

Russian Beginnings

an early taste for the stage

IDA LVOVNA RUBINSTEIN was born in Kharkov in the Ukraine. Unsure of the exact date of her birth, Garafola looked for her birth certificate and found it in Kharkov, in the Grand Choral Synagogue, written in both Russian and Hebrew, stating that she was born in September in 1883. Her parents were highly respected in upper-class Jewish circles with great riches both in banking and in the grain trade. They were considered among the wealthiest families in Russia, and despite the family's Jewish background, were privy to most of the same advantages that the aristocracy enjoyed. Rubinstein lost both her parents at an early age—her mother when she was five and her father at the age of eight, either from cholera, or typhus.

Rubinstein was taken from Kharkov in the Ukraine to live with her wealthy Aunt Horwitz in St. Petersburg, the Russian capitol founded by Peter the Great. It is a resplendent city surrounded and penetrated by waterways, like Stockholm and Amsterdam, and, scattered throughout the horizon are a series of Baroque structures, magisterial and lyrical palaces filled with art and the highest sense of Italian and French decorative styles. These opulent buildings represented the dying czardom and withering aristocracy soon to be thrown



Walter Guinness, First Baron Moyne, 1918. Photographer unknown. SOURCE: BASSANO LTD., PUBLIC DOMAIN.



Ida Rubinstein's Russian home, 2 Angliskaya, St. Petersburg.

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

into oblivion in 1917. Although Russia, during the autocratic regime of Czar Nicolas II, ruling from 1894 to 1917, was dangerously arrogant, it was still a Russia full of hope for the future, with its wondrous nineteenth-century inventions such as the train, the telephone, the Belle Époque's fashion and style, the economic and modern industrial advances, the welcome freedom for the serfs, and a rich cultural environment with writers, composers, and artists inspired by European initiatives creating new ways and visions.

But it also presaged continuing and monstrous acts endangering all Jews. Rubinstein's family, as rich as they were, certainly took account of the anti-Semitic outbursts in 1881 and 1882, as well as the profoundly hostile and frightening Kishinev pogrom in 1903 when forty-nine Jews were killed and 1,500 homes were destroyed. The Rubinstein family wealth, however, was known to be philanthropic, and they endeavored to place themselves in a modern industrial world. Rubinstein would never deny her Jewishness, but her quest for aesthetic perfection strove to supersede religious boundaries.

Contrastingly, Kenneth B. Moss, a distinguished scholar of Russian history, offers an illuminating comment to introduce a study of Ida Rubinstein:

“We should think about late imperial Russian Jewry not only as more Russian and more imperial than previously thought, but also as enthusiastic participants in the life of a modern society that afforded them the possibility of a ‘vibrant cultural life.’”¹

The photos of Rubinstein in various libraries depict an enthusiastic woman of extraordinary character and, depending on the photo, multiple sensibilities and qualities—frail and imperial, sad and triumphant, seductive and aloof. When Rubinstein was growing up, the fashion for nude bathing and freeing the body of corsets and clothes was spreading across Western Europe.² Being influenced by such views, she would not shy away from celebrating her body in her future productions. Her tendency to disrobe will be explored in later chapters.

Vicki Woolf, the author of *Dancing in the Vortex: The Story of Ida Rubinstein*, also comments on the disappearance of outward signs of Judaism in the Rubinstein/Horwitz family³ and that they were driven by their desire to be accepted by the elite of Russian society. Woolf, on her first pages, brings up the horrors of the pogroms that plagued Jews in their confined villages outside of the rich urban centers. Jews “were disliked by landowners and peasants alike, a hatred based upon Medieval Christian tradition; inevitably they became scapegoats when times were hard.”⁴ Woolf imagines the luxurious surroundings that Rubinstein enjoyed as a youngster, even the kinds of vodka and caviar and rich borscht that were served in her opulent apartment at 2 Angliskaya.⁵ Waiters in red-blue-and-gold-dressed suits acceded to their every need. One wonders where Woolf uncovered these details. She speculates that the rooms were filled with paintings and objects admired during that time and with a huge library of thousands of books. “In this haven of sophistication, she was formally educated to a level of high achievement.”⁶ Though why Rubinstein did not attend university, with her inquiring mind, does cause some puzzlement. Perhaps it was because she always wanted to be in the theater. Woolf explores the idea that Mme Horwitz encouraged her niece to attend opera and ballet performances, especially since the court played a vital role in the activities of the imperial ballet and getting close to the court was the essence of upper-bourgeois aspirations. Horwitz and her niece were regular participants at the Maryinsky Theatre. But it became apparent to her family, when Rubinstein turned twenty-one, that she had no business attaching her hopes and dreams to a life in the theater. Rubinstein disagreed.

