

Roots Beneath the Surface

Joram Piatigorsky

Not uncommonly, family tradition shapes destiny. I heard a Japanese physician, the most recent in a 200-year-old chain of family ophthalmologists, deliver a lecture with the self-assurance of a man fulfilling his mission, and a lawyer friend of mine has so many lawyers in his family tree that he displays their names on the rungs of a ladder in his office. My eclectic family couldn't be more different. Yet, that hasn't stopped others from trying to squeeze me into a family mold, mostly due to my father – Gregor Piatigorsky – a world-famous cellist who carried the family flag.

"You *do* play an instrument, don't you?" asked a lady psychologist I met for the first time at a family friend's birthday party a long time ago. She had recognized my name and made the connection with music. I don't remember her name so I'll call her LP for Lady Psychologist.

"No," I answered LP. "I don't play an instrument." Already I was starting to feel uncomfortable.

"Did you ever?" she persisted, looking perplexed. I didn't know what was in her mind, but I felt, as I had many times before and after, that I needed to defend myself for not being engaged in music.

"Yes," I told her. "I played the clarinet for a short time as a teenager. I don't remember for how long." This was true.

Not missing a beat, she asked with skewed logic, "So, are you a failure like all sons of great men?"



Joram in Moscow, 1962.

Was she probing for another patient?

I squirmed, figuring that any time spent thinking would be taken as validating that I was a failure. "Not yet," I said. I was in my early thirties, just a few years past graduate school, at Caltech and in the midst of establishing my research laboratory on molecular genetics at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda with plenty of time left to satisfy her diagnosis. It was too soon to predict failure or success, but not too soon to wonder how my roots beneath the surface affected me.

My father and I could have been born on different planets. His life started in 1903 in Ekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk), Ukraine; he was commonly considered Russian. "Blood ran in the streets," he told me, describing the pogroms he endured where Jews – men, women, boys and girls – were slaughtered when he was less than ten years old. "Often I filled my pockets with rocks to protect myself from roving brutes that appeared at random," he said. How could I, raised and sheltered in the United States, understand such terror? Impossible. No description of a pogrom could substitute for the terror of living

through the real event.

When he was still a little boy my father's family moved from Ekaterinoslav to Moscow, and then his father – a frustrated musician – went to St. Petersburg to study violin, abandoning his family for some time. Although not the eldest child, my father was already a budding cellist and took charge of supporting his mother, two brothers and two sisters with his cello. He played in silent movie theaters, restaurants, and once, too young to take full advantage, in a brothel. Trouble brewed when his father – my grandfather – returned to reclaim his position as head of the family. My father had opposed – forbade is more likely – his sister, Nadja, marrying a boy who lived in the apartment below. “He will beat you,” my father told her. I can hear him now in my mind, certain of himself and prophetic as always, for he had an uncanny sense of the way things were. He had “x-ray eyes,” as my sister's husband Dan called it. Imagine, a ten or eleven year old boy feeling entitled to manage his older sister's romantic adventures and dictate her life. Meanwhile, his father said, “Nonsense. Of course Nadja can marry the boy.” My father, too proud to acquiesce to the restored family order, left home clutching his cello. All this is recounted in my father's autobiography, *Cellist* (Doubleday, 1965).

The night my father left his home, he was found nearly frozen to death by a kindly storeowner who took him to his place and cared for him. My father refused to return to his parents, despite his siblings' urging him to do so. After some months he set out on his own, still a boy with a man's obstacles to overcome. Amazingly, he was appointed soloist for the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow in his early teens, and then he joined the Lenin Quartet and even played for Lenin himself. In 1921 he escaped the Bolsheviks by sneaking across the Russian border into Poland. He made his way to Germany, became the principal cellist of the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra and went on to stardom as a cellist during the troubled years preceding World War II. Being a famous musician, however, didn't give him a home. He was fortunate to be one of the lucky refugees to receive a “Nansen passport” issued to European refugees (often Russian) from the

League of Nations. This bureaucratic paper was a certificate of identity that allowed travel across country borders, but it didn't signify citizenship. Thus, my father lived in a borderless world where he belonged everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and his survival depended entirely on his wits and talent.

