga and oriental philosophy. He'd met the famous adventuress Alexandra David-Neel, author of the popular *Voyage d'une Parisienne a Lhasa*, at an orientalist dinner, finding her arrogant and insupportable. I later read the book, that I found interesting, but I also found that I shared his view.

When uninvited people showed up he'd stand on his head explaining that he was doing a blood transfusion! Appalled, and thinking him mad, they'd never come back. I'm just repeating what he told me. This couple, friends of mother's, were just about the only ones invited more than once to our house. Apart from our rich uncles, aunts and cousins, my parents saw no one. The Pohls, who lived in town, were pleased to get some fresh air in our garden and were happy to visit.

I.V. was also a gifted painter; he'd done a lovely watercolour of our house that he framed and gave to our mother. I don't know what became of the picture, that hung for a long time over the sofa in the living room.

My father was very fond of his brothers. He often took me to see his eldest brother Vladimir, who was also my godfather. When I was older I'd go on my own, to see my aunt, an extraordinary person, and my cousins, especially the youngest who was only one year older than me. Both families lived in Bourg-la-Reine, which made visiting easy.

My uncle Serge was an architect who lived with his Polish wife in Neuilly. My dad was very sarcastic about the crowd they moved in; princes (?) and countesses (?), Russian emigrés, very rich Jews, etc. My dad would see funny, convivial, tolerant Serge only at their mother's house, where his children never failed to turn up. My cousin Olga and I were nevertheless good friends and remain so. We were the same age; Constanatin would take me to Neuilly on the bus and métro, over an hour's trip, going home alone to Bourg-la-Reine, leaving me to sleep over at my uncle's, sometimes for several days during the holidays.

My uncle "loura" (Georges) and his wife, née Dees, had no children and liked to spoil their nephews and nieces. They lived in Auteuil like my granny, and often

came over on Sundays or holidays, to visit us or the Vladimirs in our leafy suburbs.

My uncle Boris was finishing his architectural studies at the Beaux-Arts, and was still living with his mother. My grandmother had moved and now occupied a lovely apartment in the 16th Arrondissement on avenue de Versailles, not far from the Seine. My father, George and Boris were large distinguished-looking men; Vladimir and Serge were only a little taller than average, but all five were real gentlemen, even though my dad sometimes liked to fool around, speaking in a vulgar way.

The older of Vladimir's sons, Cyrille, about ten years older than me, was great friends with his young uncle Boris, only a couple of years older, and they like to play tennis. Later Boris married Maria Bétoulinisky, from old St Petersburg aristocracy. Marina had a sister, quite a well-known singer, Anna Marly, a supporter of the Free French of De Gaulle in Britain, famous for her 'Song of the Partisans' ("the crows on the plain").

We saw less of my grandmother and my father's first cousins, Michel and André Catoire and their two sisters, and also Lise Dutfoy and Olga Rabeneck, née Trapp, who came quite often from England to visit her aunt. Sometimes these ladies brought their children of my generation. The only ones left now are the oldsters, like me; the rest have gone to a better place.

Michel and his sister Catherine, André and Olga, had all been baptised catholic since their time in Moscow. André and his wife Valérie (a Simonot daughter from a French family established in Russia) had two sons, Jean-Pierre and Bernard. The whole family had remained catholic and Bernard, an old bachelor, often visited the Dominican Brothers of Paris.

Michel married Natalie (Natacha) Chioukine, daughter of a millionaire Muscovite trader who collected French Impressionists. He had a fine collection that the Bolsheviks confiscated from him. He was even put in prison as a filthy capitalist; but his money probably got him out. The Chioukines even managed to carry a few of their canvases into exile. They led a comfortable life in France. When their finances dipped, they'd sell a picture, which allowed them to keep up appearances. The core of their collection is now housed on the second floor of the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. Natacha's mother had remarried with the musician Conus, a piano professor. She was also a piano teacher. Both Conus taught at the Rachmaninov Conservatory. Natacha was an excellent pianist, but she also played bridge and tennis. She and Michel didn't have children.

Olga and Catherine converted to Orthodoxy, doubtless because of their husbands. Olga's husband, the capable lawyer Stoupnitsky, was never invited to the Catoires. They were even suspected of having underhand contacts with the Soviet

embassy and were thus shunned. Furthermore, his wife had at some time been president of the 'Jar Ptitsa' (Firebird) Cinematic Club, an offshoot of France-URSS that showed Soviet films to the glory of socialist labour, The Stoupnitskys had a son my age, Alexis, a little fatty with cauliflower ears. He later had a good career in oil, in Black Africa, in Texas and elsewhere.

Alexis Struve, Catherine's husband also had a poor reputation with our family, if to a lesser extent than his brother-in-law. He was the son of the philosopher Struve, well known at the beginning of the twentieth century, first as a 'literal' Marxist, then a liberal and lastly an anti-Bolshevik. He came from a German family that had been Russified over the generations. Catherine's husband, scruffy, short-sighted and sly, was resented for having run through his wife's fortune and for being a failure. He claimed to be a bibliophile, hunting for books, buying and selling old Russian books that were becoming rare since the Soviets had imposed changes in Russian spelling, spelling that kept only one way of writing the vowels 'i' and 'e', (whereas before the revolution there had been three ways) and suppressed accents previously used to for words ending in consonants (and which were silent in speech) - all that to save paper because they were so poor.

When we went to the cousins Struve there were piles of books everywhere on the floor, on tables and on chairs, most of which were in bad shape and never repaired; missing a leg, backs and seats damaged. It was clear that the book business wasn't going too well. In any event Struve never made a fortune.

Catherine remained pretty indifferent about these things, not really interested in daily matters. They had three children. Their eldest, Pierre, was my age, a sweet boy, a joker and fantasist. He was studying medicine at the same time as my cousin Olga at Neuilly and became a doctor as well as an ordained priest after he married (that was the rule in the Orthodox church). He died young in a terrible car accident at the wheel of his 2CV. His younger sister was as short-sighted as her father, and a little dotty. But that didn't stop her becoming a bi-lingual secretary for an international organisation in Geneva. The youngest was Nikita Struve. He became a Russian professor at Nanterre and was a great pal of Alexander Solzhynitsyn. Nikita had welcomed the writer (read his work if you haven't already) when he arrived in Switzerland after being expelled as an undesirable from the USSR. Nikita sports a goatee beard like Chekhov, remains very active in the Russian Orthodox community, and prefers Putin's Moscow patriarch rather than the patriarch of Constantinople preferred by French Orthodox. My grandmother¹⁷ had a younger sister Olga Pavloff married to an Englishman,¹⁸ whose daughter we used to call Tante Olguette, another Olga, married to Charles Rabeneck, the older brother of my aunt Sophie in Bourg-la-Reine.¹⁹ Their family lived in London and

¹⁷ Marie Pavloff

¹⁸ Charles John Trapp

¹⁹ Irène is referring to Olga, daughter of Charles John Trapp and Olga Pavloff, who married Charles (Irène mistakenly says Edouard) Rabeneck. Charles was the elder brother of Irène's aunt Sophie, married to Vladimir Catoire and living

they often came to spend holidays with their cousins in France. Their son, Leo Rabeneck, was a year older than my cousin Cyrille ('Kika') and the same age as my uncle Boris. Leo was a tall slim young man, elegant and very British. He was at a famous 'Public School', even though it wasn't Eton.²⁰ The three young men got on well and played plenty of tennis, played the guitar and listened to West Indian records, etc. We younger ones looked up to them. Leo ('Liovka') was perfectly bi-lingual Anglo-Russian but his Russian had a terrible English accent. Liovka also spoke French, but less well. Later he became an engineer, working in India and Singapore, where he re-married a Eurasian woman, a golf and swimming champion, grand-daughter of an Indian dignitary and the daughter of a senior officer in the Australian Army. When Leo brought his wife to London some of his English friends dropped him . . .