Not surprisingly, events in Rubinstein’s life, although studied by very few writers, caused many scandals and much gossip. In an effort to uncover

information and stories about her early years growing up in St. Petersburg, I sifted through comments from a number of authoritative sources. Details about Rubinstein's family fortune are few and often differ. For example, I found a 2015 Ukrainian article on Rubinstein online in the *Jewish Observer* titled "Mystery Woman," a Russian-language text that speaks about her resistance to questions asked about her past. What it does say is that "she was born to the parents, the father an honorable citizen of Kharkov, Lian or Leon Romanovitch Rubinstein and the mother, Ernestina Isaacovna. Rubinstein came from one of the most prosperous families in Ukraine and Russia. Her grandfather founded the banking firm, Roman Rubinstein and Sons. The family owned sugar factories, a brewery named New Bavaria, warehouses and stores."⁷ According to the *Jewish Observer*, they spent this formidable wealth on charitable causes and the cultural development of Kharkov. The Ukrainian publication notes that Ida Rubinstein inherited the "best qualities of the Rubinsteins: drive, energy and most importantly artistic inclinations and force of personality, pushing her way to success. When her parents died, she inherited an enormous fortune."⁸

Since Rubinstein was associated with a known and powerful family, as she was related to the Rothschilds and the Cahen d'Anvers. Rubinstein's aunts, Marie Kahn and Julia Cahen d'Anvers held glittering settings at their salons and were known as the "Jewesses of Art."⁹ Rubinstein was sought out for her opinions and personal intentions. Many paintings of Rubinstein idealized her exquisite body and her gentle animal-like quality. Long legs, a thin body, and an aquiline nose, coupled with an innate elegance and grace enhanced her Venus-like aura. A French/Russian writer, Nathalie Stronhina, reflected that her growing up in Russia, until the age of twenty-six, was a threshold to her future fame. Having Russian connections not only to the rich and famous but also to very "prestigious names" such as Léon Bakst, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Michel Fokine, Alexander Glazunov, and Serge Diaghilev before she joined them in Paris, endowed her with immediate credibility as an artist and performer. These relationships, which began in Russia, led to her generative collaborations with remarkable artists such as d'Annunzio, Claude Debussy, Paul Valéry, and Robert de Montesquiou, who introduced her to Sarah Bernhardt.¹⁰

Stronhina makes the persuasive point that wealthy Russians, especially from Jewish families, became important figures (*mécénats*) in the cultural landscape, offering an inexhaustible number of rubles to the parks, gardens,



Ida Rubinstein, 1910. Portrait painted by Valentin Serov. SOURCE: UTCON COLLECTION/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

libraries, hospitals, and the arts, including museums. Wealthy Jews lived on the level of the richest and aristocratic, “*Marchands de premiere guilde*.” At the same time, if you were not among the gifted, there were strict prohibitions against Jews of a lower class, who were not allowed to live in the urban centers of Russia, but were relegated to the Ukraine, to the old boundaries of Poland, and Belorussia, and were treated on the same level as criminals. But privileges and permission to live away from the “Jewish Pale of Settlement” only came with large payments to the imperial treasury.

Rubinstein grew up without religion, or “*croyances*”—beliefs that, according to Stronhina, might have been detrimental and would have prevented her from developing into a freethinker and lover of all forms of art, literature, and languages. She opined that religion tended to restrict free-thinking. Art became the spirituality that she sought all her life.¹¹

Stronhina also reminds us that Rubinstein is still remembered in Russia, perhaps not so favorably, for a number of reasons. The famous Russian portrait painter Valentin Serov painted an unusual singular image of Rubinstein reclining, naked and looking quite beautiful and enigmatic (1910). Long famous in France, she was quickly forgotten after World War II, despite many portraits and photos that kept her image in the news while she was alive.

Russians disliked her seductive persona, believing that she lured Serov into an illicit affair that destroyed his marriage. The portrait remains and so in Russia she is remembered.

DePaulis indicates that her mother Ernestine may have had gypsy origins (*d'origine tzigane*), and mentions that Rubinstein's father had a brother, Daniel, a wealthy businessman, who also lived in St. Petersburg. DePaulis affirms that Alexandre Benois wrote about Daniel as being an "exquisite person and a great friend of the Count Benckendorff,"¹² a protector of Bakst, and an important companion. However, Rubinstein never mentioned this uncle. DePaulis quoted Michael de Cossart, who claims that the great banking families of the time, particularly the Cahen d'Anvers, would have helped her to save the major part of her bountiful fortune in 1917, when revolutionaries were appropriating land and money. But by then she and probably her inheritance were safely in France.¹³

DePaulis, like her other biographers, stressed that she did not identify with Judaism, though her family came from a very orthodox background, but that they chose to forget their origins. It seems understandable in light of the atrocities waged against Jews.

