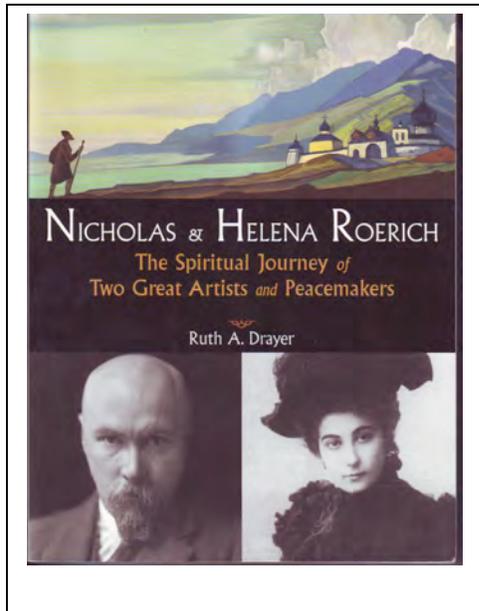


Chapter 13 from Ruth Drayer's  
*Nicholas and Helena Roerich*  
*The Spiritual Journey of*  
*Two Great Artists and Peacemakers*



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### Chapter 13. The Altai: Sacred Magnet for the Future

Before the family arrived in Moscow, Vladimir Shibayev, Roerich's secretary, had been corresponding with a close relative of Helena's, hoping to locate and retrieve the Roerichs' confiscated collection of Old Master paintings and artifacts. Roerich also wanted to display the work he had created during the expedition. But the Russia from which the Roerich family had fled in 1916 bore little resemblance to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics they now entered, ten years later. The Tsar and his family had been brutally murdered, and all possessions of the rich ruling class had been given to the poor. Education had become compulsory, and brothels were closed. Little of the past remained.

Although bitter struggles, severe hardships, and continual turmoil had filled the intervening years, by 1925 the "policy of recovery" had relieved the worst of the economic shortages and restored a semblance of health to the country. A kind of freeness

had occurred on the heels of Lenin's New Economic Policy. Major transformation was occurring politically, economically, culturally, and spiritually. Small-scale and light industries were largely in the hands of private entrepreneurs or cooperatives. Some people in the top echelons of government were Buddhists or involved with spiritual organizations such as the Masons and the Rosicrucians. With the support and encouragement of the Roerichs' old friend Lama Dorzhiev, the Soviets were entertaining the idea of influencing Tibet and turning it toward a "Red" Buddhism.

Although many writers and artists had greeted the early years of the new regime with high fervor, Roerich had not been among them. In 1919, his article "Violators of Art" had been published by the Russian Liberation Committee in London and widely circulated. In it, he challenged the Bolsheviks' claim that they were the "Medicis of Petrograd," guardians of art and science encouraging "the cultural achievements of the Soviet Government." Roerich had warned readers not to be deceived, labeling the Bolsheviks

Judas Iscariots with their thirty pieces of silver.... Vulgarity and hypocrisy. Betrayal and bribery, the distortion of all the sacred conceptions of mankind. That is Bolshevism.

The shameless monster which is deceiving mankind; a monster who has gained possession of the sparkle of precious stones. But do not be afraid to come nearer and look! The stones are imitations. Only a weak eye will fail to see that the glitter is false and the world and real spiritual culture are perishing in this glitter. Wake up and recognize what you know!

Roerich's views had been stated so emphatically that they were unlikely to have been forgotten by those he had implicated—who had been involved with the formation of the new government and now held many of the key political positions. Nevertheless, the Roerichs still had friends in Russia. The Mahatmas saw this special time as a window of opportunity and hoped that a message from them to the heads of state might help Russia turn toward a new path. In sending the Roerichs back to deliver it, Master Morya advised them:

It is wise to draw the line between past and future. It is impossible to calculate all that has been done.... It is better to say, "Yesterday is past; let us learn how to meet a new dawn." We all grow, and our works are expanding with us. It is unworthy to rummage in yesterday's dust....