We also had Dutch cousins, the Bursmas and the Setters. They hardly ever came to France; they had nearly starved to death during the 39-45 War when they had only tulip bulbs to eat . . . I only met one of them, once, much later. he worked as an engineer with Philips in Holland. What diversity within one family! Quite out of the ordinary . . .

Once a year there was a great Christmas Eve feast for the whole family, as well as the parents, bachelor brothers, aunts, etc. The meal took place in the large rectangular dining room separated from the living room by glazed double doors always left open. Heavy red velvet curtains covered French doors that gave onto a small balcony on the facade. There were engravings on the walls and the large gouache of Moscow by Yon hung over the sideboard. A lovely white tablecloth covered the long heavy wooden table. The table was laid with gold-rimmed plates, silverware, crystal glasses, carafes of wine and vodka, with water for the children.

There were about twenty of us. My grandmother was a perfect hostess, smiling, affable, and pleased to have her large family around her, sitting at the head of the table, with the 'seniors' to her left and right. Further down were those of intermediate age, with the children at the end. To my right, for example, was the Franco-Russo-Polish uncle of my cousin from Neuilly, Georges Corman, with his gleaming brown hair and sharp features. He loved riddles and daft jokes, like you find in the Almanach Vermont. He carried around visiting cards with silly names such as "G. Dupoil from Fez" or "Alonso Bistro y Ferlanos" that made us laugh.

The meal was served rather formally by a very tall chap with a meticulous square grey beard, an ex-officer of the Imperial Navy, whose wife took care of the cooking. The couple lived on the eighth floor in a maid's room under the roof.

in Bourg-la-Reine.

²⁰ St Paul's school in Hammersmith.

At the end of the meal coffee and cognac were served. The men all took some, and sometimes some more . . . but we children had already left the table to open our presents in the living room, accompanied by our bountiful granny. And we in turn offered our 'baboushka' little presents we had made ourselves much earlier; decorated calendars, clumsily embroidered hankies, etc. I remember that one year my mother had taught my cousin Jean (the future composer) and I quite an easy four-handed piece for piano, the 'Jouravel' (Crane), by Glinka, that we had to perform for our grandmother. She was thrilled to bits and warmly congratulated us (we'd played it pretty well, without bad notes), and the whole family applauded. Jean and I were quite carried away! Even the naval officer and his wife, framed in the doorway, clapped their hands. These lovely family celebrations have left me with fine memories. My grandmother had a little circle of old Russian ladies, both worthy and noisy, their arthritic fingers covered in rings and their wrinkly necks laden with pearls, provided they hadn't sold them to pay the rent. These old girls were only about sixty. Nowadays they'd be out driving, playing tennis and jogging . . . how times have changed! I only ever saw one man amongst them, a short bald chap who went by the extraordinary name of Napoleon Napoleonovitch. He must have come from a Bonapartist Russian family fallen on hard times in Russia.

The 'five o' clock tea' was served daily and was quite a performance; cups, saucers, dessert plates in fine china, teaspoons, little embroidered napkins, thin slices of lemon prepared ahead of time, tarts, various biscuits, 'vatrouchkas' (a sort of small brioche tart with a filling of cottage cheese, egg yolk and sugar flavoured with vanilla and raisins).

At Easter-time we had 'Paskha' (a sort of pyramid of pressed cream cheese flavoured with sugar and crystalised fruits) and 'Koulich' (a sort of panettone decorated with icing sugar and scented with saffron), as well as hard boiled eggs in every colour. Guests arrived and kissed three times saying "Christ is risen" to which one would reply "He is indeed risen".

Granny poured the tea and offered cakes. Very polite, she hardly spoke herself, limiting herself to discreet questions to her guests, showing interest in each of them (perhaps that was the case). The ladies replied and told the latest stories about their families, friends and acquaintances, as well recounting their worries. In their defence I must say they never spoke about their health. That would have been in poor taste; the *bon ton* prevailed.

Out of politeness as much as out of Christian sentiment, my granny never turned anyone away, even if they were importunate or undesirable. She was sometimes a bit swamped by this sort of invader. I particularly remember a sort of Russo-German woman of about forty who came several times to visit, coming from Berlin via Paris. My father couldn't stand her and suspected her of being a Nazi

spy. He got rid of her without too much difficulty by making rather nasty sarcastic comments about Germany's Nazi regime.

Catoire family businesses

During the week my uncles and my father, together or separately, often went to lunch with their mother, Marie Pavloff. They took care of administration, paid bills, and generally surrounded her with filial love. Did she feel well? Did she need anything? As soon as they arrived they'd kiss her hand and she'd respond with a kiss to the forehead. But once at Bourg-la-Reine when I was there and she was away, Uncle Georges made a point of criticising her rather stiff formality - so British.

My uncle Vladimir who worked in the centre of Paris, had lunch with his mother once or twice a week when business allowed. He'd set up, with his brother Georges and two cousins Michel and André, the 'Société Catoire Frères', which imported Polish anthracite. Their offices were in the 8th Arrondissement at 2, rue de Vienne. The staff included three secretaries; Sophie Dees (uncle Georges' wife), and his excellent friend and faithful employee Miss Barraux, and the accountant's secretary Miss Ehrenburg, an old Jewish spinster with a wrinkly neck who was the sister of the famous Russian writer Ilya Ehrenburg. I'm sure she was good at maths, but her French was atrocious. The nearest Métro station, St Phillippe du Roule became for her 'Fillipkirroul', not to mention many other pronunciations that made us laugh. I also remember a chauffeur who drove the company car (my uncles didn't drive! . . .). It was the car and the chauffeur that should have taken Uncle Vladimir on the exodus from Paris, but they got no further than Savigny-sur-Orge and had to turn back the next day, put off by the crowds and the bombardment of that staging post. The chauffeur was a parisian; not part of the Russian diaspora. Surprise!

The business remained profitable until 1940 when the invasion of Poland put an end to it. The 'Société Catoire Frères' got recycled as 'Claire Vallier, Cosmetic Products'. They made beauty creams using hard to find oils and black-market butter. In those days to survive you had to use initiative . . . The accountant de Skalsky, in whom my uncles had great confidence, showed plenty of initiative. One day he made off with the strongbox. The cousins André and Michel seem to have anticipated such a coup and came out of it alright. But my uncles, on the other hand, victims of their naive integrity, were more or less ruined. Uncle Georges died of a heart attack and Uncle Vladimir ended his days a widower and almost destitute.

In the offices on the rue de Vienne the atmosphere remained pretty Russian. On a little table in the entrance hall there were always tea glasses and a full teapot for all! Not something you'd usually find in a Paris office.

My father had lunch with his mother on most business days. He had only to cross the Pont Mirabeau to get there. He hadn't wanted to be part of his brothers'

business, preferring to remain independent and autonomous. And he had his own business at 1, avenue Emile Zola in the fifteenth, the "Etablissements Leon Catoire and son, mechanical engineering, heating, plumbing and ventilation". My dad worked very hard, coming home very late in the evening. He liked to complain, but actually the business did very well. My dad was trained as an engineer, had a very good business sense, and was nobody's fool. Amongst other things he'd done the ventilation for a very large cinema, the *Eldorado* I believe, and the Ministry of the Army subsequently gave him important projects for an armament factory at Houilles, North- West of Paris. But my dad didn't give up on his more modest clients who tended to pay more regularly and on time than the Ministry.