I doubt LP considered my father's extraordinary past when she asked me if I played a musical instrument. Of course I wasn't a musician; that was the least of what was in my mind. But how could I ignore my father's history of courageously defying the odds of survival without parental help as a child in revolutionary Russia and of rising from obscurity to fame as a young refugee in pre-World War II Europe when answering her question: was I a failure? The conditions of my life – born in safety and raised with love in a secure home – provided no opportunity for comparison with my father's achievements.

And then there was my mother, the daughter of the French Baron Edouard de Rothschild, head of a dynasty known worldwide for banking, wealth, philanthropy, vineyards, chateaus, racing horses and art collections. However, despite riches and physical comforts, she had a lonely upbringing dominated by a mean English nanny. The mother I knew had no desire to remain immersed in the luxury of her past. She focused on what she could accomplish, not on what she had.

My parents met in Paris in the 1930s and formed a union of his artistic fame and her impoverished background with inherited wealth. To escape the treacherous pre-war conditions in Europe, my father, mother, and two-year-old sister Jephtha caught the last passenger ship from Le Havre, France, to the United States on the day that both France and Britain declared war on Nazi Germany: September 3, 1939. They had to endure an anxious three-day wait on the boat for the captain to decide whether or not to risk the journey and possibly be torpedoed. The decision was to sail and, fortunately, they arrived safely in New York. Six months later, half French and half Russian, I made my appearance in the Adirondacks in Elizabethtown, New York, as the first native-born American citizen in my family. Initially, we lived in an Adirondack “camp” (large summer home) called Windy Cliff nestled



*The family at Windy Cliff,
with Rothschild grandparents.*

in the woods before we moved to a smaller, more suitable house bordering the road. My mother's parents resided in New York city during the war and visited us in Windy Cliff from time to time. Thus, the United States was home for me, yet not without a foreign landscape.

Consider language, the verbal glue with connotations and underlying metaphors that knots families together into a common identity. My father spoke only Russian when he escaped the incipient Soviet Union, picked up German as a refugee, added a dose of French to his repertoire when he married my Parisian mother, and switched to English after immigrating to the United States in 1939. As for my mother, she added a modicum of Russian to her French when she married my father and settled on English over time when she immigrated to the United States. My sister Jephtha began with French in infancy and converted to English when she went to school. She learned a touch of Russian as an adult as a birthday present to our father.

Our family moved to Philadelphia when my father began to teach at the Curtis Institute of Music. I was three or four years old. Under my mother's loving care, I spoke only French until I started kindergarten at Friends Select School in Philadelphia. However, when my father was at home he spoke Russian to his many Russian friends and colleagues and occasionally as a secret language with my mother, who had learned enough to communicate in Russian with him. Despite that Russian was his native tongue, the mother language that must have coated his sensibility since childhood, he never taught Russian to Jephtha or to me – never said a word to us in Russian, not even hello or good-bye. Perhaps he was protecting us from those dark days that he'd escaped. He hated the Russia of his memories. "They're all barbarians," he said more than once. "They always were and always will be." He was uncompromising in his anger towards his motherland and his Russian family. But from my perspective, growing up speaking French at first and then English with my fellow Americans of every age, the Russian gibberish I heard at home created a distance between my father and me, a latent gap in intimacy. Would I have felt the same if I'd spoken Russian? Sometimes questions are too late to answer. In any event, I regret not speaking Russian and never having made the effort to learn the language.

Many years ago, before CDs and videos, I listened to a wire recording of me speaking French at about four years old. What I heard was a little French boy. My European background was visible in other ways as well. Attire, for example. A picture in my yearbook when I was in kindergarten from the first grade at Friends Select School (a Jew in a Quaker school, another conflict) shows me in a coat and tie at the tip-top of a Jungle Jim during recess.

I was being raised formally as a French child in informal America. In many ways we were a family apart from the American culture we were in. We had no relatives in the United States; it was just the four of us. I never went for an "overnight" at a friend's house like most kids do. I stayed comfortably at home with my European family. I even remember feeling homesick at school, despite that I would be home before din-



Joram, wearing his tie in Kindergarten, top left on the jungle gym.