He, who affirms the Community, contributes to the hastening of the evolution of the planet. Fear and immobility signify a return to primitive forms. If you pay attention to history, you will perceive clear jolts of progress, and see that these jolts graphically coincide with manifestations of the idea of community—cooperation. When the banner of cooperation was unfurled, dictatorships were destroyed, new scientific forms were developed, new techniques of labor arose, and benevolent boldness shone forth.... In our picture of Community, everyone is working in full readiness, and our resources are intensified for the Common Good.

Encouraged by the wisdom of these teachings, the family decided that if they could safely return to Russia, they would. Now, in Moscow, they were welcomed by G. V. Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and Nicholas's old school friend; A. V. Lunacharsky, Commissar of Education, who was interested in Buddhism; and several others, including Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya. They listened to the Roerichs' tales of India and the research they had done in Asia, and accepted the small chest of sacred Himalayan soil ceremoniously presented to Chicherin, to be placed on the grave of "Mahatma Lenin." The Mahatmas' message read:

In the Himalayas, we know what you are accomplishing. You abolished the church, which was a breeding ground of lies and superstitions. You destroyed the bourgeoisie who had become agents of prejudice. You demolished the educational prisons. You destroyed the hypocritical family. You did away with the army, which had ruled as over slaves. You crushed the spiders of greed. You closed the night dens of cutthroats. You freed the land of wealthy traitors. You recognized that religion is the teaching of universal matter. You recognized the insignificance

of private ownership. You foresaw the evolution of community. You pointed out the importance of knowledge. You bowed down before beauty. You brought the entire power of the Cosmos to the children. You opened the windows of the palaces. You saw the urgency of building homes for the Common Good.

We stopped the revolt in India because it was premature; but We recognized the timeliness of your movement, and We send you all our help, affirming the Unity of Asia.

Once Roerich had executed the Mahatmas' mission, he presented his *Maitreya* series and the painting *The Time Has Come* to Lunacharsky. Then he set about seeing friends and relatives and conducting some business of his own. Two years earlier, in November 1924, Roerich had formed the Beluha Corporation to take advantage of the easing economic conditions and attempt to begin business transactions with the Soviets. During the expedition, Roerich had seen many rich natural resources waiting to be developed: timber, coal, oil, ores, metals, minerals. In 1927, the Ur Corporation was incorporated; the purpose of both companies was to try to get these resources to market and manufacture, which would benefit the New Country. However, both corporations were so ineffective that they were later abandoned.

Now Roerich felt he had a perfect opportunity to discuss the prospects of mining in Siberia with the Soviet authorities. With Herbert Hoover's Quaker Relief Fund feeding the perishing millions in the Ukraine, the well-remembered Roerichs, now with American connections, were very newsworthy. But the press pounced upon them. Accusations were hurled at the couple for desertion, for fleeing from the Bolsheviks, and for serving the capitalists of the world. Their "mysterious devotion" to Buddhism received the most severe criticism. Though the family tried to make light of these charges, they were understandably wary and troubled. *Pravda* printed an article, reprinted in the English language papers, saying the Soviets were considering equipping Roerich with Soviet passports and Browning revolvers so that he could lead a two-year scientific expedition to Tibet.

The publicity did broadcast the news of their arrival in Moscow to their friends and acquaintances. Roerich was able to speak with some young Russian painters,

engaging them with stories of their American brother artists in Cor Ardens and Los Cinco Pintores. And, again, a brotherhood of artists was formed, called Amaravella. One artist who was there, Boris Smirnov-Rusetsky, remembered the meeting until his death in 1993. He often recalled how deeply Roerich's talk and the Agni Yoga teachings had affected the young artists. For many years thereafter, when free expression and symbolism in art were considered criminal acts deserving punishment, the Roerichs' support and the Agni Yoga teachings were all the artists had for encouragement.

Some weeks later, Roerich and George were sitting in the CHEKA reception room waiting to see Felix Dzherzhinsky, the head of that organization, when Dzherzhinsky suddenly dropped dead in his office.<sup>1</sup> After watching the funeral procession with all the important dignitaries pass beneath their hotel window, the family expediently packed and prepared to leave. With their supplies and equipment replenished, they climbed into a couple of hired automobiles and, with the Litchmanns, departed for the Altai Mountains. They had been in Moscow for two months.