It always remained a mystery to me how a business with such a broad base of activity around the country could be supported from such a pathetic little office, with no equipment and no home comforts? You'd have thought it was the time of Zola! The offices were squeezed between the quai de Javel and the avenue Emile Zola, occupying most of the ground floor of a building with a few little shops along the pavement. The entrance door opened onto the avenue and connected to a small corridor. To the left, behind a glass screen, was the workshop littered with tubes, bits of metal and junk of all sorts, and with machines. The welding lamps buzzed, the hammers banged, and the hacksaws pierced your ears, it was quite deafening. In the winter the workshop was hardly heated. About thirty workmen, mostly French, were there in their blue overalls, managed by Michler, a rather decrepit old foreman from Lorraine, who knew the business well and always wore a jacket. To the right the first door led to the communal WCs, almost public and Turkish style, but very clean. Next one could see a small washbasin with a dripping copper tap. There was a hand-towel on a hook next to it. The next door led to the 'director's office', a small room, minimally furnished. There was a large plain wooden desk with drawers in the pedestals, a telephone and a desk lamp, with papers and files everywhere, a small table with a typewriter for the stenographer, two or three chairs, a sort of plan pinned up on the wall and a large wall calendar with the Sundays and holidays picked out in red. There was no easy chair, no rugs or any ornament. My dad was only there early in the morning and late in the evening; he spent the day in his car going to see suppliers, his clients and architects, as well as to inspect the building sites. The other rooms housed his Russian collaborators, Kaminsky and Dubrovsky who called him "Liev Lvovich". Kaminsky was a well-educated chap of about the same age as dad, whom he got on well with. He lived at the Croix de Berny, not far from us. He grew cucumbers and Russian aniseed in his little garden, visiting us a few times. He liked to discuss political and philosophical questions endlessly. Dubrovsky, the accountant, was quite different. Discreet and pretty taciturn, he was a bit mysterious but very intelligent. He thought that Nazi Germany could never become the saviour of Holy Russia, putting an end to Bolshevism, but that it was the enemy of Russia and of France, and more widely the enemy of the entire human race.

At the end of the corridor a door opened into the design office with its two drawing boards, the domain of the two young draftsmen whose names I've forgotten. One was a bit rough and uneducated, pronouncing Bordeaux like Viadox with a KS sound on the end. The other, a little crazy, belonged to a militant organisation (lots of meetings, not much action) of imperialists and nationalists, wanting to restore the Tsarist monarchy, but as a constitutional monarchy. This chap had embraced . . . Islam! Perhaps he had ancient Tatar ancestors. He didn't look in the least mongoloid. A big strawberry blond, he also drove the company van.

The factory at Houilles was requisitioned by the Germans from the onset of the occupation. And this was a big problem for my father. Not to collaborate was difficult and even dangerous. Besides, my father bore the heavy responsibility of providing for his employees, his workers and his family: *volens nolens* he kept on working at Houilles and thereby kept everybody fed. But at the Liberation the outcome was quite unexpected; my father was accused of collaboration. The trial lasted for a whole year; nothing but pangs of guilt that got on my father's nerves and ruined his health. The outcome was inconclusive, and the factory was able to continue in business. It turned out that Dubrovsky had contacts in the French Communist Party and several of the workers were members. They all stood witness, with evidence, that they'd taken part in numerous acts of sabotage at the factory with the tacit approval of their boss and, being communists, they'd had the honesty to appreciate his contribution.

On the other side of the avenue, opposite Etablissements Catoire, was a well-maintained busy grocery. M. Ismailoff, the owner was smart, quick and voluble - an excellent tradesman. He sold all sorts of products, and particularly Russian specialities like smoked salmon and pickled herring; buckwheat and maize, the basic ingredients of 'kachas' (dumplings) of which Russians are so fond.; large jars of pickled cucumbers in a dill scented brine; vodka and kvass (a slightly alcoholic fermented bread drink); 'boublichki', a sort of crunchy pretzel with a soft centre; poppy seed rolls; also sweeties such as 'pastilas' (no idea what they're made of), 'tianouchki' (delicious caramels), Turkish halva based on sesame seeds, etc. There was plenty for gourmands. Ismailoff's wife made prepared dishes, tarts and 'piroshki' (little packets of flaky pastry) stuffed with cabbage, meat, mushrooms or fish - a real treat!

The shop was always busy, with a mixed clientele of locals, both French and Russian (of whom there were a lot in the 15th). The two shop assistants, both as efficient as their boss, were always busy. The business flourished. But with the German Occupation the Ismailoff shop seemed as empty as all the others. Nevertheless, you could still get almost everything under the counter; the fruits of the black market!

Thanks to Ismailoff, to our money and to the initiative of my father, we suffered

a lot less under the Occupation than many others. I'm not particularly adept at the black market but as long as it provides a service and doesn't hurt anyone, why not?

At some point Ismailoff managed to track down his ancient father who had remained in Russia and he managed, I don't know how, to get him out of the USSR and to Paris. Then they underwent a terrible incident that I ought to mention. The illiterate old man didn't know one word of French. Having misunderstood or forgotten the precise instructions that his son had given him he set off on the Métro and got lost. He had no papers on him; he was always afraid they'd get lost or be stolen. The police rounded him up. Not understanding a word of his explanations shouted out in Russian, the cops thought he must be mad and packed him off to an asylum. To calm his violent outbursts and threatening gestures he was given drugs. Luckily for him they didn't make him mad for real. His son, appalled, spent three months visiting various commissariats and hospitals before he found him. It had been a terrible ordeal for the old man, but he survived. Russians can put up with anything; it's a matter of upbringing!

My secondary education at the Marie Curie Lycée de Jeunes Filles



Marie Curie Lycée de Jeunes Filles, opened in 1936, designed by Emile Brunet

My recollections take me all the way back to 1936: that's when the magnificent Marie Curie Lycée de Jeunes Filles was inaugurated in the residential suburb of Sceaux, south of Paris. It was a handsome three storey building, rising to four in its corner towers, if my memory serves me. The building was all pink brick and glass, with a central section and two lateral wings, very well sited on a hill. The luminous assembly hall opened onto wide white stone steps that descended to the sports fields, shaded on the right hand side by beautiful deciduous trees. In the distance one could see the greenery of the famous Vallée aux Loups where Chateaubriand met Madame Récamier, a valley abandoned by wolves for quite a while.

I entered the brand-new school in the fifth class, and I stayed all the way to the second. Then it was the Occupation. The school was requisitioned by the Luftwaffe who turned it into their HQ, with our classes distributed around Sceaux, but with the same teachers.

I'm extremely grateful to those teachers who taught me everything, opened my eyes to the world, and gave me a thirst for knowledge. Most of them were excellent teachers. Those who weren't at least gave us the pleasure of heckling and of surreptitious reading under our desks.