Jephta and Joram playing on the car bumper.

ner. I didn't quite fit in. I wanted to be like everyone else, but I wanted to excel too, to separate – distinguish – myself. If I was separate, I needed to be consistently separate, special. Even my name – Joram Piatigorsky – was different, foreign and hard to say. When I was a little older at “mixers” – school dances to meet girls – I wished my name were Michael or something equivalent that was easy to pronounce. I think once I actually called myself Michael (still no luck with the girl, however). Joram, a name derived from the Old Testament, is common in Israel but not used in the United States. I would have had less trouble with the name if I had pronounced it as an American would, with the accent on the first syllable and a soft R (no throat involvement). But I only knew my name in the French pronunciation as my mother said it – accent on the second syllable and a throaty R. In my late twenties I simplified my life by saying my name with an American accent, but it took many years for me to feel comfortable with that pronunciation, and it still feels a bit odd today.

Now, as I write at 74 years of age, I can understand and get by in French, but my French is a child's French. Since I switched to English before I learned to read, I need to sound out the French written words in my mind to make sense of them or use the proper tense. I tried to satisfy my language requirement for graduate school at Caltech by telling the teacher that I'd spoken French all my life and didn't need to take French courses or exams. She called my partial bluff and handed me a passage to read on the biology of worms. I was doing fine until I came to “vers.” I couldn't understand what a glass – “verre” in French – was doing underground. “Vers” is worm,” she said. “Of course,” I said. She concluded that I was a rare language mutant – partly literate, partly not – and luckily for me she waived my French language requirement.

My freshman roommate at Harvard – who incidentally had a French father and spoke French fluently – made me aware of the depth of my French background when he asked me to whom I had been speaking on the telephone a

moment earlier.

"My mother. Why?" I asked.

"Your French accent. It confused me," he said.

I had a French accent at college? I throat-rolled my R's? That was news to me. After passage of many years, I realize now that French was more than just the language of my youth. It was my mother's voice, a bridge that connected me to her and also reached my European roots, while simultaneously it isolated and protected me from foreigners and even my peers. Apparently when speaking to my mother on the phone while I was at Harvard so many miles away from the comfort and safety of my Los Angeles home, I crossed my private, invisible border that separated French and English, Europe and America, security and challenge. My French accent continued to slip through the cracks of English now and then until my mother died two years ago at a hundred years of age. I may also have remnants of a French accent at times when speaking to my sister Jephtha. I would have to ask someone listening to me to be sure. My wife Lona said she was flattered when I once addressed her with a French accent. "I'm now *really* a family member!" she said, forcing an R with her throat. She *really* was before that.

My French background was reinforced as a child by summer visits to my grandparents in Paris after the war until my grandfather died in 1949. Those trips were multicolored: sparkling red for me, resentful blue for my mother, and I think overcast with gray for my father, when he was with us. I loved the trans-Atlantic trips where I ran freely on the decks of ocean liners and played ping-pong with Jephtha. In Paris I relished the luxury of my grandparents' home at 19 Avenue Foch, a half block from the Arc de Triomphe. It's still more natural for me to say "Arc de Triomphe" as the French do than "Arch of Triumph" as an American would, which doesn't sound quite right even after all these years. I remember my bed in my grandparents' home as the softest, most comfortable bed in the world, and I forced myself to stay awake as long as possible at night so I could enjoy the bed longer. The food was special as well: the chocolate croissants for breakfast, the tiny shrimps in their