Upon her return to New York, Sina told the American press that the Moscow visit was a great success. All doors flew open at the sound of the Roerich name, and they were met with absolute hospitality and friendship everywhere. But the many conflicting stories lead one to wonder what exactly did happen.<sup>2</sup>

For anyone hoping to escape notice, the Altai Mountains were the perfect place to go. Partially on Soviet territory and partially in Mongolia, the range stretches from the West Siberian Plain southeast to the Gobi Plain, forming the northern boundary of the Gobi. With a tradition as holy as Shambhala, the mountains are regarded as sacred. The highly revered Mount Belukha rises in the center of the Katun Range. It was to be the location of New Russia (called Zvenigorod by the Masters), the Buddhist New Country. Although the range has been described as cruel and unapproachable, to Roerich it was, "austere yet beautiful," and their arrival was greeted by an auspicious double rainbow stretching across the entire sky, above the mighty river Ob. Their Master explained: "The sun's smile amidst the clouds brings forth the radiant rainbow. Thou shall remember the Aura of the Teacher smiling through the dewdrops on that future day of glory."

Passing beside the Shambatyon and Katun Rivers, the group saw rocks hurling through the rapids with tremendous force. Even though followers of Master Morya were

said to be living already on the opposite shore, none of the group was reckless enough to wade across to investigate. They were watching for signs of the new city, but saw nothing obvious. They did notice an abundance of caves containing bones with carved inscriptions. Without a light to gauge the depth, the Roerichs felt sure these caves were the same secret passages that the Spiritual Ones of Asia used to reach Tibet, Kunlun, Altyn-Taga, Turfan, and other places.

In *Heart of Asia*, Roerich explained:

The Altai played a most important part in the migration of nations and is an untouched treasure with Belukha, the ruler, nourishing all rivers and fields, ready to yield its riches. The so-called graves of the Tchud and those burial places marked with inscriptions on rocks, all direct our attention to that time when, whether impelled by glaciers or escaping the sands, nations from the far southeast collected themselves into an avalanche and overran and regenerated Europe. I believe the entire area is a sacred and powerful magnet for the future.

On the 17th of August we beheld Belukha; so clear and reverberant; “the Queen of the White Snows” of whom even the deserts whisper. Verily, she is Zvenigorod, the City of the Bells that I painted while still in Russia. And beyond Belukha, the crests of the Kunluns, so beloved in my heart, appear far in the distance. “The Queen of the White Snows” stands alongside “the Five Treasures of the Snows” and all the other sacred names written and unwritten, spoken and unspoken.

During their weeks in the Altai, the Roerichs stayed in the home of an Old Believer, Vakhramey Semyonovich Atamanov. Writing of Atamanov, Nicholas noted: “Like many of the wise ones who know the secret traditions, Vakhramey is not astonished at anything; he knows the ores, the ways of the deer and the little bees. He loves herbs and flowers and understands them indisputably.... His face lights up as he gathers a great bunch of varied-colored grasses that reach up and touch his gray beard. He delights in them, pets them, and caresses them as he speaks of their usefulness. Here is verily the same Panteleimon, the Healer, whom I first painted in 1916.”

Completely versed in the sacred shamanistic lore of the region, Vakhramey was a treasured resource. Whatever secrets he revealed to the group remained secret however, for neither Roerich nor Sina Lichtmann disclosed a word in their diaries. Even George, so meticulous with his lists and descriptions, completely omitted mention of the trip to Altai. Sina wrote only, “We went out exploring today, and discovered many wonderful things.” Nor did the Lichtmanns ever divulge anything when they returned to New York. The press was informed that the Roerich expedition was on its way to Abyssinia!

Instead, Roerich wrote of the cave of the legendary Tchud tribe, who escaped bondage by going underground. He said stones encircled its entrance and it resembled other huge tombs he had seen from the period of the great migrations in such places as the foothills of the northern Caucasus. He further wrote that when the Central Asia expedition was crossing the Karakorum Pass, their Ladakhi groom had told them they were riding above caves where many treasures had been stored by a wonderful tribe who went underground because they abhorred the sins of the earth. The reverberation of the horses’ hooves had sounded the same as it had when they approached Khotan. The caravaners had told them that people could reach distant countries through those passages.