At that time my musical education continued at home. Since I was tiny the house had rung to the gentle vocalise of my mother, Chopin or Rachmaninoff etudes when she was at the piano, and later my brother Leon's violin scales. My father also loved music; he even had a leather-bound edition of Wagner operas, with piano transpositions of the orchestral parts with the parts of Tristan and Isolde in Russian and German below. To support the books he made a fine wooden lectern, that my son still has. Both my father and his brothers played the piano fairly well, but I only ever heard him play 'Alexander's Rag Time Band', not appreciated by Mummy. Maybe the joyful syncopation of the rag reminded him of his youth.

My mother sometimes dragged him off to concerts in the evening. Tired after a hard day's work and lulled by the music, he often nodded off only to be woken by a sudden fortissimo or a dig in the ribs from an upset Mummy to bring him round. There was even an unfortunate incident they couldn't have helped; the room was very full and Daddy was sat on the last available *strapontin*. It was faulty and collapsed noisily under his weight during a pianissimo moment . . . !

My mother also sometimes took me to the salle Pleyel or the salle Gaveau. That's how I got to see the famous Argentina dancing, with her mantilla stuck in her black chignon, her tight bodice, her tasselled shawl and her castanets, and above all her seductive langourous latino-hispanic music. I also heard the famous Italian baritone Titta Ruffo, a plump little man who sang arias from operas and popular songs. I also had the good luck to see the great pianist Rachmaninoff, and finally the unforgettable Chaliapine, whose bass voice boomed out in so many operas; Mussorgski's 'Prince Igor' and 'Boris Gudonov'; 'The Invisible City of Kitezh' by Rimsky-Korsakov . . . all the soloists and the choirs were Russian, and what décors!



Salle Pleyel, opened in 1927, designed by acoustician Gustave Lyon together with architect Jacques Marcel Auburtin

My mother also sang a mezzo-soprano role for the first time in a little known opera 'La Camorra', by? The show was put on by musicians from the Rachmaninoff conservatory for an audience almost entirely made up of émigrés. I remember all the preparations; my mother rehearsing the arias at the piano, trying on the costumes, the generous applause. The concert-hall was full. I believe it was a great success, but without any follow-on for my mother, not from lack of talent but because of intrigues and rivalry among the artists, that disgusted my mother. She left the company; in any case she wouldn't have been able to defend herself in such a wasp's nest, she would have needed an impresario. . .

Despite my youth I, too, entered on scene. Where, when, how? I have no recollection. I was a strong girl and a little plump. To improve my sense of movement I'd been signed up for a course of rhythmic gymnastics and had been told I was a gifted dancer. One day there was a performance by the children in which I took part. To the sounds of a Russian folksong I gaily undertook slides and spins - a real folk dance in a pretty costume with a red hanky round my neck, a broad white linen shirt with puffed sleeves and a high waisted long red skirt down to my ankles, with braces, a lovely white embroidered apron tied behind and several strings of coloured wooden beads. I was enchanted. And it went off quite well despite my stage fright, and I was applauded which made me very happy (did I really deserve such success? Everyone, good or bad, got clapped by their friends and parents). That was the end of my choreographic presentations.

I'd had piano lessons from an early age and I played quite well, but not well enough to take it seriously. It was different for Leon. My mother saw him as a future virtuoso violinist, a Yehudi Menuhin, condescending to lower himself to the conservatory, accompanied by his sister Hepzibah. For my father, though, Leon was his heir, his successor at the head of *Ets.L. Catoire*. A tacit matrimonial misunderstanding! My brother may well have benefitted from it, but he also suffered quite a bit.

I was coming up for twelve when I went to the Marie Curie Lycée. I'd finished with the Cours Florian annex of the Lycée Lakanal. I was making new friends. But whatever happened to my dear Chourotchka? My memory is muddled. Was she a 'modern' while I was doing Latin? Did she take the Ligne de Sceaux on the métro to go home to Bagneux, while I could get from Sceaux to Bourg-la-Reine on foot (about three kilometres)? I just don't remember. I'd see Chourotchka once or twice when Mummy took us to Paris on a Sunday, at the Russian church in rue Olivier de Serres, in the 15th., where we often also saw the whole Bourda tribe. The church occupied, and still occupies as far as I know, the site of an abandoned warehouse at the end of a courtyard that gave onto the street. The walls were decorated with numerous icons, with candles in glasses suspended before the larger ones . . . A sort of lectern supported the bible from which the priest read from the scriptures. A screen, the iconostasis, with its 'Golden Doors', hid the altar

from the congregants. There were no chairs, just a bench at the back for invalids; the faithful remained standing for the entire service making many signs of the cross and kneeling down. You could feel a light tap on the right shoulder with a candle with a whispered "pass it forwards". Row by row the candle finally reached its destination, and someone would light it and place it before an icon. Candles and little blessed wafers ('prospirki') were sold just inside the door by a fat old lady dressed all in black with a black veil on her head sitting behind a table with a white napkin on which were arrayed her goods, a cashbox, and paper listings of the names of saint's days. The priest would read them out loud during the intercessions of the Eucharistic Prayer. To the right side of the entrance was the choir, made up of five or six men and women who sang (sometimes off-key) the beautiful polyphonic Orthodox liturgy. The priest or the deacon would mumble the litany, and the priest would raise his voice in the Slavonic language which was a bit like Russian; you could understand it. How it went on! Then it was communion with the two sacraments. The wafer, the 'prospirki', was OK. But I didn't care for the little sip of red wine (apparently Cahors) that the priest offered each communicant in a little tasting goblet, wiping the rim with a little red cloth each time . . . Afterwards the priest offers the cross for each communicant to kiss, without even the little red cloth. It was hardly hygienic, although the cross does save and protect. Only faith matters. Nevertheless, I was moved by the religious atmosphere; at thirteen I wanted to become a nun! Things are a bit different now. Later I discovered catholic churches and services which were much less mysterious and more comfortable; one sits quietly, and one can follow the service in the missal. It is over quite quickly, and order is restored . . .

Rue Olivier de Serres was some way off, almost an hour's journey. Our Sunday church expeditions, already irregular, became fewer and fewer and eventually stopped altogether, not least because my father, who didn't come with us, would welcome us home with sarcastic jokes about priests. I remember nevertheless his strong moral character and his consideration the family and for others . . . I believe he was a good person of integrity, and a believer in spite of his strong anticlerical convictions and his sharp tongue.



Russian Orthodox church in the rue Olivier de Serres

Near the church on rue Olivier de Serres was the A.C.E.R, the Association of Russian Students, preoccupied with denouncing the suffering of holy Russia under the USSR, with ecumenical feeling for the Anglicans but shunning the Catholics. The Association had founded a Sunday school where Russian and holy history were taught. They also organised summer holiday camps near Lac Petichet, south of Grenoble. They were pro-Russian without being particularly tsarist. They were fiercely anti-Nazi during the Occupation (Germans were the enemy), unlike the parishioners of the Orthodox cathedral on the rue Daru (17th arrondissement) who admired the military (most of them were ex-officers of the Imperial Army), order and German-style discipline. In their eyes the Germans could have become the liberators of Holy Russia, the eventual restorers of the Romanoffs and enablers of a return to pre-revolutionary times.

The three Bourda sisters, together with Tolia Berg, who was mentioned earlier, were naturally members of the A.C.E.R. Choura and her younger sister Sonia had given up their promising studies before their final exams to the chagrin of their mother who had envisaged Choura as a future doctor in biology and Sonia as a Russian lecturer. Each of them married militant members of A.C.E.R., had lots of kids and lives richer in spiritual values than in material goods. Lena, the eldest sister, managed to escape the émigré quagmire. A good multilinguist, she worked in a major news agency (print or radio?). She married the journalist Philomenko, a Ukranian war correspondent. He died somewhere over the Pacific when the American plane he was travelling in went down without trace. Lena remained single, bringing up her two children. Being very energetic and hard-working, she

managed to come out of it OK.