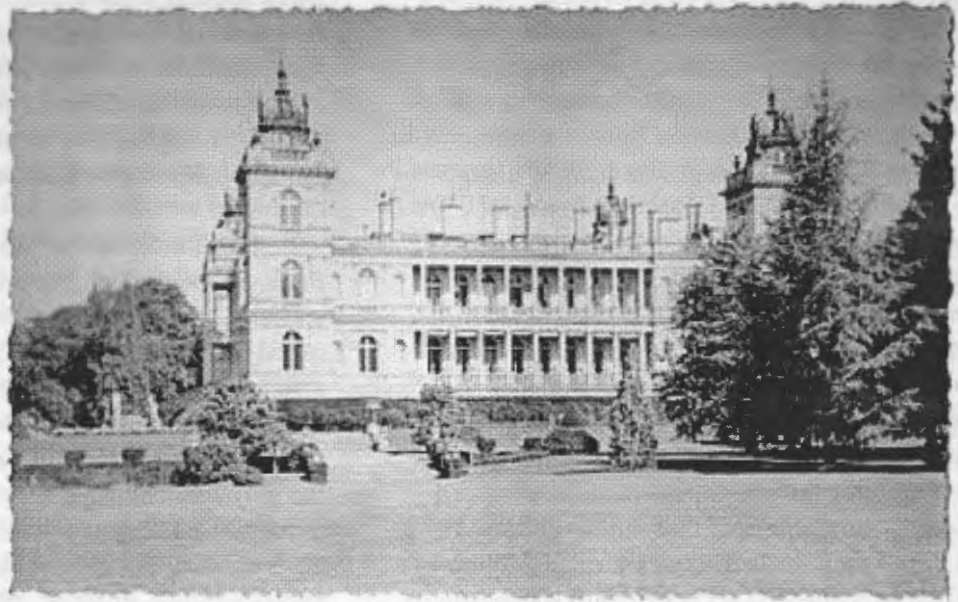
shells from the Maison Prunier restaurant for lunch, and the gourmet dinners, although they dragged on far longer than a small boy would like.

Although my grandfather whom we called Grandpapa (with a French accent) was there, I saw him relatively little on these summer trips because he was aging (he was sixteen years older than my grandmother) and in poor health. He had tuberculosis when he was younger and I don't know if he ever was completely cured. I remember him in a wheelchair on top of his strategically placed parked car – he was not strong enough to fight the crowds – so that he could watch one of his horses compete at the racetrack. Everyone was disappointed when his horse – "Violoncelle" if my memory is correct – did not win. I saw much more of my grandmother, Baboushka, who also visited us with her servant after we moved to Los Angeles.

In Paris I befriended my first cousin, David, two years my junior and the son of Baron Guy de Rothschild, my mother's brother. I could never match David's ease in French society, where he was at home. I felt as an outsider looking in through the window.

My home lacked national borders, but in a different fashion than that of my father's when he was touring with a Nansen passport. My borders were an overlapping blur squeezed into my head.

A highlight for me in our visits to France was staying in my grandparents' magnificent Château de Ferrières close to Paris. I had free access to explore the huge chateau with more rooms than I could count, and I loved bicycling throughout the extensive trails in the woods and gardens of the estate. The parkland was like a small country village with a lake and a few cottages, a paradise with a certain feudal quality. The luxurious château was built between 1855 and 1859 for Baron James de Rothschild, my great-great grandfather, and inaugurated in 1862 by a gala attended by Napoleon III. The Germans seized it in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, and then the Nazis occupied it in the Second World War and confiscated the art, which fortunately was retrieved after the war. Clearly it was a popular spot! My Uncle Guy was its last Rothschild owner. He donated the



Château de Ferrières close to Paris.

château to the chancellery of the University of Paris in 1975 for its use as a public park with guided tours and for special events, but kept a corner of the estate where he built a weekend retreat for himself.

These childhood visits to Paris exposed me personally to the rich history of the Rothschild heritage. I saw the extraordinary as part of the ordinary, the normal. But I had another heritage too – a Piatigorsky lineage of no mean significance where personality, courage and talent sculpted the ordinary and elevated the improbable into the extraordinary. This heritage – the Piatigorsky heritage linked with my name for all to see – appeared to dangle out of reach, but not entirely. I believe these two parental backgrounds – my roots beneath the surface – played silently within me, teased me like a seesaw to be confident and insecure simultaneously, up and down, to blend certainty with doubt. The Rothschild heritage made everything expected, while the Piatigorsky heritage made anything possible despite the odds, but the bar of “anything” was set high, very high; obstacles and failure lurked on the horizon, perhaps the failure that LP fo-

cused on. In addition, I lived in a culture of the American ideal, where we were all just ourselves and backgrounds faded in the light of personal achievements.