To his diary, Roerich commented: “Great is the belief in subterranean people. Through all Asia, through the vast spaces of the deserts, from the Pacific to the Urals, I have heard the same wondrous tales of vanished holy people. ‘Long ago people lived here; now they have gone inside; they found a passage and entered the subterranean kingdom. And only rarely do they appear on earth again. Such people come to our bazaar with strange, very ancient money. No one can even remember when such money was used.’”

When Nicholas inquired if he could see some of these subterranean people, he was told, “Yes, if your thoughts are similarly high and in contact with these holy people—because sinners stay upon earth, while the pure and courageous ones pass on to something more beautiful.”

The Roerichs were introduced to several village schoolteachers, who lowered their voices and inquired if the group had come from India. Upon hearing their affirmative reply, all eyes lit up with eagerness as they asked for information of the

Mahatmas, whispering, “There are many of us and we exist solely for these teachings.” They spoke of an old monk who had died recently after traveling throughout India and the Himalayas. Among his possessions was a manuscript containing much about the Mahatmas, and indicating the monk had been intimately acquainted with this usually secret subject.

Much needed to be accomplished if the Roerichs were to return to the Altai someday and establish their pan-Mongolian country. Although they were now starting for Mongolia in the hope of finding the Panchen Lama, he wrote: “Mongolia (Land of Brave Men) attracts our attention. Tales creep to us of Kobdo, near the Northwest frontier, where a goodly number of temples and mud houses are built near the lake. Everyone seems interested in conveying at least something to us of the spirit of Mongolia, the land of magnetic storms, mirages of the sun, and cruciform moons.”

Geographically, the area loosely called Central Asia is outlined by the Caspian Sea on the west, Siberia on the north, and northern Iran and Afghanistan on the south. China lies to the northwest, Mongolia to the east. The Pamirs and the Himalayas rise in the center, and the T'ien Shans and the Altai are on the eastern flank. This vast expanse of arid plain and desert is the greatest landmass on earth. Inner and Outer Mongolia are the heartland of the Asian continent. In 1921, following the Russian Revolution, Mongolia peacefully converted from a centuries-old, completely pastoral society populated by nomads to a socialist state. Though after the revolution, the capital city was renamed Ulan Bator Khoto (City of the Red Warrior), most people continued to call it Uрга.

From the Altai, the Roerich party went by train to the Buriat Republic and then arranged for autos to carry them into Mongolia. With the Altai behind, George resumed his journal: “Around 4:00 in the afternoon, we started our journey toward the immense and boundless steppes of Mongolia, motoring through the country of the greatest conquerors of Asia. The road rose imperceptibly until we had crossed several ridges of low, grass-covered hills, and then we saw the true signs of Buddhist Mongolia: the suburgans or stupas, which stood sparkling, like a white necklace.”

The next day, when they tried to cross a swift current where there was no ferry, it became obvious that the motorcars were going to create more problems than they would solve:

One at a time, the cars were carried on barges; the driver made a careless movement and one almost slid into the river, but it was rescued just in time.... Our progress was very slow, for after the recent heavy rains the route was sandy, extremely muddy, and slippery. It was often necessary to get out and push the cars along the slopes, greatly handicapped by the lack of headlights on one of them.

In the full darkness of a moonless evening, we reached the river Iro and persuaded the ferryman to take us across. We camped in the open, near to some wretched Mongol tents, from which two old women emerged, covered with rags. The night was cold and we had to light camp fires. A white mist arose from the river surface to envelop the far bank. Dark silhouettes of the forest-clad mountains stood to the south and we heard the conchshell of a nearby lamasery call the lamas for evening prayer. We were up before dawn and drove south toward a low pass. Though newly constructed, the road was so muddy and sandy that our cars sank deep into the mud and had to be rescued by horsemen.

We continued on, and found several cars traveling from Urga, stranded on the banks. They had endeavored to cross the river, but it flooded their engines. They all warned us that it was foolhardy to try and cross, but we decided to try it; so we crammed all the luggage inside the cars and covered the radiators with several sheets of waterproof canvas. Luckily, several horsemen came to our aid again. They tied ropes from the front of the cars to the pommels of their saddles and when we were all set, the drivers started the cars and the horsemen rushed towards the opposite river bank, shouting wildly. Water splashed high into the air but the two cars were pulled safely across the river.