I have completely lost track of the three sisters. Whatever became of them? Are they still with us? These reminiscences bring me to a couple of slightly later episodes relating to the A.C.E.R.

As well as my cousins Pierre and Nikita Struve, my first cousins Marie (Mouich) and Olga were also members of A.C.E.R. Marie was a member because her mother, my aunt Rabeneck, an enthusiastic Orthodox convert, used to invite lots of Orthodox theologians, priests and monks to Bourg-la-Reine. Every Sunday my aunt, with Germanic regularity, used to travel to the other side of Paris to the church of St. Serge near the Buttes Chaumont, to take part in the service. She'd set off at about six in the morning; it must have taken her about an hour and a half on the métro to get there. The monastic service went on for hours. She'd get home at about two in the afternoon, exhausted. She'd retire to her room, stretching out on the bed to recover. While she was away it was my uncle who looked after everything at home. What a saint! But my cousin Mouich didn't complain about her mother's influence.

As for Olga, her parents had hired a bustling fifty-year old, tiny, with glasses and a chignon, to teach her Russian. She used to come to Neuilly once a week. Her name was Madame Nédochivina, and she had tea with my grandmother a bit too often; a terrific snacker. My father nicknamed her Nédopucekina, doubtless because of her flitting from tea to tea with her clients, and because of her tiny wasp waist. Madame N. was very Anglophile. So, instead of giving Olga lessons in handwriting or Russian grammar (would she have known how? You can't become a prof. overnight), she preferred to give her some vague notions of English "It's much more interesting" she'd say . . . Olga's mother, (a spirited half-Polish brunette, and a lapsed catholic) was too busy to look after her daughter; wrapped up in the worldly ins and outs of émigré life, princes and countesses, bridge parties, teas, dances, charity bazaars (later on Olga and I were taken on as hostesses by her mother. I had the honour to offer tea and cakes to the unforgettable Serge Lifar, the famous dancer).

Her relations with noble white Russians didn't stop my aunt from acting as a go-between from the occupied zone for Jewish resistants, usually millionaires, trying to get to Megève. These train journeys across the line of demarcation were not without risk. Old Niania, to whom Olga had been entrusted since childhood, was always present, buried in her esoteric faith. She'd taught her little protégé all sorts of prayers, signs of the cross, and above all her faith. A faith that my little cousin has maintained until now. But, getting back to ACER, my cousins must have found nourishment for their spiritual hunger. They hung out with several members of the association, seminarians from the Saint Serge Orthodox institute of theology. Two of them even fell in love with those charming girls, very different in temperament but both studying medicine with the aim of helping their

fellows.

After the war an ecumenical conference was convened at Canterbury (?) at which ACER took part. My cousins were also there. The day after they got there a young British priest who'd only met Olga the day before, was overcome by a violent passion for this pretty and devout Christian, and immediately proposed to her. Luckily, she turned him down and a little later married a nice young Frenchman from an excellent Clermont-Ferrand family, a doctor like her, but not without insisting he convert to the Orthodox faith as a condition of getting married. They're still together, and they get on fine.

At the beginning of the Occupation we had to move for the third time, but still in Bourg-la-Reine, leaving 'Les Glycines' with its millstones, tucked behind the Sellier workshops, for a residential area east of the RN20, near the Grand-rue, and the centre of town. We set up house at 8 rue Le Bouvier, parallel to the Grand-rue and a few steps from the only square in the region.

By luck, or perhaps as intended by the city council, when you left the Grand-rue for the Avenue Carnot the first thing you saw was a tiny police station, with two policemen hanging out on chairs outside it. They got up only to go home or to manage the traffic and crossings when school got out. Right next to the police station was the fine white two storey Mairie, with its tricolour flag out front. That's where a city hall official wearing a red toupée married Jacques Micol and I. Further along was the great neo-classical church of Saint-Gilles, with its columned portico like the Madeleine, where Pierre was baptised. The presbytery was next door; the curé's governess watched all the comings and goings on the boulevard from her window. The next building was the lying-in hospital where Pierre was born, on the corner of the rue Le Bouvier . . .

A few more lovely villas, sitting in their gardens, were strung out along the lime-tree bordered boulevard, then on the right was the rue des Ecoles, where Pierre went to school. I knew the street well; the Cours Florian I went to was opposite the school. To the left, off the boulevard, a long street led to the cemetery where our family tomb holds my parents and my brother André (*cremated at St Nazaire, but where's the urn?*). I expect I'll be joining them in the near future. They are at peace, as I hope to be. My childhood friend Genette is also there. The cemetery is a pretty creepy place. Four big cypress trees rise above the tombstones, the monuments and the artificial flowers, all enclosed by brick walls. Cemeteries can be welcoming when there are trees, shade and greenery, flowers and grass and benches to sit on and meditate. I've seen several in England, in Germany, in Russia and in the USA. Please forgive this digression, but at my age my interest in these places is increasingly relevant.

So, in Bourg-la-Reine everything was in place (and near to hand) for the important stages of an entire life .

One omission on our tour; in the angle formed by the place de Bourg-la-Reine and the avenue Carnot, on the left opposite the little police station, you can see the sober building of the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul. Pierre ought to be grateful to them; it was in their cafeteria (where I worked) that together with his little pals he finally began to eat without making a fuss, without pushing away his plate, balking and repeating 'no'. At last, his mealtime tantrums were over!

He also learned to read and write in their nursery school. The schoolyard and the ground floor of the building were hidden behind a high metal fence punctuated by a pedestrian entrance, a wide double gate for cars and clumps of lovely lilacs. The facade was shaded by two or three magnificent horse chestnut trees. You reached the glazed entrance hall up a wide flight of stone steps under a glass canopy. Either side of the stairs were tulips, roses and dahlias according to the season. There was also quite a large garden behind the building. Near the house there were more flowers and further away a vegetable garden where we gathered tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuces and also a few apples and lots of cherries. The brick boundary wall gave onto the offices of the EDF, which in turn gave onto the Grand Rue.

Going on down the boulevard, about two kilometres beyond the intersection where the schools were, one comes to the Bièvre a minor tributary of the Seine separating Bourg-la-Reine from L'Hay-les-Roses that used to be lined with poplars and willows. Just before the bridge, on the right in an angle formed by the boulevard Carnot and the river, was a little plot of land for sale. At the beginning of the Occupation my father presciently bought it. He planted potatoes that he looked after in his few leisure hours. For irrigation he took water from the Bièvre. My job was to pick off the Colorado beetles (a name we also gave the Germans) one by one (there were not yet any insecticides) to stop them eating the leaves necessary for the development of the tubers. The potatoes did much to improve our lot in a difficult time. My dad and/or I used to visit our little plot on our bikes; it was downhill to get there, but you had to pedal hard to get home.

