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CHAPTER ONE

Russian Childhoods, 1900–05

ON A LATE OCTOBER MORNING in 1990 Nathalie Sarraute returned to the house at no. 29/12 Ulitsa Pushkina in the Soviet industrial town of Ivanovo, where she had been born ninety years earlier. Throughout her life she had retained the memory of a long, single-storey wooden building with intricately carved window surrounds of the kind found all over Russia, and a few examples of which still exist in Ivanovo. This “immutable image” is vividly recalled in *Childhood* as a fairy-tale vision that encapsulated the Russia she had left behind forever at the age of eight.¹ But the house Nathalie found on that cold October morning was not at all as she had for so long remembered it: in reality, it was a solid, stone-built, two-storey dwelling, which had fallen into serious disrepair. The paint was peeling, the stucco was crumbling, the roof had been patched up with corrugated iron, and steel panels were propped along the front to keep out rain and melting snow. Nathalie was photographed beneath the wooden archway that led to the now neglected grounds, but she didn’t venture inside, as the house had long since been turned into *kommunalki*, the one-room apartments introduced under Stalin in the 1930s. It was a homecoming of sorts, but not the one she had for so long imagined.

Much else had also changed. The child born as Natalia Ilyinichna Tcherniak to Ilya Evseevich Tcherniak and his wife Polina Osipovna



FIGURE 1. 29/12 Ulitsa Pushkina, Ivanovo, October 2017. (Author's photo)

on 5 July 1900 in Ivanovo-Voznesensk had long since acquired a French name and French nationality. The Julian calendar used in tsarist Russia had been replaced by the Gregorian calendar, bringing her birthdate forward to 18 July; under the Soviets Ivanovo had dropped the Voznesensk component of its hyphenate; and the streets on whose corner the house stood had both been renamed. Just over a year later, in December 1991, the Soviet Union itself would collapse, almost seven decades after its foundation.

In 1900 the house on what was then Mikhailovskaya Ulitsa had been one of two brand-new dwellings, converted from a pair of disused textile-printing workshops by the widow of a local industrialist, and rented out as living accommodation. The Tcherniak family occupied the first floor in the larger of the two, and it was here that Natacha (as she was always known) spent the first two years of her life.² But impermanence was written into her childhood from the start, and in 1902 her parents separated. Polina left Ivanovo with Natacha, while Ilya stayed behind. No longer requiring family accommodation, he gave up the lease on the apartment and subsequently took lodgings at two other addresses on streets whose names have also changed.³ And so, despite its solidity as an edifice,

the house where Natacha was born had no lasting place in her life except as the false memory of a childhood home that had never existed.

Documentary evidence of her birth has proved equally insubstantial. The file in the Ivanovo Regional State Archive recording births and deaths at the turn of the century contains no trace of Natalia Ilyinichna Tcherniak. Nor is there any record of her elder sister, Elena, who, according to Nathalie herself, died probably in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, almost certainly in 1899, and very likely at the age of three. However, the Tcherniaks were Jewish, and under the tsarist regime, births, marriages, and deaths were documented in church registers. In 1900, at a time when there were fewer than two hundred Jews out of a total population of fifty-four thousand, Ivanovo-Voznesensk had no synagogue and no rabbi to register the death and the birth of the Tcherniaks' small daughters.⁴ There was thus no administrative structure through which the very existence of Natalia Tcherniak could be given official acknowledgement. This absence established a pattern that would recur throughout her long life, where the world didn't always seem willing to accommodate her and where recognition would all too often appear wanting.

Ivanovo-Voznesensk was an unlikely place for the Tcherniaks to have settled. They had had no previous connection with the city until Ilya moved there in 1900 to set up a small dye-manufacturing business. Known as "the Manchester of Russia" for its textile production, Ivanovo had grown from modest flax-weaving origins in the early eighteenth century to become the centre of Russia's largest industry, incorporating the neighbouring suburb of Voznesensk as production expanded. By the end of the nineteenth century, imported cottons had replaced locally grown flax, while weaving and fabric printing had been mechanised and were carried out in large factories, which employed ever-increasing numbers of workers. Technical experts were required for some of the processes, including the production of the mineral dyes used in the printed calicos for which Ivanovo was renowned. As a qualified chemical engineer, Ilya Tcherniak had been encouraged to move to the city by one Vassiliy Lavrentievitch Mokeev, who lent him the money to set up a chemical dye business of his own.⁵



FIGURE 2. Ivanovo-Voznesensk, view of the manufacturing district, early twentieth century. (<http://pavel-subbotin.livejournal.com/14373.html>)

