

**New Nonfiction from
Antoinette Constable: “A
Hundred Roses for Olga
Herzen”**



Still Life with Roses of Dijon, 1882,
Ignace-Henri-Jean-Théodore Fantin-Latour (French, 1836–1904)

To some people outside our circle, Charles Rist was seen as a saintly hero. Charles Rist, our grandfather, was a famous economist, and vice-governor at La Banque de France. He was among the first to sign Zola's "J'Accuse," in a public letter defending Alfred Dreyfus. It was a courageous act for a man of the establishment. For this gesture, he was condemned by some as a nefarious sinner.

My most vivid memory of my paternal grandfather is that he ran away from the Villa Amiel in Versailles—where he lived with his wife and mother-in-law, Olga Herzen—early on January 1, 1950. The Rist home had been designed and built for Olga Herzen at the time of her marriage.

Grand-Papa's chauffeur-driven Hotchkiss rushed him to Paris, while at the same time, the Russian Embassy delegation sped away from the capital toward his home, to honor our great-grandmother, the surviving daughter of Alexander Herzen. Her aristocratic father had written eloquently at the turn of the century, being the first to advocate the abolishment of serfdom and the distribution of land to peasants. In exile, he published his famous newspaper *The Bell* outside Russia. His writings had sparked the Russian Revolution. If Karl Marx was the Revolution's father, Herzen could be credited with being its grandfather.

The Soviets manning the Russian embassy in 1950 demonstrated their undying admiration for Herzen by delivering to Herzen's only surviving child, Olga, the gift of one hundred roses on New Year's Day. She became a hundred years old that year.

Each magnificent rose was an intense, brash red, trumpeting a total allegiance to Stalin. By contrast, the White Russian Community sent Olga a magnificent white azalea that stood at a place of honor in her salon. Delighted to speak Russian that day with native speakers, Olga sat in the sitting room, thanked the men, and nodded during the usual speeches, though she held her brass hearing horn well away from her ear. Then

she spoke of her famous father, wished everyone a happy New Year, and told a few jokes. We children had been sent upstairs, but at least one of us managed to creep to the landing, to eavesdrop and peer through the railing.

Olga at a hundred was much prettier, more expressive and shapely than Queen Victoria in her widowhood. Like her, Olga wore black dresses down to her feet and high-laced boots. Her sparse white hair was parted in the middle, pinned over her head in a tiny bun. She had a pronounced Bourbon nose. Her forehead was as wide as Herzen's, above blue eyes clouded by inoperable cataracts.

That day, we heard Olga speak a few sentences in a language we didn't understand, followed by the exuberant laughter of several men. Our grandmother, Olga's daughter, came out of her bedroom several times, wringing her hands, terrified that neighbors might have guessed who was visiting her solidly bourgeois French home, weighed down by the anticipated burden of disposing of a profusion of bloodred roses.

Our urbane, conservative grand-papa felt forced to spend the day at the Banque de France, since he refused any contact with the despised Communists. Grand-Papa had been born old, which meant he was unchanging in our eyes. He was about five feet ten, with a square face and rich gray mustache. The chain and fob resting on his vest added to his dignity. He wore immaculate, stiff-collared white shirts of fine linen, and three-piece suits made by his tailor, with discreet ties imported from England. A semicircle of gray hair ran from one ear to the other. To us, told biblical stories by our Jewish mother, he was a bald Moses dressed up as a judge.

He came home from Paris that evening well after dark. Before walking in, he checked that no black Volga cars with opaque windows and well-armed drivers had parked by the gate. Once inside his home, as a further precaution, he hid in the darkened hall, to make sure no foreign conversations were

taking place in the sitting room. Silence confirmed that the enemy was again ensconced inside its fortified Russian embassy, since no fur-lined overcoats hung on the rack. At last he could take off his coat, hat, and gloves.

Grand-Papa's birthday, coincidentally, happened to take place on New Year's Day and was, by necessity, celebrated a few days later with many relatives. He never mentioned the crimson roses flooding his home on his special day. Twelve of the loveliest had found their way into Olga's room, where he never set foot. The rest were apologetically given away, many to service people, so that within days, all trace of the embarrassing visit had vanished.

Germaine Monod, our grandmother, and her husband, Charles Rist, came to live at the Villa Amiel in Versailles in 1912, when Olga became a widow. It was in Olga's welcoming home that my grandparents raised their five sons. Perhaps because he looked like a slender, younger version of Alexander Herzen, my father, with his wit and generosity, was Olga's favorite grandchild.

My two sisters, and myself the middle child, started visiting the Villa Amiel as toddlers. In 1936, when we were in grade school, my older sister and I began to spend weekends and vacations there.

At the Villa Amiel, the day started for me when Rousseli, the spaniel, scratched at my bedroom door. I dressed and hurried to breakfast in the dining room, where my grandmother presided over a solid silver tea tray, teapot, and cream pitcher—gifts from a grateful Alfred Dreyfus and his wife to Grand-Papa on the occasion of his marriage.

Sometimes Olga, our great-grandmother, was talkative. I loved hearing stories about her devoted German governess Malwida, who'd swept her away from the Herzen household when she was twelve to live with her in Italy, or stories about her cruel

stepmother, or the man with the strange look in his eyes who'd offered marriage when she was only sixteen, a man named Friedrich Nietzsche.

We children were too young to fully understand, but we'd heard whispers and had guessed there were secrets and scandals in the family. Only as adults, when biographers wrote about Herzen's life, did we learn about our great-great-grandfather's reluctant acceptance, twice, of a ménage à trois, as recently depicted in Tom Stoppard's brilliant play trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*.