After the war the poplars and willows were cut down and the pretty stream was concreted over, frustrating the fishermen and robbing our little plot of all its charm. My father sold it. But we no longer needed it because potatoes came back on the market. The site is now occupied by three mediocre suburban villas. The Green party is now lobbying to restore air and light to the Bièvre, ruined by the planners.²¹

Let's have look inside the square hallway of our house ('Our' is just a figure of speech. We were just renters. At the time owners were rare). A pair of double

²¹ *Bièvre* means beaver stream in English; *Bobrr* in Russian.

doors, usually left open, led to the salon on the left, and to the dining room on the right. On the salon side was my father's little study, lit by a glazed exterior door with a fanlight above. A few steps led down into the garden. On the right, next to the dining room, was the old-fashioned kitchen without electric oven, fridge or dishwasher, but with a coal-fired range for hot water, and a big gas cooker with an oven. Modern comforts arrived only after the war, quite a bit later, including a telephone! An exterior door took you out to the dog kennel (we'd always had one). At the end of the hall a waxed staircase led to the two upper floors where the bedrooms were. Another door led down to the cellar. From the onset of the war my father had stockpiled a maximum amount of anthracite at the "Glycines". This anthracite moved house with us (Ah! the sacks), eliciting the envy of our new neighbours.

In the salon, my mother's domain, a vast old mirror on the mantelpiece lit by two sconces reflected the room. There was also an ancient mantle clock.

Clocks were everywhere around the house, grandfather clocks, mantle clocks and alarm clocks. My father was keen on clocks. He even made friends with an old Russian (yes, another!) clockmaker who had a shop on the Grand Rue, an anarchist who had fled Russia after the abortive revolution of 1905 who adored wide-ranging political chat. His exile had started in Switzerland, where he'd learned his trade, then he ended up in France where he mended watches and clocks. Our lovely mantle clock with lots of glass and bronze, chimed on the hour and half-hour and had to be wound weekly. The case was mahogany in the Louis Philippe style; there was also a bookcase with glass doors for musical scores, an oval table with three legs for serving tea, a couple of armchairs, some upright chairs and a sofa covered in almond-green velvet, engravings on the walls, a crystal chandelier and heavy velvet curtains on the window. Above all there was a black baby grand Blüthner piano where my mother spent most of her time, sometimes with my brother Leon, bow in hand and violin under his chin, playing his exercises for his mother. There was another piano upstairs, a so-so upright Gaveau, kept for practising scales, Hanon, Czerny, etc. of which I was the main user. Later my little brother André also played it. He was quite gifted and could pick up tunes by ear, but he completely lacked the discipline necessary to develop real pianistic skill.

I hope dear readers that I haven't bored you too much with these lengthy descriptions, but they do give you an impression of the setting for my adolescence, my youth, and my early adulthood. My son Pierre will probably spot some childhood memories.

When we moved to the rue le Bouvier in the autumn of 1940, to a pretty house with restored tapestries and paintings, my Brother André was only five years old. He still needed help getting dressed, getting to school and coming home, keeping

an eye on him. So he had a governess (yet another, but the last), Madame Eynaud who wasn't quite Russian. but Georgian, from a princely family she claimed, a Nougachvili or Marmeladze, whatever (Russians` used to say of Georgians: "down there all you need is a couple of sheep and you're a prince!").

At that time Georgia was an integral part of the Russian, and later the Soviet Empire. It used to be that Orthodox Georgians were grateful to Russians for having protected them from the Turks, and independence wasn't an issue. On the shores of the Black Sea, and enjoying an almost sub-tropical climate, they produced an abundance of fruit and vegetables, vines and even tea on the hills. They had good tourist income from their attractive resorts such as Sochi or Batoumi with sea bathing, Palm lined seaside promenades, convention centres and holiday colonies. My mother's parents even had a dacha at Batoumi.

Getting back to Madame Eynaud, Tatiana Varnavnova (daughter of Barnaby) was perfectly bi-lingual, even tri-lingual since she also spoke perfect Georgian. She'd learned impeccable French having been brought up, heavens knows how, in a French convent in Lebanon. Since when she'd had two or three husbands, whom she'd buried one after the other, the last being Monsieur Eynaud. She also let us know in a roundabout way about her numerous lovers, whose existence could only be imagined except for the last, a beautiful athletic black man who was completely civilised. Was that true or did she make it up? I always wondered where mother had found our Mme Eynaud. The physical aspect of this person was as strange as her CV: she was extremely well-upholstered if not obese, pudgy and always dressed in black, a large skirt down to her ankles, black stockings and flat lace-up shoes like a nun's, a 1900's hairdo from her youth, a mass of jet-black hair (hardly a grey hair) brought into a thick chignon on top of her head, a fat sallow face with sly eyes hidden behind thick tortoiseshell glasses, big wet lips (she had lost a few teeth and dribbled a lot), white dimpled hands with stubby well-manicured nails cut square. Her whole look reminded you of a fat odalisque from a harem, stuffing herself on oriental pastries and never venturing outside. She'd already spent time at Les Glycines on temporary assignment when we were between governesses . . . that first contact was enough bring Leon and I down with the flu, and here's why; we had a big illustrated book full of gripping tales of aviators stranded in the Sahara, racing drivers winning cups, explorers going up the Congo in canoes, Christopher Columbus discovering America, comics of the time telling tales of the "Pieds-Nickelés", a comic with a motto in verse of which I can still remember the opening:

"Je constate chaque matin
Que j'ai une peau de crocodile,
Tandis que ma cousine Odile
A l'épiderme de satin",²²

²² **Les Pieds Nickelés** ("The nickel-plated feet") is a French comic series, originally created by Louis Forton. The comic premiered on June 4, 1908 in the newspaper *L'Épatant*. Wikipedia.

and other riddles, jokes and puns, often pretty silly it's true, but this inoffensive album had us in its grip and we'd spend hours over it. Tatiana Varnavnova in her bossy hypocritical way CONFISCATED it, considering it 'niecoulturny' (too uncultured!). Nevertheless I owe her a lot. As an adolescent I'd become disorganised and rather careless. But with her strict convent discipline she made sure I made my bed as soon as I got up, that I washed and tidied my socks, kept my room neat . . .

She may have seemed horrible to us, and she was certainly pretty unimaginative, but she was intelligent and talented. She'd been converted to Catholicism at her convent, was quite devout and we'd see her returning from the Ash Wednesday service her forehead still covered in ashes! She liked to sit with her legs apart and her hands crossed resting on her ample skirts. These attitudes seemed ridiculous and strange to us. But she could do anything manual; she was an excellent cook, could do remarkable needlework (book-covers, pincushions, initials on everything in tiny stitches), she also did watercolours and wrote poetry (I was then too young to appreciate her talents). Order, cleanliness, work well done, she had all the domestic virtues of a good Christian. As soon as my little brother André could go to school, Madame Eynaud left us, but she'd come back to see my mother from time to time. That was the end of the governess era!

Paris life under the Nazi Occupation

Time passed and we were in the Occupation. Life went on somehow. Privileged as we were, we didn't suffer too much from cold or hunger. In winter the indoor temperature managed to stay around 13 Or 14 C. My mother put mittens on to play the piano. She suffered from chilblains because she was so thin, sacrificing her pitiful ration for her children, who didn't even notice. Like everybody we ate rutabaga, horrid tasteless vegetable, a sort of cross between a turnip and a Jerusalem Artichoke, that you no longer see except as animal feed because they prefer it to fish meal. . . My father used to have to go to Brittany on business, where they were short of plumbing materials. He managed to get paid in kind. He came back with his case full of smoked ham or sausage, a big block of butter, or something else. One of the hams, once cut open released big white maggots. Horrible spectacle! We got rid of them, boiled the ham and ate it, of course.