It is strange that she did not hold her family in high esteem. DePaulis refers to a letter in the Paul Claudel Society archive about Rubinstein's elder sister, Mme Lewisohn, who was killed during the bombing of Paris in 1918.¹⁴ Rubinstein had wrathful, angry feelings about this sister, who disapproved of Rubinstein's profession and her behavior onstage. In Rubinstein's will she left no one in her family any funds or gifts. DePaulis seems not to agree with Michael de Cossart about her inheritance after the Russian Revolution; he poses the question "What happened to the Rubinstein fortune after the Revolution?" and responds by bringing into the conversation the prosperous Lord Moyne, Walter Guinness, who was guiding Rubinstein financially. "In private Rubinstein had started an affair with the English sportsman and millionaire Walter Guinness who stood ready to indulge her every whim."¹⁵

Like Rubinstein, Guinness's life was surrounded by dramatic events. He had been considered one of the heroes of the British military, having performed bravely during World War I. The private nature of their relationship remains somewhat of a mystery, because Rubinstein was a fiercely private person and probably destroyed all his letters. What she wanted the public to know, she would reveal to the writers and critics who avidly followed her career. It is a supreme irony that Rubinstein and Guinness were very close friends for almost thirty-five years; they seemed so different from one another



Ida Rubinstein with pet tiger, 1912. SOURCE: THE CHRONICLE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

and yet he cared for her until he died. He funded her performances, accompanied her on their grand safaris and hunts, and bought her the luxurious yacht *Istar* as a gift.¹⁶

A few words explaining Rubinstein's everlasting devotion to Guinness and his to her are helpful here. Apparently, they met in 1909,¹⁷ and surreptitiously kept their intimate friendship alive as they pursued other relationships and experiences; all the while, she was able to receive large gifts of money from him, not only to fund her sumptuous productions, but also her nursing activities during both wars. (It seems that no financial or written documentation about the funds Guinness provided Rubinstein have been discovered.) However, there are numerous anecdotal stories that confirm his generosity toward Rubinstein's productions. For example, Jacques DePaulis writes in "Un Mécène atypique" or "A Rare Philanthropist," "What's important to remember here is that Walter Guinness has dedicated a great portion of his fortune to sustain without fail all of the performances of Rubinstein and her for the duration of 34 years."¹⁸ So careful were they that we rarely hear of Rubinstein and Guinness as a couple, but Paul Claudel, the esteemed French poet, understood their relationship, as did Léon Bakst.

Guinness, born in 1880 in Dublin, was the third son of Edward Cecil Guinness, owner of the celebrated Irish breweries. He went to school at Eton and had a tremendous curiosity about a great variety of things in nature and culture. As a soldier he was awarded prizes for his heroism in South Africa and later in Turkey and Egypt. He married Evelyn Erskine in 1903, and had several children. When he retired as lieutenant colonel, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Subsequently, he entered politics and worked closely with Winston Churchill's government. Ida and Walter seemed at first strange bedfellows, but their affair endured for a long time.

A good indication of the depth and longevity of their relationship appears in Paul Claudel's work. In his *Journal*, he refers to the date September 2, 1921, when the ship *André Lebon* left from Marseille with passengers Mme Saussine, Mme Lartique, Mme Rubinstein, Mme Guinness, Walter Guinness, and himself. Claudel quipped that the conversations on board were a "dialogue of the dead."¹⁹ They all talked endlessly about the past. It was no secret that the Colonel Guinness and Rubinstein were on their way to Africa, to Djibouti to hunt for large animals. In a letter to a friend, Audrey Parr, confided on September 13, 1921, that Claudel disclosed he traveled to Djibouti with Rubinstein, "as always beautiful, and her lover, the Colonel Guinness who was son of a brewery owner. They are on their way to hunt antelope and lions in

Abyssinia. Rubinstein told me that next spring she was hoping to remount *Le Martyre de San Sébastien* at the Opéra,” which she did in June 1922.²⁰

Rubinstein also wrote a letter to Léon Bakst dated September 11, 1921, about this same hunting trip. She tells Bakst, “I am writing from the Red Sea. I cannot stress how hot it is here. I am going to send this letter from Djibouti where we arrive tomorrow and from where I am departing on horse to search for lions and their skins that I promised to bring you.”²¹ Rubinstein clearly treasured Guinness’s support and friendship. Without him, she would probably not have been able to achieve many of her productions or to survive the two World Wars.

An interesting French novel about Rubinstein’s life by Donald Flanell Friedman, *Rubinstein: Le Roman d’une vie d’artiste* (2011), writing in the first person, poetically evokes her youthful and romanticized thoughts and experiences, her dreams, and fears. There are no footnotes or references to his sources to ascertain where he attained his information, but it is clear he is an excellent researcher. He dedicates his book to the Brothers of the Abbaye de Citeaux and notes Rubinstein’s attachment to the thirteenth-century Cistercian Abbey near Dijon, dedicating her last years to meditation and prayer in her quest for a transcendent belief.