He was born Israël Evseevich Tcherniak on 13 November 1869 in Monastyrshchina, a small urban settlement on the bank of the River Vikhra in what is now the Smolensk Oblast.⁶ Home to a sizeable population of Jews—including the Hebrew-language novelist Peretz Smolenskin—Monastyrshchina was in the Pale of Settlement, the vast swathe of western Russia, present-day Poland, and Ukraine to which Russian Jewry had been confined since the end of the eighteenth century. Israël was one of several siblings, and his father was a guild merchant, which gave him the right to trade. He dealt in timber and was almost certainly affluent enough to have his sons educated at one of the local schools for Jewish children.⁷ However, strict quotas in higher education drove Jews abroad, and in 1892 Israël (as he still styled himself) became a student at the University of Geneva. After taking courses in botany and mineralogy, he graduated in chemistry in 1896 and, inspired by Carl Vogt, the much-revered professor of geology and zoology, obtained a doctorate in physical sciences a few months later.⁸ The Geneva address on his university file is 21 rue de la Roseraie.

This is also the address given for Polina Osipovna Chatounovskaia, who had joined the university in 1893, taking an eclectic mix of courses in political economy, history of civilisation, general history, archaeology, and linguistics. She dropped out in the winter semester of 1895–96 without taking a degree.⁹ Polina had been born Khina Perl in 1867 in Ukraine and was later known to her family as Paula.¹⁰ Nathalie herself claimed that her mother was born in what was then Elizavetgrad (subsequently renamed Kirovograd and then Kropyvnytskyi) in central Ukraine, that she was orphaned young and was brought up by her elder brother who became a famous mathematician. This was undoubtedly Samuil Osipovich Shatunovsky, whose biographical record indicates that he was born in March 1859 in Znamenka on the Dnieper River into a large family of poor Jewish artisans, although in later life Polina claimed that she descended from Russian aristocracy.¹¹ In any case, Samuil, who studied in Saint Petersburg and later taught at the University of Odessa, was perhaps not the ideal parent substitute for the unabashed narcissist that Nathalie always made her mother out to have been.¹²

Ilya and Polina both exemplify the transition that took place in the last decades of the nineteenth century amongst educated Russian Jews. Whereas their parents were mostly religiously observant and Yiddish-speaking, for this younger, cosmopolitan generation, Jewishness was essentially a cultural rather than a religious category, from which there emerged a new Jewish intelligentsia who sought assimilation, education, and new ideas. They Russified their Jewish first names—Ilya for Israël, Polina for Khina Perl—and were not observant. Their languages were Russian with supplementary French, and there is no evidence that, as adults, either of Natacha's parents ever spoke Yiddish. For them, being Jewish was a fact to be neither concealed nor advertised, and they considered it bad manners to mention ethnicity at all. However, the world in which they lived proved less respectful of this courtesy.

No. 21 rue de la Roseraie in Geneva may have been a boarding house for Russian students, which would explain how Ilya and Polina met. Geneva attracted a large number of young Jews debarred from studying in Russia, who formed their own émigré society. Exposed to new ideas, many became politicised and acquired revolutionary

aspirations in response to the increasingly harsh anti-Semitic regulations introduced by Alexander III after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881.¹³ Although neither of them seems ever to have been involved in political activism, Ilya and Polina both had Socialist Revolutionary sympathies, and Ilya was a party member.¹⁴ The Socialist Revolutionaries were eventually eclipsed by Lenin's Social Democrats, from whom they differed in their belief that revolution would be brought about by the peasants rather than by Russia's small urban proletariat and that the intelligentsia (many of whom were in exile) would lead the political awakening of the country's destitute peasantry.¹⁵

The abrupt end to Polina's studies, which coincided with the completion of Ilya's degree course, suggests that the couple got married at this time. The hypothesis has a certain plausibility given that Natacha's elder sister supposedly died at the age of three in 1899. Elena—known as Liolia—would therefore have been born in 1896, and this may well have been the reason why Polina failed to complete her studies.¹⁶ According to Nathalie's later accounts of her parents' early life, Ilya abandoned an academic career in order to be able to provide for his wife. The arrival of a child would have made this an even more pressing requirement. But exactly what became of the Tcherniak couple during the following three years is a mystery. It's possible that they headed for Ukraine, from where Polina's family originated, and where another brother, Grigory Shatunovsky, a lawyer, figures in the 1895 business directory for the town of Kamyanets-Podilskyi in western Ukraine.¹⁷ Documents in the Ivanovo archives allude to a diploma that Ilya had gained at the St Vladimir Imperial University in Kiev, and these further qualifications would certainly explain how he had obtained sufficient expertise to go into business manufacturing mineral dyes.