This traffic in perishables wasn't without danger: the police were tasked with rooting out black market goods, and there were checkpoints. That's how my cousin Cyrille (Kika), was caught coming back from the country to Paris on his bike (it was closer in the 1940s) with butter in his saddlebags, and a fair quantity too, destined for our "Claire Vallier" cosmetics. Ouch! Police on the road. Kika had the presence of mind to stop his bike next to them, asking them the way to Bourg-la-Reine. They were happy to tell him without stopping to search the saddlebags. He got home safely. These material challenges were compensated for by the musical atmosphere at home. We were swimming in music. I had developed enough dexterity and knowledge to unpick pieces within my capabilities. I enjoyed playing Schubert's 'Moment Musical' and waltzes, a few waltzes, mazurkas or preludes slow enough for me to get my fingers round, 'Songs without Words' by Mendelssohn, etc. I would accompany my mother when she sang in her fine mezzo- soprano the 'Arie Antiche', a collection of 17th and 18th C Italian melodies, and my brother in sonatas for violin and piano. This last was not without its problems. Leon was never happy and we often argued . . . There was also my mother's daily piano practice ("pianists who do not practice daily not only stagnate, they go backwards"), as well as musical gatherings with our dear German teachers. Long live classical music! We didn't know much about operettas or modern music.

My dear 'baboushka' had more eclectic tastes; that's how she took my cousin Olga and I to see a matinée performance of 'Die Fledermaus' produced by an Austrian company. The waltzes reminded my granny the balls of her youth. It was also thanks to her that we were able to see Rossini's 'Barber of Seville' and Bizet's 'Carmen'. I'm sure my mother thought that French musicians were less good than Russian ones . . .at least the singers. As for the celebrity stars adored by the public, she ignored them completely. So, who is this Charles Trenet everyone is talking

about? For sure, our musical world remained pretty exclusive. No operetta, no musical comedies and above all no singers. We stuck to serious music.

Luckily for my mother the occupying forces were very keen on music. One could go to magnificent concerts. My mother took me along mostly for my musical education. The Metro was working for getting to Paris. But of course there were air raid warnings; the sirens would go off. Everything stopped. People were required to go down into air raid shelters, meaning the cellars of buildings. These warnings usually happened at night. Block monitors would go around, dressing down anyone who disobeyed. A bomb had fallen on a building in the rue de Rennes during a German raid in May 1940, just before the start of the Occupation. Ever since allied planes would fly over the city for sure, the warnings would sound, German anti-aircraft batteries would start up, but nothing would happen. Most people came up from the Metro and started walking home, taking the Metro again when the all clear sounded . . Parisians weren't too bothered. It was mostly timid folk who went down into the shelters. Most just tried to avoid zealous block monitors eager to hand out fines, typical of weak types given a bit of power . . .

Those were the conditions under which we made our expeditions to the salle Pleyel and other places. The anticipation of sirens interrupting the performance would give me terrible stomach cramps. Curled up on my chair I tried to ignore them and concentrate on the music. Sometimes I succeeded. Those pains have completely disappeared since the Liberation.

On one occasion the concert had gone off well. We were going home via the Denfert- Rochereau Metro station to join the Ligne de Sceaux. At the Edgar Quinet station the sirens went off. Everyone went down into the Metro, but my mother and I set off on foot hoping to get to the station in time for the last train once the alert was over. It was a real summer story; it wasn't yet quite dark and the walk was quite agreeable. But sadly the police stopped us and issued a summons; we had to appear later at the Tribunal. Months went by and we forgot about it. Nevertheless, the following November the postman delivered the indictment. I was still a minor so my father accompanied us. The judge ran through his administrative rigmarole, the accused usually agree: if you object it usually makes things worse and you get a stiffer sentence. We were given a pretty stiff fine . . . we were just leaving when an individual accused of leaving lights on in his windows thus not observing the basic rules of civil defence, shouted out: "I protest Judge; I was on my deathbed; how could I have closed my curtains?". He nevertheless received a stiff fine.

That summer we had new visitors at the house, the Nélidoffs, a very distinguished couple, reputedly more or less descendants of Peter the Great. How had my mother got to know them? The husband, with a little neatly trimmed little blond beard, wore a three-piece suit and well-polished shoes. A true Russian intellectual, he adored to talk. His wife, very discreet (he hardly let her speak), was slender with

fine features and squinty short-sighted eyes, dressed in flowing dark coloured clothes vaguely romantic in style worn with long necklaces. Their son, a skinny kid the same age as me, had a big round head and glasses. He looked at people oddly and seemed strange to me. The Nélidoffs lived in an apartment in the 14th Arrondissement. For these townies coming to Bourg-la-Reine was a bit like going to the country; they enjoyed the fresh air and the greenery of the suburban gardens in residential areas. When the weather got worse we no longer saw them. My parents lost sight of them. Later we learned that their son became subject to fits and had to be put in an asylum. That upset me; he was their only child.

The baccalauréat - end of my secondary education

My secondary education was coming to an end; the baccalauréat (le Bac) was looming. In the 1940s you first had to sit the Premier Bac (Classic: Latin, Greek plus a living language, or Latin and two living languages, or Modern: two living languages), written and oral. Once through that, one was in the superior (and last) class and had to choose either PHILO (Philosophy) or MATHELEM (elementary mathematics). There weren't the cruel distinctions you have today: the aces in 'S', the average students in 'E', and the duds in 'L'. Of course, you had to have a Mathélem Bac to prepare for entry to the Grandes Ecoles. On the other hand, excellent medics of my generation could get into P.C.B (Physics, Chemistry, Biology) with the Philo Bac and prepare for the entrance exams of the Faculties of Medicine or Pharmacy. These doctors knew how to listen to and heal patients without recourse to sophisticated and expensive technology.

The exams of the first and second Bacs included written answers on all we'd learned in class. If you got an average of 10 or more in the written exam you could go through to the oral. At a personal appearance you presented everything covered in the written exam, as well as History and Geography, for which there were no written exams, only obligatory orals. There was no such thing as PE, Drawing, Music or Crafts. In addition to living languages studied in class you could choose an additional language to present at the oral, for example Russian or Portugese, or even Breton a bit later in recognition of a broadening of regional identities . . . Only points above the mean counted towards your score, but marks below had no negative impact for the candidate. So, I chose Russian as my option. I read fluently but my written work was weak. Fortunately, in the oral these faults didn't show. But you did have to demonstrate some knowledge of literature. A tutor was found who came and gave me lessons once a week. Monsieur Kovalevsky, about forty years old, was a skinny old boy and very clever, with a sensitive spirit . . . He read me poems of Nékrassof, a popular miserabilist of the late nineteenth century (think Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*) in a shaky voice, a tear or two dripping off his eyelash and slowly running down his nose. He'd pull a handkerchief from his pocket and wipe them away surreptitiously, pretending to blow his nose. I didn't share his emotions which made me laugh on the quiet. Pupils see everything and can often be quite cruel. But I remain indebted to poor M. Kovalevsky; thanks to him I managed to get an excellent score and I was accepted for the second Bac, with distinction. Besides which, and above all, that teacher gave me a taste for marvellous Russian literature.