Friedman suggests that the Rubinsteins were also related to other powerful Russian Jewish families, for example, the Poliakovs and the Raffaloviches who financed the construction of the TransSiberian railroads and founded huge commercial banks in St. Petersburg. He noted that, as a youngster, Rubinstein would often visit her uncle Daniel Poliakov, who lived in the ancient palace of the Strogonoffs that was reconstructed in all its opulence for his family. The palace is described in detail. In addition, Friedman recounts that the Rubinsteins were also connected to the Cahen d’Anvers and the Camondos, French bankers.²² When Rubinstein paid an unfortunate visit to her sister in Paris, she also became acquainted with the sisters Warshawska, Loulou Cahen d’Anvers, and Marie Kann. There were also Elizabeth Cahen, connected to the famous Forceville family, and Louise Malpurgo, who inherited a fortune from ship-owning and insurance companies, from Trieste.

Friedman avows Rubinstein’s early disenchantment with her stifling and narrow-minded family. This is interesting in light of the fact that she was given such an enormous advantage, with governesses and tutors in music; languages such as Latin, Greek, French, German, and Italian; salon soirees; and visits to many theaters and museums. But those benefits did not quiet her restless spirit. He quotes her statement in an edition of *L’Écho*, September

9, 1932, when she is forty-nine years old. Here she declares that “I lived the life that I wanted, and it was not won easily, born in Russia to a family who thought a theatrical life was a disgrace, I had to break away firmly from my milieu.”²³ Friedman early on asserts that the epidemic that killed her parents was typhoid fever. Nobody whom I’ve read seems to agree. Typhoid fever is acquired after drinking infected water. Cholera is also carried in polluted water, but it is more likely her parents died of the latter.

Friedman and her other biographers underscored Rubinstein’s love for Ancient Greece, and remind us that at the tender age of fifteen, she was permitted a trip there with her governess and tutor—a journey she never forgot, returning to its startling beauty and knowledge by performing the roles of its canonical tragedies. From the very beginning, she kept apart from other children, finding in books, concerts, and her tutors enough stimulation and excitement. She studied piano assiduously, sinking herself into the music she often heard in her aunt’s home. She loved to recite poems and extracts from literature, easily learning long narratives by heart. Friedman thought that Rubinstein had been baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church²⁴ soon after her move to St. Petersburg; perhaps she forgot this event. After some time, her aunt allowed her to follow the acting lessons of Yuri Ozarovsky, the professor at the conservatory in St. Petersburg, and to become a close associate of Lydia Yavorskaya, a celebrated actress who ran her own theater.

RUSSIAN JEWISH HISTORY

So why did the Rubinstein family have conflicting views on being Jewish, causing them to both embrace and discount their heritage? Jews migrated to southern Russia and its regions several thousand years ago, as inscriptions, tombstones, and Greek sources inform us, then more substantial numbers of Eastern Jews arrived, fleeing from persecution by the church in Byzantium. By 700 CE, they comprised the largest single group in Crimea, or Tauris, as it was called. “In several centuries they rose to great power and prosperity and lived cooperatively and comfortably with Christians and Muslims.”²⁵ Gradually there arose serious hostility, and by the seventeenth century, they were not allowed in Russia and the Ukraine. Later in the eighteenth century, Jews were permitted to move from Western and Central Europe, to Poland, Lithuania, and Russia.

The meeting between Russians and Jews began officially when St. Petersburg, under Catherine the Great, annexed eastern Poland at the end

of the eighteenth century, and so the Romanovs acquired about 500,000 Jewish subjects on the western border of the Russian Empire. Jews lived quite independently among the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, and Lithuanians.²⁶ In the Pale, the virtual absence of both a Jewish peasantry and a Jewish nobility left the majority of Jews as petty traders, small shop or tavern keepers, artisans, money lenders, or others who floated from one job to another.²⁷

Many hardships afflicted the Jews who lived in the Pale, that is, the area of Lithuania (the provinces of Kovno, Vilno, Grodno, and Minsk), as well as the western provinces of Vohlyn and Podnol, White Russia (Vitebsk ad Mogilev), Little Russia (Chernigov and Pitava), New Russia (Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, Taurida, and Bessarabia), and the province of Kiev. Rural settlements were to be closed to newcomers.