They were heading toward the Tola Valley and the magnificent Bogdo-Ula, which rises 3,000 feet above Urga and forms the southern boundary of the forests in that part of Mongolia. Believed to be the birthplace of Genghis Khan, some scholars also believe he died there. The mountain dominates the entire valley and has a unique history. In A.D.

1778 when Mongolia was under Chinese domination, the Bogdo-Ula was declared sacred and the Emperor legalized the cult of the sacred mountains. He ordered that incense and silk be sent there biannually and that ceremonial offerings be made by the spiritual leader, the Bogdo-gegen, the Living Buddha of Mongolia. Hunting and tree chopping were outlawed, and fishing forbidden. The area became a true natural reserve and haven for fauna large and small. One could observe herds of reindeer, mountain deer, wild bears, wolves, foxes, and hundreds of different birds, all quite tame and unafraid of humans. Over time, the Bogdo-gegen brought apes, bears, rare birds, and even an elephant to live in this sanctuary.

Though students of history considered Genghis Khan “the Scourge of God” for his acts of brutality, Roerich had never agreed. He recognized that Genghis had given the world a wise code of laws so usable that it was still Mongolia’s base of justice. And Nicholas was pleased to discover that many in Mongolia shared his viewpoint.

Closely in touch with Tibet, Mongolia had been a stronghold of Lamaism for centuries. Even after the revolution, the Lamaist church continued to exist and membership was maintained in the World Buddhist Association. The old ways, however, were quickly dying out; there were only about one hundred priests in the entire country. Most of the lavish temples and sanctuaries had become museums. Roerich was anxious to offer the New Country as a safe asylum for the priests.

Eager to visit the Gandan Lamasery, the only sanctuary in Mongolia where Lamaism still functioned, the Roerich party also wanted to see the state library, with its monumental collection of theological works including the hundreds of volumes of the Kanjur and the Tanjur printed in rare woodblock form. The ancient brilliant textiles discovered by the Russian explorer General P. K. Kozlov were of special scientific interest; traced back to Greece, Iran, Scytho-Siberia, and China, the designs were evidence of the far-reaching trade of Central Asian nomads. Because of their strong resemblance to the well-documented silks excavated from the Tarim Basin by Sir Aurel Stein, the materials could be fairly well dated to the first century B.C. The textiles’ composition affirmed for Roerich that different provinces of Central Asia had borrowed their inspiration from a common source. The Mongol Scientific Committee’s current

research and excavations of tumuli throughout the Noin-Ul Mountains were substantiating that and throwing fresh light on nomadic culture.

The sprawling city of Urga resembled a permanent settlement surrounded by a large colony of yurts. Most of the population lived in yurts during the cold winters. The glittering, gilded roofs of monasteries, the cathedral, and other religious buildings enhanced Urga's appearance. With wonderful luck, the Roerichs found a four-room house with two spacious courtyards and stables for rent. There was room to establish headquarters and space for brother Boris and the Lichtmanns.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Konstantin Ryabinin, their dear friend from Russia, and Roerich's other brother, Vladimir, soon joined the expedition, renting a place nearby.

With many opportunities to attend dances, festivals, and services at the colorful temples, they were entranced by everything they saw and heard. The family spent their days productively: Helena had time to write, Nicholas to paint, George to share rare time with the lamas, and all three were able to study Kalachakra. "These rituals and music are remnants of the past," George wrote, "and harken back to shamanistic antiquity. Its peculiar charms touch me deeply." The family also needed time to organize and carefully study the route for the last phase of the expedition: the great crossing of Central Asia, through Mongolia and Tibet, back to India.

Touring near a temple in Urga one day, they spotted an open place surrounded by a stockade, unusual for Mongolian dwellings. They inquired, and were startled to hear that it was a site for the future temple of Shambhala. An unknown lama had purchased it. Roerich told his diary: "Not only do many learned lamas in Mongolia know of Shambhala, but even many laymen and members of the Government can relate the most striking details. When we showed some of the Shambhala prophecies to a member of the Government, he exclaimed in astonishment, 'But this agrees with the prophecy foretold by a young boy on the Iro River. Verily, the Great Time is coming!'"