The Tcherniaks first surface in the annals of Ivanovo during the year 1898–99 in association with the local Temperance Society. They may have seen membership of the socially enlightened society as a means of being accepted as Jews: one of the most prominent charitable figures in Ivanovo-Voznesensk was a Jew by the name of M. M. Jakub, who taught at the technical school, ran a library, and had considerable influence on the cultural life of the town.¹⁸ But being Jewish, Ilya nevertheless required authorisation to reside and con-

duct business outside the Pale of Settlement, and on 28 April 1900 he was granted official permission to settle in Ivanovo-Voznesensk. A certificate dated 10 June 1900 confirmed that he had “acquired possession of an establishment for the preparation of mineral colours.”¹⁹ The little factory—a wooden building located close to the Sokovsky Bridge on the River Uvod in the centre of Ivanovo-Voznesensk—initially had just three employees. In *Childhood* Nathalie later recalled visiting her father’s place of work and having to negotiate a muddy courtyard, avoiding puddles of all colours before reaching the interior with its beaten-earth floor, its chemical reek, and the laboratory benches where Ilya, dressed in a white coat, was absorbed in scrutinising test tubes clamped to wooden rods. His energetic and scrupulously professional devotion to work comes through in all Nathalie’s memories of her father. An active figure in the Ivanovo-Voznesensk branch of the Russian Technical Society, he evidently succeeded in acquiring some social status as well as making a success of his business.²⁰

Polina’s experience of Ivanovo-Voznesensk was very different from that of her husband. She was no doubt grieving for Liolia, who had died of scarlet fever the previous year, but while Ilya was establishing his colourant factory, she was pregnant with Natalia. In the absence of reliable information about the date of Liolia’s death, it’s impossible to know whether Natacha was conceived as a substitute for the dead girl or as her younger sister. But either way, her first years were lived in the shadow of the baby with the beaded cap and the startled gaze who looked like Polina, and whom Natacha knew only from a photograph kept by her father. Growing up in the wake of a dead sibling, she was always aware of death hovering on the periphery of her childhood.

She was cared for by a nursemaid, leaving Polina with time on her hands in the cultural backwater of Ivanovo-Voznesensk, where she was almost certainly better educated than the wives of the other industrialists, who may also have been reluctant to mix with Jews—even assimilated and cosmopolitan Jews like the Tcherniaks. Cultural life in the town was mostly geared to the working population, which had the benefit of two circuses, eight “electric theatres” providing entertainment in the form of proto-cinematic moving images, and three conventional theatres, one of which was occasionally

visited by theatrical troupes from Moscow. All this offered slim pickings for a cultivated woman who, like Flaubert's fictional Madame Bovary, found herself bored by provincial life and no doubt longed for real drama and perhaps a real lover who would carry her off to a more exciting world. Flaubert's heroine suggests itself as a more appropriate analogy than the similarly frustrated three sisters in Chekhov's 1901 play of that name, as records from the municipal police files indicate that Natacha had originally been called Emma.²¹ This was an unusual first name for a French woman, let alone for the daughter of Russian Jews, and in naming the child after Emma Bovary, Polina was acting entirely in the spirit of the extravagantly literary gestures Flaubert ascribes to his fictional protagonist.

Having literary ambitions of her own, she was evidently not content with gestures. A little over two years after the Tcherniaks' arrival in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, she announced that the marriage was over and that she would be going abroad. The divorce that later followed was a rare occurrence at the time, and Ilya saw to the necessary administrative procedures. The first of these was the belated certification of Natacha's birth as the prerequisite for equipping her with a passport. On 5 April 1902 he applied to the municipal police department requesting a document to present to the rabbi of Nizhny-Novgorod and Vladimir confirming that a daughter, Natalia, had been born to himself and his wife on 5 July 1900. He included witness statements from two doctors and a midwife, who had attended the birth. It was only when Ilya collected the documents on 25 April 1902, almost two years after her birth, that Natalia Ilyinichna Tcherniak finally acquired official certification of her existence. Polina applied to the Police Department on 4 May for permission to travel abroad with her young daughter, accompanied by a nursemaid from one of the neighbouring villages. She gave ill health rather than marital breakdown as her reason for leaving the country, but strangely includes her original Jewish first name (Khina Perl) in the document, and even more bizarrely describes Ilya as a dentist. Ilya added a note to say that he had no objection to his wife and daughter going abroad. Authorisation was granted by the end of May, and Polina departed taking Natacha with her.