When Russia lost the Crimean War (1853-1856) to multiple European countries (France, the UK, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire or Turkey), new reforms were instituted, especially under Alexander II, who was famous for having freed the serfs. Sometimes called the Emperor of Mercy, he accorded certain Jews the right of residence and government employ. There was some discussion about freeing the Jews, and there were attempts to stop the endemic anti-Semitism. Jews were taught to speak and read in Russian, thereby encouraging them to rise in a very hierarchical system. Leaving behind their ritualistic clothing and beliefs was thought to allow them to join Russian society. But civic equality was not ordained and various uprisings in 1863 were attributed to the Jews, so Jewish schools were closed. Reports in European presses in the 1880s spoke about the violent outbursts toward Jews, but also blamed the Jews for their “allegedly oppressive commercial practices.” The Ukraine had the largest concentration of Jews in Russia and most of the pogroms and deaths occurred there. The word *pogrom*, Russian for thunder or storm, was not, however, utilized until the early twentieth century.²⁸ Nevertheless, the era of rampant pogroms presaging the horrors of World War II had begun. Jewish physicians and jurists seemed to have escaped the limited opportunities forced on their brethren. Interestingly, during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, many Jewish physicians achieved the citation of Imperial Favor for their achievement in checking the then-raging typhoid epidemic.²⁹

The pogroms of the 1880s were some of the severest episodes of ethnic cruelty in the Russian empire during the nineteenth century. Violence triggered by Alexander II's assassination on March 13, 1881, began to subside in 1883, the year of Rubinstein's birth, when thousands of Jewish homes and businesses

had been destroyed by roaming mobs, several dozen Jews were murdered, and unknown numbers assaulted and raped.³⁰ One of the most difficult problems that had to be dealt with was that the czarist government could not be persuaded to stop the attacks against the Jews or to permit them to emigrate from Russia. These pogroms took place over the entire Russian empire, and a “national response” was not initiated. Legislation against the Jews was restrictive,³¹ and the mobs understood that those who ravage the Jews would not be punished. The wealthy and comfortable Jews in St. Petersburg were accused of doing nothing to support or help their brothers.

The Rubinstein family’s rise to great financial stability occurred when the czar allowed those who marketed grain and created large liquor concessions to gain significant power. Many benefited from their conversion to Russian Orthodoxy, becoming certified members of the wealthy, especially in St. Petersburg, which was the center of the aristocracy. “During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, social and geographic mobility among significant portions of the Jewish population transformed the Jews’ relationship to Russian society and the imperial state.”³² It was evident that Rubinstein’s family was one of the beneficiaries of this transcendent project and the new industrial Russia.

YOUNG RUBINSTEIN: LETTERS TO
ELIZAVETA ALEKSANDROVNA IUVITSKAIIA

Rubinstein’s fanatical belief in herself and her abilities were not so unusual in St. Petersburg. It was a time when women, especially Jewish women, felt capable of realizing their aspirations. For example, “By 1882 more than two hundred female physicians had been trained in Russia, more than in any other European state. By the 1880s Jewish women accounted for 16 percent of the students enrolled at the Kiev Higher Courses, and 34 percent at the Women’s Medical Courses in St. Petersburg.”³³ If Rubinstein chose to go to university, she would have succeeded in any profession she desired. But she decided at a very young age that she was a performer, an actress who needed to be on stage. Her personal letters to her dearest friends deeply express her passions and her sense of drama. The letters are a significant part of Garafola’s collection.

In my initial reading of the letters, I found that they reflect Rubinstein’s tempestuous and flamboyant personality and lifestyle, and was struck by her persistence and dedication to the creation of art as well as to her belief in her rightful place in the most respected halls of international theater. Born

to wealth and privilege, and despite the early loss of her parents, she knew that she was extraordinary and her faith in her destiny never left her. Her privileged upbringing afforded her a classical education with an intimate knowledge of languages, especially Italian, German, English, and French. She traveled and read widely, including the French luminary authors of the nineteenth century, as well as about the theater of Greece and Rome. She became an astute intellectual.

At the age of twenty-one, beginning in 1904, her letters mirrored the intense, urgent moods that overtook her. Her writing was breathless and bossy. And it's important to realize that in those days the letters arrived and departed fast and furiously hour-by-hour and day-by-day, often by pneumatic. She constantly swears to the truth of her promises and to her dedication to a new role, to a new endeavor, to a new trip somewhere, to learning a new language, and to the sincerity of her affection for her friends. She commands with imperative phrases and exhausts her reader with exclamations. She loved being onstage and studied acting and dancing with *acharnement* or fury.

Rubinstein possessed well-hewn manners in her early writing, thanking her friends and full of complimentary remarks about their warmth, kindness, and good intentions. Responding to a letter from a close associate who studied with her, Elizaveta Aleksandrovna Iuvitskaia, she asks, "But when do rehearsals for your *Stepanida* begin? I still have not read it, but as soon as I return to Petersburg I will read it and then write to you; I always carry out your assignments to the letter."³⁴ One senses that Rubinstein has something uppermost in her mind, and that everything must attend to this desire.