The Roerichs were surprised to hear the same stories of the Mahatmas they had previously heard in India. Roerich wrote, "Such are the ties of Asia. Who carries the news? By what secret passageways do these unknown messengers travel? While one may be living an ordinary routine daily life in Asia, confronted with difficulties, crudeness and

many trying cares, still at any moment a knock may come at the door, bringing important news.”

The first theological school for study of the higher metaphysics of Buddhism had been established in Urga in 1741 and approved by the Dalai Lama. Since His Holiness the Panchen Lama had escaped, he had been spreading the hidden teaching of Shambhala everywhere, so it was experiencing a powerful revival. Numerous Kalachakra colleges had been established in Inner Mongolia, Buddhist China, and even Buriatia. As George explained in his journal: “Learned abbots and meditating lamas are said to be in constant communication with the mystic fraternity of Shambhala, for it guides the destinies of the Buddhist world. A western observer is apt to belittle the importance of this name, or to relegate the voluminous literature about Shambhala (and the still more vast oral tradition) into the class of folklore or mythology; but those who have studied both literary and popular Buddhism know the terrific force that this name possesses among the masses of Buddhists of higher Asia. For in the course of history, it has not only inspired religious movements, but even moved armies, whose war cry was ‘Shambhala.’”

The troops of the great war hero Sukhe Bator, who had liberated Mongolia from centuries of Chinese domination, marched to such a song. The Roerichs were startled to hear the cavalry singing of the war of Northern Shambhala as they marched by, summoning the warriors of Mongolia to rise for the holy war and liberate their country from the oppressors. “Let us die in this war and be reborn as warriors of Shambhala” resounded through the streets as the soldiers passed.

Urga’s largest temple had been dedicated to Maitreya, and a colossal statue of him towered some fifty feet above the surrounding altars, candles, incense burners, and a Wheel of Life. George wrote:

One of the most important religious events is the Maidari procession, an imposing parade of Maitreya, the Coming Buddha, which encircles the entire city sometime during the third or fourth moon of the Mongol year. Its approach is heralded by the concentrated look of the tremendous crowd, and by the dim, yet ever rising powerful sound of the trumpets, the cymbals, and the many deep voices chanting prayers. The air becomes so dusty that the monks, and the richly bedecked horses

that transport the holy images, the huge palanquins, and the silk umbrellas of bright hued silk, all seem to move in a yellowish cloud.

Hundreds of thousands of feet trample on the dusty road to the accompaniment of long trumpets sounding out their deep, sonorous notes, clear ringing tones of the clarinets, the clashing of cymbals, and the bass voices of the drums. Majestic abbots, resplendent in gold cloth, their high lama hats, and purple mantles can be seen marching ahead of the novices in shabby garments. In one massive crowd, garbed in rainbow colors, are officials and commoners, with ropes of pearls and precious stones set in gold, all following the images of the One who incarnates all the hopes of Buddhist Mongolia. Some onlookers prostrate themselves in the dust as the images pass, others murmur prayers and jostle to get in closer.

Aware that he was watching the last remnants of old Mongolia, George was struck by the contrast of the somber khaki uniforms of the Mongolian cavalrymen, the colorfully costumed crowd, and the clergy in their deep purple robes.

Professor Roerich presented the government with a painting of Rigden Jyepo, the ruler of Shambhala, and was moved by the emotion with which it was accepted. He was told a special memorial temple might be built where it would occupy the central altar. He was asked how he knew of this vision, for it was the same as one seen several months earlier by one of their most revered lamas. “Our lama saw a great crowd of people from many nations; all of them were facing the West. A majestic rider appeared on a fiery steed, encircled by flames, with the banner of Shambhala in his hand—it was the Blessed Rigden Jyepo Himself—who bade the crowd to turn from the West and face the East.”

“Two roads of life are evident in Asia,” Roerich explained. “Do not be confused. They are making a great effort to preserve their monuments to study and learn from them. Mongolia reveals its outer self to the casual passerby with an astonishing wealth of color, costumes, and age-old traditions that are blended with brilliantly staged ceremonials. But on closer observation, I found serious research being conducted and was pleasantly

impressed by their attitude towards their past. Proof of the Great Truth may lie over the next hill.”