Polina never returned, and although Natacha came back to Ivanovo on subsequent occasions to visit her father, she was too young to have retained any memories of the first two years of her life. As far as memory was concerned, those years were a blank to be conjured into existence through hearsay and wishful thinking. She had left nothing solid behind and had put down no roots. Her parents had separated, and it was several decades before she saw them together again. At the last minute, further splits had emerged as they hesitated between Russian and Jewish versions of their names, and a fancifully literary alternative to Natacha's own name had appeared in the police files, along with a strange redefining of her father's profession. Fiction and inconsistency presided over her departure for a different country and a different kind of childhood.

There's no record of the journey that took Polina, Natacha, and the nursemaid to Europe. But they must have travelled on the overnight train that still takes passengers from Ivanovo to Moscow. From there they would have embarked on one of the long railway journeys with which Natacha would later become familiar as she shuttled between divorced parents, France and Russia. Polina's first destination was Geneva, which required a change in Berlin, and before that, as for all trains leaving Russia for Western Europe, a change of gauge at the Prussian border. In later years, Nathalie would recall the waiting room at the border station in an image that recurs elsewhere in her work as one of bleak desolation. The journey to Geneva would have taken at least three days, or more if it involved an overnight stay in Berlin.

Polina's reasons for going to Geneva, the place where she had studied at university and met the husband she was now divorcing, remain obscure. But she didn't stay for long, Geneva being in the words of Joseph Conrad "the respectable and passionless abode of democratic liberty, the serious-minded town of dreary hotels, tendering the same indifferent, hospitality to tourists of all nations and to international conspirators of every shade."²² Although she had allegedly been expelled from school for distributing revolutionary literature, Polina was not much interested in conspiracy, and soon left for Paris, a more exciting destination, where she settled with a new husband, Nikolai Petrovich Boretzky-Bergfeld.

The man whom Natacha always knew as Kolya was a writer and historian. Born in May 1880 in Tiflis, he was thirteen years younger than Polina and is known as the author of three authoritative histories, one of Hungary, one of Rumania, and one titled *The Colonial History of Western European Countries*. They were published in quick succession in Russia between 1908 and 1910, and the histories of Hungary and Western Europe are sufficiently well regarded to have been republished in 2013 and 2015. There's no indication that Kolya ever studied in Geneva, but perhaps there were other reasons for the couple to meet there. The speed of their relocation to Paris certainly suggests that they had known each other previously and had perhaps been conducting their relationship by correspondence during the three years that Polina spent in Ivanovo-Voznesensk. At any rate, unlike Emma Bovary, she had found the lover who would provide her with an escape from her marriage and open the way to a new life in Europe's most culturally vibrant capital. Kolya was first and foremost a human passport to a cosmopolitan cultural world and the opportunity for Polina to establish herself as a writer, both of which had been so frustratingly lacking in industrial Ivanovo.

On their arrival in Paris, Polina and Kolya took accommodation in the fifth arrondissement on the rue Berthollet, just off the rue Claude-Bernard, before moving to a small, sparsely furnished apartment around the corner at no. 3 rue Flatters. In one of the interviews she later gave to a Russian journalist, Nathalie mentions that her mother placed her in a "pension" for a while, perhaps because the Russian nursemaid, about whom nothing further is known, had returned home.²³ This stay, however brief, must have been a brutal immersion into a foreign language and an even more brutal separation from Polina. The neighbourhood was home to a Russian émigré community, many of them driven out of Russia for their political views. There was a Russian library close by on the Avenue des Gobelins run by a poetry-loving Menshevik, who supplied readers with Russian-language newspapers. A Socialist Revolutionary canteen served Russian food not far away on the rue de la Glacière, and a nonpartisan restaurant in the rue Pascal was known for its *bitochki* and indifferent borsch. But it was discussion rather than food that drew the émigrés together, until the talk turned to politics, when rival allegiances would drive them apart again.²⁴

The Russians were not the only new arrivals in an increasingly cosmopolitan Paris. Picasso had come from Spain in 1900, as had the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. Her friend the sculptor Clara Westhoff had recently married Rainer Maria Rilke, who lived in the same neighbourhood as Natacha's recombined family. Newcomers to Paris were struck by the speed of the traffic, the height of the double-decker horse-drawn trams, the endless clanging of the bells on the omnibuses, the bawling newspaper sellers, and the sheer size and bustle of the crowds in the streets. Many of them also remarked on the hats worn by the Parisians, especially the huge feathered concoctions favoured by the most fashionable women.²⁵ The city was a world away from Ivanovo-Voznesensk.