In a Romantic vein, she often makes references in these missives to the weather, "so beautiful, quiet and warm. I spent almost the entire day outdoors, walking and riding, I'll return healthy. I kiss you, krepko." (*Krepko* in Russian is a term of endearment suggesting a firm or tight hug.) Also in December 1904, she writes to EAI, or Elizaveta Aleksandrovna Iuvitskaia. "My dear Darling, You do not know how dear your love is to me. And I too have come to love you deeply and sincerely. As for pity on my part toward you, that is out of the question." She compliments Elizaveta on her being richly endowed, though her journey to her wished-for destiny may be difficult. Rubinstein's sympathy adds to her essential control of the relationship, a characteristic that emerges often in her letters. "I repeat, I have come to love you; often in my thoughts I am obsessed with you. So be wise, my girl." In French we say *sois sage*. "Be wise," but it really means stay out of trouble. "I kiss you, Goriacho!" (*Goriacho* in Russian is also a term of endearment

meaning a fervent embrace.) Here we see that her breathless passion for her friend Elizaveta presages her future attraction and attachment to Romaine Brooks, the American painter in Paris just six years later. While it is difficult to determine if this letter provides evidence of Rubinstein's bisexuality, it certainly indicates she was passionate about more than just her work.

Art for Rubinstein was a prayer, a pilgrimage, a "journey," "My dearest girl, Today you set forth on the hard, but beautiful journey of service to art. Be strong and begin with faith, etc." The nature of belief and religion are not questioned as they imply love of art.

In a spring 1905 letter to Elizaveta she wrote, "Girl of my blood, 'sister?'" "Of late I have been in pain. Write me everything. You know my girl, that I love you deeply and am your friend and that whatever happens, you need not feel lonely. Begin to paint in color, work on Mar'ei, after all you'll soon be playing her. I am happy that you acted well in the last performance . . . I believe unwaveringly, I believe that you can attain greatness. I kiss you krepko."

In April 1905, she wrote to Elizaveta: "My dearest girl: Be strong, my darling, be cheerful." She mentions Aleksandr Lenski, who taught in the drama department of the Moscow Theatrical School, and experimented and worked with a number of actors from the Maly Theater. Looking back at Rubinstein's dramatic training, Karina Dobrotvorskaya, a writer for the Russian publication, the *St. Petersburg Theater Journal*, suggests that Rubinstein fretted over which theatrical path, or method to follow, and that she eventually chose as her guiding mentor, Aleksandr Lenski. "In her acting roles she stunned her audiences with the luster of her diamonds, her playfulness with her scarves, her makeup painted in an exaggerated and severe manner, and topped off with ingenious hair designs. Lenski was a perfectionist and seemed to adore Rubinstein's remarkable gift for appearance, and even likened her to Sarah Bernhardt."³⁵ Rubinstein's passion for showing off and fashion was on display at the time that she auditioned for the Conservatory when, as Garafola notes, "she wore a sumptuous crimson dress with a kind of lace that seemed enchanting, a long train, costly brilliants, and elegant shoes."³⁶

However, Rubinstein's health was not always perfect. She complains unabashedly to Elizaveta of her illness. "I simply cannot stop by, as I have completely fallen apart; I didn't even make it to rehearsal today. I have influenza and fever and fear that if I go out, I will become completely ill. And you dear girl, go to the doctor, this is essential. Under no circumstances go out! Rehearsal tomorrow evening. For now, I kiss you goriacho and ask you not to act foolishly." Rubinstein would always have a haunting fear of sickness.

She often traveled to Europe for health reasons, to spas, as did so many of the upper classes at this time. On June 5, 1905, from Switzerland, she writes Elizaveta that it is, “difficult to read your letters, painful, for I am far from you and cannot warm you and cheer you up. But this time cannot last long.” Is her friend depressed, seriously depressed? She asks about *The Tempest* that was being directed by Lenski in 1905. Elizaveta responds, “I am happy that Nelli has finished your dress. Do you like it? Lili sends you warm greetings, I kiss you, Rubinstein.” Both women seem at odds with the world, with emotional ups and downs that afflict romantic souls, quick to be sad and quick to be happy.

In another letter in the fall of 1906, Rubinstein challenges Elizaveta, saying, “Do not be afraid for me; I did what was right. To reach a new goal one cannot fear a new path.” This is typical, Rubinstein fears very little and has decided to embark on another trip to Greece; there, she will study the glories of the ancient past. She continues, “I still need to learn a great, great deal, which in Moscow would be impossible. As far as technique, that will come with practice which I can get from the school here.” Here she means that she is shifting to study at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. She embellishes her thoughts about the meaning of life, “But the most important thing is to study, to explore all feelings, all thoughts, to experience everything, then to come to people with a full heart and an excited mind, to be mad for the truth and then to sing of this truth and to light all the world with my song.” Could Rubinstein have read Walt Whitman or heard of his poems? “Either I do it, or I don’t, one of the two. But I believe in miracles.”³⁷

In a fall 1906 letter to Elizaveta, Rubinstein writes that she has returned to school, having left the Moscow Conservatory. “I plunged into the new life about which I had dreamed, but I realized my complete mistake. It is impossible to combine life with the painstaking technical work that is essential to me in my art. . . . At last I have decided to dedicate the summer to the technical side of the affair. This is why I am flying off to Greece; there I will work until fall before I lose my senses, until that moment has come.” Rubinstein thrives on these assertions and dreams of success and the completion of her goals. It is evident that Greece and its brilliant ancient theater tradition provide the culture and landscape for her pursuit of beauty and plans for creating a role in a Greek play.