As much as I liked my summer trips to France, my mother dreaded them. Returning to Paris, even as an American citizen with her family, was to be thrown back into an unhappy prison of privilege where she never had the chance to express herself in school since she was tutored at home, or to gain the approval and admiration of her parents, who were otherwise occupied. She hated the strain with her parents when we visited Paris, the social engagements that her mother had prearranged for her, and the formal meals in the dining room with the priceless art on the walls, the Sèvres plates, and the servers in white gloves who poured Château Lafite wine, being sure to whisper the wine’s vintage year to each guest.

My mother did have happy moments in Paris, however. I remember one day when she, Jephtha and I slipped away and went to Montmartre, a Paris district where artists painted in the streets, a fairy tale for my mother. We wandered along the alleyways full of charm and

small shops; we looked at the artists' work and ate bread and chocolate at a café. How my mother loved that afternoon, a "Roman Holiday" like the movie with Audrey Hepburn. She had escaped her Rothschild lifestyle by immigrating to the United States (ironically the war "saved" her in that respect) and never wanted to return to France or to live in what she considered a museum covered by a glass bowl. There wasn't much oxygen for her under that bowl. She treasured her independence in the Adirondacks and being self-sufficient without a battery of servants. She was driven to show her independence – to prove herself – a drive for self-reliance so deep that it penetrated into me as well. There was convenience having others do things for you – having servants – but there was shame as well of feeling incapable, and that shame spilled over to fear of being spoiled by wealth. She told me she had never been in a kitchen until she married my father. Imagine that! It may have been an exaggeration (however not necessarily), but it doesn't matter. Whether she had been in a kitchen or not is irrelevant: she made her point. She bought a motorized tricycle that she rode into the small village of Elizabethtown with Jephtha and me bouncing in the side compartment and loving it; she ice skated in the cold winter (even hours before I was born); she shot porcupines in the woods with her 22 gauge rifle (apparently the spiny creatures damaged the wood of the house); she even learned to fly a plane, much to my father's horror, but never got her pilot's license because her teacher ended his life by crashing a few days before her pilot's examination; and she swam in the pristine Bouquet river, where I learned to swim in the lush summer months, sometimes accompanied by pigs from the neighboring Otis farm. While raising Jephtha and me my mother created the childhood for herself that she had missed out on. She often said, "I am a Piatigorsky!" not so much to abandon her Rothschild lineage, an impossibility even in our present age of genetic engineering, but to claim a new identity which she inhabited with pride. Never mind that the only adult Piatigorsky she knew at the time was my father. That was true for me too, who carried his genes.

From the beginning, then, I was embedded in a clash between a French Rothschild culture

with its entitlements and a distant Russian Piatigorsky culture with its self-reliance and self-made success. Each culture alone had international visibility and appeal, but in a different fashion and with different connotations. As much as these cultures complemented each other by bringing the extraordinary within reach, the two cultures also conflicted in values and outlook.

The childhood memories of my father in Paris, although faint, brought still another perspective. I sensed that although he was an admired son-in-law with celebrity status as well as an engaging and original personality, he felt clumsy in the Rothschild world, as if he was a poor man who made good, a respected man in the gray zone, a musician, not a family member in the full sense of the word. Historically, musicians entered through the back door, the servants' entrance, and were paid to entertain. They were not social equals invited to dinner parties. Also, the Rothschilds were clannish. They had amassed a great fortune and power by interacting tightly across European borders (Germany, Austria, France, England and Italy) and formed a closed circle among themselves. Even their marriages were frequently between blood relatives. My great-great-grandfather, James de Rothschild, married his niece, Betty, the daughter of his brother Salomon from the Austrian branch of the family. His son Alphonse de Rothschild, my great grandfather, married Leonora, a cousin from the English branch of the family. The Rothschilds created their own borders defined by genes and favoring the men. It made sense if my father had felt excluded despite that they liked and admired him. Later in life my father admitted to me that he had often felt distinct from the refined Rothschilds, as a man whose clothes did not fit perfectly because he bought them ready-made in stores rather than hand-tailored.