In my case both the Bacs led to adventures: As the date of the first written exams approached both my brothers had the brilliant idea of catching scarlet fever. I was declared at risk of contagion and put in quarantine, forbidden to go to school. In one way this forced absence suited me; I could spend all my time on revision. I felt quite well, but people I knew would cross the street to avoid me and it made me feel

anxious. Would I get ill too? Nevertheless, I studied hard with the sword of Damocles dangling over my head. In theory I wouldn't even be allowed to sit the exams. I went along anyway, didn't get ill, was allowed in, sat the orals, and was accepted, but what a lot of stress and emotion! Meanwhile my brothers got better. As for the second Bac, it was the oral that worried me; invitation in hand, I went to the designated room, but I didn't see my name on the list. What to do? There must have been a mistake I was told "Go and sort it out at the office of the Bac, rue Soufflot, it's only ten minutes away". I was very nervous (as anyone is before an oral), my heart was thumping, what was going to happen to me? It was the beginning of July, almost ten o' clock stifling hot . . . I ran sweating along to rue Soufflot. I had to wait for the officials to get to my case. At last, I was given a paper to show to my panel. I ran back, getting there about eleven o' clock. I was exhausted. A different official claimed I was too late to be admitted to the exam. I explained myself and showed my paper and things got sorted out. I tried to regain my spirits and to calm down. The official, who had become more sympathetic, led me to the philosophy professor who was apparently a nice chap. It was true, the official interceded on my behalf, explaining what had happened. The professor questioned me on Epictitus and the Stoics, my favourite question. It all went well. Next was Astronomy where, once again, I was lucky, and I shone; I was asked about Halley and I spoke about his comet that comes round every seventy years (did I get that right?). It was what I knew best. Things got even better with geography. I had to talk about Java "A large island in the Pacific in Indonesia" I said without mentioning the area that I'd forgotten, "And what's the population?" asked the examiner, a young man of about thirty. I hazarded a guess "Seven million". He looked at me and said with a sneer "Seventy . . ." Then there were other questions on the climate, the culture . . . I answered as best I could, not too well. I thought the questions were over, but he suddenly asked "Your name's CATOIRE. Haven't you got a brother, Cyrille CATOIRE?" "He's not my brother, he's a first cousin". While I turned to another examiner, he went off angry about another candidate. I was more dead than alive. But at last it was over and we had to wait for the results. You already know how things turned out, as I mentioned before. "To the courageous nothing is impossible!"

When I think about that oral exam in the second Bac, nowadays the problem would have been resolved by a quick call to the office of the Bac or a glance at the computer, either of which would have relieved me of plenty of stress. Progress is good! My cousin Cyrille, ten years older than me later told me "Your Geography examiner was a pal of mine during our military service, on the 'Jeanne d'Arc'. We went round the world together. You didn't know much but you seemed so deflated, yet you seemed quite smart. So he gave you an average mark, as a souvenir of his good times on the 'Jeanne d'Arc'.

There I was, I'd passed my two Bacs (the first on its own wouldn't have opened any doors). I was turning a page in my young life! What would I do now, what would I choose? Young people with a firm vocation at eighteen are lucky, mature

enough to know what they want to do and knowing what they're capable of. I wasn't one of them; I loved nature, outdoor activities, the sky, trees . . . drawing, music reading, languages, history. Anything outside my family or school setting fascinated me. But what should I do? I didn't have a clue.



Front row: Léon Catoire, his elder sister Irène Catoire, Feduke (Frederick) Trapp, Marie (Mouish) Catoire ; behind, Jacques Micol, Irène's husband

Thanks to my parents for a good start in life

Before I wrap up, I should fully acknowledge my parents (and my good luck). Of course, by criticising everyone and everything, they instilled my brothers and I with a sense of superiority that made us judge others, but without giving us much sense of judgement ourselves. My father because he was too busy and because some of his ideas were very out of date; my mother because she was incapable of grasping any reality outside her musical world; neither of them helped me develop any self-confidence (I was only a girl and, unfortunately, the eldest). On the other hand, they got on well together and loved us. No arguments or ugly scenes during my childhood, and how many have honestly known a happily unified family! I was born into a rich, cultivated and cosmopolitan setting. The house was full of books, two pianos and with lovely pictures on the walls, and also in the basement a woodwork shop where my father liked to maintain the garden tools so he could look after the garden beds and the vegetables, another passion. We always lived well. We never wanted for anything. Even under the Occupation, with rationing, we never really suffered thanks to me father with his enterprising spirit, his intelligence, his good business sense and his righteousness. Our parents always gave us a strong sense of personal discipline; I never saw them out of sorts, lazing about, or ill. The house was well looked after, but we were never spoiled either. From the sixth to Philo. I never missed an hour of school, whether or not I had a cold. Except one time, just one, that stayed with me my whole life. On a dark freezing February afternoon when I'd lost my voice and my nose was running, with a sore throat and sneezing every couple of minutes, I had a class at four o'clock; drawing and PE. The Lycée was three kilometres away, and I got there by bike or on foot. With mother away for the day in Paris, I decided to stay home. When she got home I received the biggest telling off of my life; I didn't have a temperature so no reason to miss class and no excuses.

There was no "Mum, I'm thirsty . . . or Mum, I'm hungry" whether we travelled by train at first or by car later. "You'll get something to eat and drink when we get there", said our parents. That's how all three of us were conditioned to suffer in silence without complaining. But what wonderful holidays we had, often in a seaside villa, at Houlgate (Calvados), at Saint- Georges-de-Dionne near the Gironde estuary, at Hossegor in the Landes, in Juan-les-Pins on the Côte d'Azur. Oh, those beautiful, deserted beaches, those dunes, those pines. It was a wonderful time when the roads were empty, before the era of paid holidays invaded nature. We felt so free . . . and for us it was thanks to our parents.

This easy living seemed quite natural to me. I always had enough pocket money, but not too much. We didn't have a fixed amount, so much a week or month. For each expense, be it minor school supplies or drawing materials we had to ask father. He made a fuss but paid up generously, if not without recrimination and complaint. If I over-spent he'd remind me that his resources weren't endless,

money had to be earned, etc., etc. Hearing this stuff over and over was pathetic, and I found it humiliating. Nevertheless, at the end of the day they were positive, they encouraged me to confront difficult situations, to judge when to act, not to spend willy- nilly. Above all, they made me want to be financially independent and. In effect, I earned my living as soon as I was able.

From a tender age our dear Tiotia had taught us good manners; we got up, we made our beds, we got dressed, we were ready to leave for school, we behaved at table, we ate properly and everything (no refusing onions, carrots, or anything else), we said please and thank you, hello and goodbye, Monsieur and Madame. In short we were well brought up children (are there any nowadays?). As for punishments for various transgressions, when small our father gave the boys a few strokes of his leather belt on the bottom (he never wore braces, a cap or woollen waistcoat!), nothing too severe. I was sent to the basement for various times, where I shouted and wept in protest . . . I can't remember what motivated these punishments, perhaps cheeky talk. My father handed out punishments without losing his snag froid. With my mother it was different; she'd shout at us but she only ever hit me once, for insolence. So, a 'normal' education.

Once we'd mastered good manners we were left pretty much to our own devices; we weren't picked on ("don't do this, don't do that", etc.) or bullied or over supervised. We played as we liked, with whomever we wanted, and we didn't need to fib. I think I kept up these good habits all my life and rather than lying I'd sometimes shut up (is that a sin of omission?)

In short, I strongly believe that I benefited from a happy childhood and adolescence with a minimum of dramas. I was never petted and spoiled for which I thank my parents with all my heart. My Baboushka spoiled me a bit on the weekends or on Thursdays when I went to see her, but she also knew how to be severe.

Here I am in the evening of my life, thank you family, thank you professors, thank you Fate. You have each allowed me to face my existence without too much weakness.