In an undated letter to Elizaveta, she is still contemplating her trip to Greece, and writes that she has been in the hospital and had an operation: “Don’t be angry with me; I lied out of love for you. Now I am out of danger,

but all I do is lie here.” Rubinstein plans her trip to Greece for a role she desires to play. “How we will work; maybe he, perhaps Sophocles, will give me something ancient? Tomorrow the gentleman who takes care of my affairs comes to see me; I will ask about money and write in the evening. Until then, I kiss you goriacho, Rubinstein.”

Rubinstein’s letters to Andrianova point to her hunger for attention both in the theater and in relationships. Such needs are not always negative indications of pathology, but, in Rubinstein’s case, they reveal her strong desire for a rich, fulfilling life. These early letters signify that, even as a young woman, Rubinstein was highly motivated, educated, and well traveled. Her work would supercede such trifles as illness in the quest for her vision. Andrianova would not be the only recipient of Rubinstein’s affections at this time, but they were probably the most innocent.

LETTERS TO AND FROM AKIM VOLYNSKY

Although we are not sure of the date, during this period, Rubinstein became enthralled by Akim Volynsky, a Russian literary critic, journalist, and art historian who became St. Petersburg’s liveliest and most prolific ballet critic in the early part of the twentieth century. His book, the first English edition of his provocative and influential writings, *The Book of Exaltations*, offers a striking look at life inside the world of Russian ballet at a crucial era in its history. In 1906, Rubinstein’s letters to Volynsky seem to suggest an emerging love affair with the celebrated ballet critic, Akim Volynsky (real name Chaim Flekser), who was born in 1865 in Zhitomir, the Ukraine, and who died in Leningrad in 1926; he was a generation older than Rubinstein.

Stanley J. Rabinowitz selected and translated forty of Volynsky’s articles—vivid, eyewitness accounts that abound with details about the careers and personalities of such dance luminaries as Anna Pavlova, Mikhail Fokine, Tamara Karsavina, and George Balanchine, at that time a young dancer in the Maryinsky company, whose keen musical sense and creative interpretive power Volynsky was one of the first to recognize. His studies emphasize the spiritual and ethereal qualities of ballet.

As a young actress in Russia, Rubinstein’s relationship with Akim Volynsky, predominantly in 1907 and 1908, shaped much of her thinking. Volynsky, an ardent ballet critic, considered himself a prophet of ballet, and viewed it as a means of spiritual renewal. He alleged that classical ballet provided symbols of a higher order of being. As a Grecophile, he asserted that Greek tragedy

was one of the greatest art forms, with its singing poetry, gestural movement, and strong narrative. Euripides' *The Bacchae* represented the wellspring of his theories. Nietzsche and the Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic provided a path to the ecstasy of classical dance; as he stated, "A new sun will shine and with its brilliant rays illuminate all the summits of human engagement."³⁸

Volynsky's opinions were often divisive, controversial, and always entirely his own. He discovered theater, and then ballet, late in his life, and his first ballet reviews only appeared in 1911, when he was fifty years old. Volynsky declaimed,

In the art of ballet, the body rises like the phoenix from the ashes of the dark ages. Suddenly it is summoned to speak again and to rejoice—more accurately to participate in the general exaltation of life. We still have to give the legs freedom and ease of movement; . . . The arms as well; they must be able to rise up like wings, to fly up and down, to form a circle over the head, and with a tender caress, to balance attitudes and poses. Every finger of the hand must be given meaning and stay alive. And do not forget the lightning that runs along the back, and the natural play of the head and shoulders. All of this body lives, sings and dances in a common choreographic exaltation.³⁹

In one of her earliest letters to Akim, Rubinstein writes, "Many sincere thanks for your kindness. I will read your book with the deepest interest and would be happy if you would personally give me your impressions in Petersburg."⁴⁰ Rubinstein is nothing if not an opportunist—ready to befriend anyone who might push her career forward. But in Volynsky, Rubinstein senses a comrade in arms; he's Jewish, he's intellectually driven, especially by the essential and rich potential of art to change humanity, and certainly by the Symbolist movement and its idealistic approach to ballet, inspired by the great French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who envisioned ballet as "an art capable of projection into the most absolute thought,"⁴¹ exactly as Volynsky proposed and as Gabriele d'Annunzio presented in his plays. And for Rubinstein, theater and dance both aspired to the immaterial realm of poetry.

Volynsky's magnum opus, *The Book of Exaltations*, is an elaborate meditation on classical dance technique that is at once a primer and an ideological treatise. Throughout the book, Rabinowitz sets Volynsky's life and work against the backdrop of the principal intellectual currents of his time. Volynsky worked briefly as director of repertoire for the actress Vera Fedorova Komissarzhevskaya's important Petersburg company, the St. Petersburg Dramatic Theater.