But wasn't that his whole life: hovering at the top, yet vulnerable? While he may have had his insecurities, he always charmed everyone, held them spellbound as a raconteur and won them over with his music. He felt closest to my grandmother Baboushka, spent long hours talking to her, and encouraged her to write a book on Luigi Boccherini, who composed one of the first, if not *the* first cello concerto. Baboushka's

book (*Luigi Boccherini: His Life and Work*, Oxford University Press, 1965) became an important reference to the little-known Boccherini at that time.

Interesting how my father fused music with the Rothschilds. What a strange thought: my father vulnerable, the world-famous cellist on stage receiving standing ovations, the man who survived poverty and pogroms and overcame innumerable obstacles in a vicious, war-torn world, the rescuer of my mother from privilege to freedom, the man who gave me his name which bestowed instant recognition. I wonder if any of the Rothschilds harbored some sense of vulnerability in his presence, the man who rose to the top solely on his talent with no family for help or support: the self-made man. Or whether any of my cousins or other French relatives ever felt a tinge of vulnerability in my presence, as I did in their presence: the American “pioneer,” a scientist in the powerful United States, the progeny of their escaped relative Jacqueline who made good elsewhere on her own.

My first direct contact with my Russian heritage was when I accompanied my parents to Moscow in 1962 when my father was a judge at the Tchaikovsky Music Competition. I was on semester break during my senior year at Harvard. Our State Department had bungled the paperwork for our trip, sending me, a lowly college student, on official business and my father, the invited celebrity, as my guest. Somehow it got straightened out.

The Cold War was full-blown, and being behind the Iron Curtain a few years after Sputnik had shattered the space barrier was disquieting. The tension between the capitalist United States and communist Soviet Union was palpable, meaning it was scary. We hesitated to say anything out loud that could be considered detrimental about Russia for fear of being overheard and getting into trouble, whatever that meant, or endangering my father’s Russian family. Sometimes

fear exists because of known dangers, such as pogroms when my father was young; our anxiety in Moscow was the uncertainty of danger. Even when my parents and I were alone in our room in the Metropol Hotel, we spoke guardedly, assuming our suite was bugged. Were we VIPs to be handled with soft gloves no matter what, or were we an adversary from the West? Who were we? The issue of identity hovered in the background.

When our plane landed in the Moscow airport we were met by the Soviet press with their cameras clicking. It was my father’s first return to Russia since he’d escaped in 1921. He was a runaway then and a celebrity now. Changes can be dramatic in a lifetime.

“Greenia!” I heard from a man rushing toward my father.

Baboushka, Baronness Edouard de Rothschild, in Paris.



Greenia? I wondered. What's that all about?

"They used to call me that at home, as a kid," said my father, reading my mind.

That was my first glimpse of my father's cloudy childhood, my mysterious Russian heritage. But it must have been even more disorienting for my father to greet this stranger, who turned out to be his brother, Anatole, whom he'd never met before: Anatole was born after my father had left Russia. As a symbol of family unity Anatole gave me a row of linked plastic elephants glued on a base. I was touched, but he remained a stranger, and I felt uncomfortable in his presence. Yet, he was my uncle. Anatole had a fourteen-year-old son named Gregory (nicknamed Grisha), the same name and nickname as my father's. Grisha was wearing a Sputnik pin with pride when I met him. Many years later Grisha immigrated to New Jersey with his wife, Yelena, and two sons, Misha and Lev. Today, Misha is an award-winning jazz pianist and Lev is a computer geek. Neither Anatole nor Grisha spoke English when I was in Moscow, and I didn't speak Russian, so we just stared at each other self-consciously, or at least I was self-conscious. We smiled and made gestures to each other like two chimpanzees.