It must have been in 1938, when Hitler marched into Austria and extreme persecutions of Jews started in Germany, that the adults began talking about pogroms and held alarming discussions about insufficient war preparations and my mother being Jewish.

"France will fall, that's inevitable, considering..." I imagined a lady looking like our mother falling headfirst down a long flight of stairs. It was terrifying. Better to sneak upstairs and visit Olga in her room.

Having lost most of her sight, Olga managed well by feel. When she pulled out family albums filled with postcards and brown photos, she knew which page showed my father in a sailor suit, or my father and his older brother on wooden bicycles without pedals; where to turn for the photo Dostoevsky had send of himself to her father, Alexander Herzen, whom he met several times in London.

Constance Garnett, translator of Russian novels, stated in a footnote to *The Brothers Karamazov* that the father in that novel was modeled on Herzen's own father, Ivan Yakovlev.

During my visits, Olga spoke not of our nebulously grim future, as did the family downstairs, but of the past, so vivid to her. Olga had shaken Garibaldi's hand and enjoyed Wagner's operas in his loge at Bayreuth as a friend and guest

of Cosima Wagner. She knew Turgenev and had read his letters to her father and to her sister, Tata. She had met Kossuth, the Hungarian writer, and many others. All these people with ringing, mysterious names were fascinating characters in an endless story to me. I never tired of hearing about them.

Near blindness didn't keep Olga from her favorite occupation: attending to her vast correspondence. Over her writing pad she placed a metal frame of horizontal bars enabling her to write line after even line down the page. She wrote in a slanting script in the five languages she spoke equally well: Russian, German, Italian, English, French, and Russian, to send out her own invitations.

Afternoon tea was a grand event, and the best meal of the day at the Villa Amiel. Our grandmother's Russian grandfather Herzen and her mother Olga's home had swarmed with guests. Olga, like her father, would have been ashamed had not two extra place settings been included daily for unexpected, last-minute guests. At tea, the adults talked among themselves and ignored the children. We kicked each other under the table. I took advantage of the situation by eating more than my share of quince paste squares and wolf-teeth anise seed cookies with impunity.

At the time, I had no idea what an illustrious group of people sat around the table. They'd come in response to invitations, jumping at the chance to talk to Olga, daughter of the famous Alexander Herzen. There was Baron Eugene de Vogue, author of a study of Russian novels, and grandmother's nephew Wilfried De Glehn and his wife, Jane, both artists and friends of Sargent, among others. At age five, in 1936, I posed for Jane. That portrait hangs on my wall.

On our grandmother's side, Germaine née Monod, Philippe Monod was a government minister. His brother was Jacques Lucien Monod, whose DNA studies won him a Nobel Prize. Another cousin, Jacques Louis Monod, became a well-known composer.

Trocmé cousins also came to call, as well as Grand-Papa's brother Edouard, a tuberculosis specialist. My father and his brothers were frequent visitors, with wives and children. Scientists, engineers, educators, and politicians were also drawn to the Villa Amiel because of Grand-Papa. The lawyer Alexandre Parodi broke bread with us. It was Parodi, right-hand man to De Gaulle, who, at the end of the war, influenced Von Choltitz's decision not to destroy Paris. Several guests were intimates of Charles Rist, our grandfather. Some guests belonged to both the Olga and the Charles Rist coteries: Marguerite Bonnet, founder of the first *La Maison des Etudiantes* in Paris; my father's friend Jean Milhaud, a nephew of Darius Milhaud; and a promising young novelist, friend of our uncle Noel, who recuperated from TB at my grandparents' house in the Alps. This was Albert Camus.

Often on Saturdays before the war, Grand-Papa whistled for Rousseli, and took us with the retriever for a walk to the nearby woods of Glatigny, where we roamed beneath European oaks, beeches, and leafy ashes. On Sundays, we sometimes took a favorite morning walk on the grounds of the palace, to the delightful *Hameau du Le Petit Trianon*, a protected, idyllic enclave of thatched cottages with a tiny pond, a dairy, a lighthouse, and a mill, set among lilacs, tulips, and forget-me-nots. It had been created for fourteen-year-old Marie-Antoinette, whom we believed played hide-and-seek around the corner with her ladies in period costumes.

One warm afternoon, shortly before the exodus of May 1940, Grand-Papa, frowning, strode along with us for a change in the geometric gardens of the *Palais de Versailles*. He gave talks to elevate our minds. Yet it seems to me now that as much as he wanted to teach us French history, our grandfather was in serious need of a respite from the worries of the fast-approaching catastrophe. It was years before I understood his talk, and learned that he'd just returned from Washington, where he was received by President Roosevelt before the US

entered the war. Charles Rist had gone to Washington to ask the United States and Canada to stop exporting their nickel and molybdenum to Germany, essential to the manufacture of weapons. The meeting was successful.

Rousseli yapped an accompanying chorus as Grand-Papa poked his cane straight ahead of him as in a fencing move. "Louis XIV was a wiser ruler than he's given credit for. Look at his choice of admirable ministers, devoted to king and country, indefatigable." He stopped in his tracks. "You've heard of Colbert and Vauban, haven't you?" We nodded, afraid to interrupt. "Vauban was an exceptional architect responsible for splendid fortifications on France's borders. Remember, to fortify means to make strong, or stronger." After a pause, he added, "As war minister, the king chose Louvois, who introduced the musket, uniforms, regular pay, and the use of barracks for the army. Great innovations. These ministers' work greatly increased the influence and prestige of France. Thanks to them, France was a great nation. France had power."

Grand-Papa poked the ground with the tip of his cane, before leading us back to the Villa Amiel, and repeated with conviction, "France was a great nation. France had power," like a spell that could keep us, and all the beauty around us, forever safe.