Again in 1906, writing to Volynsky, Rubinstein seems torn about her education at the Moscow Theatrical School. “Lenski trains only the actress in me, but not the part of me that must subsequently realize my dream. He draws me away from our work. Something in me burns, and now I know no peace. I want to reveal my soul, to reveal all the beauty of the world. . . .”⁴² How prescient is her understanding of herself, her sense of importance to the world and to the future!

Despite these outbursts, her physical training at the Moscow Theatrical School prepared her to explore her body’s expressive potential although she was by no means a stranger to using her body in creative ways. Lynn Garafola noted that when Rubinstein enrolled in the school, she studied “*plastique*,” a movement system developed by Vasili Geltser. There, she also was taught plastic motion by Meyerhold, the famed theater director. It was called the movement system of “*plastique*.”⁴³

Did Rubinstein actually go to Greece in 1906? According to Stanley Rabinowitz, she accompanied Volynsky on one of her trips to Greece. He was contemplating a ballet scenario inspired by one of these trips. As a follower of Nietzsche and the Apollonian qualities of classical ballet, Volynsky imagined, the “*Birth of Apollo*,” with his paramour Rubinstein playing the role of Leto, the mother of Apollo.

We begin to surmise that Akim Volynsky is sadly falling in love with her. In 1907 she writes, “Akim L’vovich, forgive me for hurting you, if you can.” She seems ready to apologize at the drop of a hat, for shunning, or ignoring or turning away from people who’ve fallen in love with her. She goes on in a subsequent letter, “It pained me to read your letter, pained me that you were upset and miserable and that I had no words to soothe you.”⁴⁴ What is going on here? Things don’t seem to improve, as not long after, she writes, “I so often give you pain. Forgive me. There is something in me I cannot change. I am always glad to have your letters. I anxiously await the end. Now that spring is here, I want to leave. I think only of that. I do not even want to act. I close my eyes and see the sun and the sea, do not be melancholy.” The coquette reigns, she asks him to come and visit her, telling him, “You were so sad today. I want you to be happy again.”

In these brief text messages, probably sent by pneumatic, we envision her radical changes of moods like the changes of weather and try to understand what the “big picture” might be. Does Rubinstein have a grasp of where she wants her career to go? Or is she spontaneously seizing opportunities of the moment?

In 1907 she wrote to Volynsky, "I will be at the Hermitage tomorrow. If you wish, come." Then she writes, "Tomorrow come to our box at the Maly Theater on the mezzanine right side," Again she tempts him, "Tonight I will go to see *The Daughter of the Sea*. (This may have been the Spanish play by Angel Guimerà.) I want to see the decorations. I will sit in the third row. But I think that it will bore you to see the poor acting."

Rubinstein will graduate from the St. Petersburg Conservatory and finds the time to invite Volynsky to her exams. She notes that she will be performing in *The Last Oxen* by Nemerovich-Danchenko on March 26; in *Sardanapal* on March 28; in *Richard III* (Anna) on March 30; in *A Winter's Tale* on April 1; in *Macbeth* on April 8; and in *Mary Stuart* on April 10. "I appear in one act of each play."

She sends a telegram to Volynsky: "Am delighted you will come to first performance Monday, greetings, Rubinstein."

A draft of a letter from Volynsky in 1907 to Rubinstein tells a grand story: Volynsky addresses Rubinstein, and confesses his ardor, "My Divine Rubinstein, I cannot live without you. We will not fear words or names . . . in ordinary life; in our life, all will be meaningful and beautiful. God has readied me for you, . . . allow me, Rubinstein, to call you my bride?"⁴⁵ And the letter continues with more grandiloquent admissions.

Does Rubinstein respond to these declarations? Perhaps the following letter (1907) from her was an acknowledgment of Volynsky's impassioned note? "I returned and found your note. Only you didn't have to write to me like that. Some time after perhaps, but not now. I was terrified that my gift was too great." Did Rubinstein sleep with him? Does he now expect too much from her? She continues, "Your letter is beautiful, but it does not speak about the miracle of which what you write is a harbinger, nor does it speak about the moment, which will wash away all your tortures and sufferings. And in this miracle I have to believe, otherwise it is impossible to live. I believe that sort of madness will come."

It is easy to speculate that his feelings were not reciprocated, and that she needs to wait before such profound outpourings will be shared. However, she continues to lure Volynsky on. In the planning of a trip to Greece, and perhaps to India with him, she writes about her "heart and mind" that are preoccupied with leaving.

On May 7, 1907, she discloses, "I believe boundless happiness awaits us ahead." When they both have begun their travels, she writes from Hotel Bessarabia in Pale Roial, in Kiev, saying that she is "delighted about our