But it wasn't Anatole that my father had most wanted to see – how could it have been since he was a stranger? It was his mother, Maria. My father had told me she was a kind person, intelligent but uneducated, illiterate. He wanted desperately to see her again after abandoning his family before his teenage years. I presume that he wanted to tell his mother that he loved her, to apologize for never having returned to see her, and to assure her that she had never left his thoughts. I'm guessing. He told me relatively little about his Russian family, and certainly not about tender feelings he must have had for them, or about guilty feelings for abandoning them, even though he had his reasons. I'm not sure he did feel guilty. I'm not even certain that the limited amount my father did tell me about his family was entirely reliable. What he remembered was a child's impression. For example, my cousin Grisha told me later that my father's mother, my grandmother, read stories to him as a little boy in Russia. That's hardly being illiterate, as my father insisted she was. The fine

line between fact and story blurs as easily as memory fades. Sadly, my father never did see his mother again. She died when my father was on concert tour in Asia a few months before we went to Russia, leaving a void in his heart that was never filled. Since I never met her she remains an abstraction in my mind, a person who apparently could read, but perhaps not well, or not at all. What matters is that she was my grandmother I never met, who spoke a language I didn't understand, and lived in a culture considered our adversary.

My father's father – my grandfather Paul – was old and shriveled when we visited Moscow, but still healthy and the proud possessor of a full mop of hair. He had even recently remarried a few months after his wife – my father's mother and my grandmother – had died. My father described the new wife as a bitter old lady that no one liked. I don't remember meeting her, but maybe I did. Since my grandfather spoke no English, my encounter with him amounted to a few nods and a sea of distance between us. My father told me later, or I surmised (I can't remember), he would rather not have seen his father again as a diminished, provincial, old, henpecked man. Whatever one thinks, parents sit on a private pedestal that is best not toppled.



Joram's grandfather Paul.

I met other members of my father's family in Moscow. My uncle Leonid was a tall, child-

less man, a conductor, but I can't remember of which orchestra. My father had a prosthetic foot made for him in the United States later when Leonid's foot was amputated due to diabetes. There was Alexander – Shura for short. He was a musicologist and cellist who had changed his name to Stagorsky (I'm not sure about the spelling) to avoid being considered "the lesser Piatigorsky cellist." Shura had a wife and daughter; I don't remember meeting either one. Shura visited my wife Lona and me in Bethesda for a few days many years later. We still couldn't communicate: language again. Overweight Pauline, one of my father's two sisters, was an expressionless woman, the type one sees on a bus and ignores.

And my father's sister Nadja, the one who wanted to marry the boy downstairs, where was she? "Gone," my father said. "She went to Siberia with her rotten husband and was never heard from again." He had known this would be her fate already as a little boy when he ran away from home. Is this really what happened? Probably.

If I had spoken Russian I would have seen and remembered entirely different people, not caricatures but complex relatives, for all people are complex and interesting if one speaks their language and understands their culture.

The Soviet Union at the time of my visit was an unhappy place. The airport was deserted and there were few cars in the streets. Our guide seemed terrified to drive by the Kremlin but I had no idea what he was afraid of. When I wanted to pay a few rubles for a small lacquered box I bought from someone in the street, he hid behind a tree scared to be seen accepting money from a tourist, which was illegal. This was a world apart in which I had no place. The Russian language, the setting, the culture, my relatives were all foreign to me. I felt out of place – too privileged, too wealthy, too different. I felt American, not French, as I have often felt European, not American in the United States. I certainly didn't feel Russian.

Yet, there's a part of me – one of my buried selves – that includes this strange Russian world. When I read Russian literature I recognize the despondency and torment – a sadness – that ex-



Joram, left, and Shura in Moscow, 1962.

isted in my father. A similar, peculiar sadness often feels heavy in my breast. But that part of me is able to emerge like my father did from the despair of his childhood and like the founder of the Rothschild dynasty, my great-great-grandfather Mayer Amschel Rothschild, did from the Frankfurt ghetto to a position of international power and prestige. My French and Russian heritages may be polar opposites in one sense, but are similar in their humble origins and extraordinary ascents beyond any expectation. They establish my roots, often invisible and beneath my American exterior, that are recorded in my genes and etched into my being.

Finally, to revisit LP's question some forty years ago: "Am I a failure like the sons of all great men?"

My answer is evasive: We are all children of our parents, as our parents are children of their parents, and so on down the line buried beneath the surface. We must adapt to our particular circumstances, as I have done, as evolving species must adapt to new niches by exploiting their inherited genes and new mutations that make them, and all of us, unique.