The Russian émigré community was a largely adult one, and the little apartment in the rue Flatters was no exception. Natacha was cared for by a French nursemaid with whom she must have spoken French, but whose habit of dousing her hair in vinegar to treat migraine did not encourage intimacy. Evenings were spent in adult company as Polina, Kolya, and their Russian friends talked into the night, until someone carried Natacha off to bed. Except for the ghostly presence of her dead sister, Natacha had no experience of other children, and her first and only contact with girls and boys of her own age was at the *École Maternelle* in the rue des Feuillantines. Situated at the upper end of the rue Claude-Bernard, it was a very different place from the former convent on the same street where Victor Hugo and his siblings had played a century earlier, and which he recalled in poems that generations of French children learned by heart in primary school.

At the age of three Natacha found herself plunged into an unfamiliar French-speaking institution, which she later compared to a children's penal colony whose inmates, wearing clogs and black pinafores, spent their days marching single-file round a bare courtyard.²⁶ Since the neighbourhood was largely working class—as the mention of clogs indicates—her companions almost certainly belonged to a world that was socially, culturally, and linguistically very different to her own. Middle-class children of that age would normally be kept at home to learn their first rudiments from their mothers or a nursemaid. Offering noncompulsory education to children between the ages of two and six, and attended by only 25

percent of the child population, nursery schools existed in practice to provide daycare for working parents. For Polina, this was no doubt its main purpose. Children were introduced to reading and writing at the age of five, and it was here that Natacha first encountered written French.²⁷ She later dated her real initiation into the French language to this experience.

Her life was lived between several alternating worlds—Paris and Russia, mother and father, and two versions of childhood. With Polina and Kolya, childhood took the form of premature access to adult life, which mostly meant that Polina would be absorbed in her writing, while Natacha's demands for attention would be met with a "you can see very well that I'm busy."²⁸ With Ilya, by contrast, she was allowed to be a child. Having lost one daughter to scarlet fever, he was evidently determined not to lose a second to divorce. He travelled to Paris to visit her, or had her join him for holidays in Switzerland, and sometimes arranged for her to come either to Ivanovo-Voznesensk or to Moscow where he now had an apartment. It was Ilya, and not Polina, who taught her to count and to recite the days of the week, who invented pet names for her—Tashok, Tashotshok, and Pignalitza (little sparrow)—sang lullabies when she couldn't sleep, bought her a coat in which she looked as pretty as a picture, and would kneel down to help her put on a new pair of gloves.²⁹ One way of describing all this is to say, as she later did, that she was horribly spoiled by her father, but, in contrast to Polina's distracted indifference, his attentions exhibit devoted paternal concern for his young daughter.

The childhood photographs of Natacha are almost all taken at her father's instigation, their cardboard mounts stamped with the names of professional photographers in Moscow and Ivanovo. However, the photograph where Ilya appears in profile and Natacha is dressed in frilled white and stands, legs akimbo, on a Turkish rug amongst potted plants and occasional tables was taken not, as Nathalie claimed, in the family home in Ivanovo, but by a Moscow photographer, in Ilya's apartment, or even in the photographer's own studio, where something off camera has evidently startled them both. The idea that Ilya had remained in Ivanovo as the guardian of her childhood home was another illusion.



FIGURE 3. Natacha with her father in Moscow, 1904 or 1905. (Sarraute Family Collection)

Nathalie's account of her early years in *Childhood* balances French and Russian versions of this time with idealised images of each: the Jardin du Luxembourg for Paris, and for Russia an idyllic summer spent with her Shatunovsky cousins in Kamianets-Podilskiy. The scenes in the Luxemburg Gardens are decked out with the features that appear in so many other literary accounts of Parisian childhood, with the model boats in the pond, the hoops, the statues of the kings and queens of France, the Punch and Judy show, and the merry-go-round, which is the subject of a poem of that name by Rilke.³⁰ The holiday with Uncle Grisha's family in Kamianets-Podilskiy, with its images of fond parents, family meals, outings in a horse-drawn carriage, games with cousins, loyal family retainers, and a kind-hearted coachman, is bathed in an atmosphere that recalls Tolstoy's evocation of his own early years in the first of his three autobiographical volumes, also called *Childhood*.

As remembered in Nathalie's *Childhood*, both scenes—the Luxemburg Gardens and the Russian country house—are portrayed with an awareness of their stereotypical character, derived from literary models that were almost too good to have been true. They are glimpses of a life that Natacha never quite had, but which she had been granted “on loan,” as if to offset more complex and unstable realities, holding out the promise of a childhood to which she remained—as she later said a certain kind of writer always was—“morbidly attached.”³¹

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