

## **Autobiography of an Artist—The Beginnings**

I do not know by what mystery or alchemy I was transformed into becoming an artist—painter—when up to the age of eleven years, I wanted above all else to be a musician. However, when I was told in no uncertain terms that I would not be allowed to be one, within a week I began to draw for the first time in my life, and to this day I have never stopped drawing and painting. What makes this event even more strange is the fact that from the very beginning I drew as an adult and not as a child. It was people that I wanted to paint, then and now. I was deeply affected not only by our own poverty but by the teeming life around me as well—people's haunting faces and their dignity never left me.

Memories, established points in my life taking me back in time and place, act as pieces in a jig-saw puzzle. When they are put together extraordinary relationships take place. Everything that previously seemed so isolated fits into a design, and it all begins to make sense.

Where are my sources as an artist? Where does the impulse and drive come from, and in which direction does it go? What are the layers of meaning in my paintings and the links that bind them together?

I was born on November 1, 1902, in the city of Astrakhan, Russia, which is at the mouth of the Volga River that flows into the Caspian Sea; it's a city of mixed origin, part European and part Asian. From the earliest times it formed an important link of commercial intercourse between the European part of Russia and Central Asia. I saw daily caravans of camels plodding through the streets, at the same time that there were street cars run by electricity. Among my companions were Russians, Calmuks, Tartars, Persians and Turks. We were inventive, entertaining ourselves in many ways. We would put up a tent in an enormous courtyard and perform our fantasies for each other. All my life I inherited a passion for music, although I never played a conventional instrument; instead I carved out of wood an imaginary one, a cross between a violin and a guitar, and played on it with a bow I made and plucked the strings. The sounds emerging from it must have been harsh on the ears, but it gave me great pleasure because I had made them. Each of us made and decorated our own costumes.

The building we lived in was a large rectangular one of European style, three stories high, covering the equivalent of a square block. Within were two enormous courtyards. In each there was a water pump from which the occupants supplied themselves with water. Around each story, exposed to the courtyards, ran a wide terrace on all four sides. Sometimes, on rainy days, it was here that we would put up our tent and sit on the floor so each of us had a chance to perform.

Our household was made up of grandmother, our parents, two younger brothers, Alex and Louis, two uncles—Paul, a jeweler and designer of elaborate settings, and Eli a musician—as well as a family who provided household help. In addition, almost from habit and stemming from needier days, we also housed a boarder.

My brothers and I were unlike each other in temperament and interests. Alex was favored by Grandmother, due to his gentleness and obedience, and Louis, in contrast was volatile. Grandmother looked like a marvelous gypsy.

In fact I suspected that she had a secret past steeped in Gypsy life... that was my fantasy. She was the center of our family, a somewhat strict and a devoutly religious person who punished me severely when I was rebellious or acted on some wild impulse not sanctioned by the family. Yet I had great admiration for her, possibly because she was such a colorful personality.

In his youth and mature years, father had become a cabinet maker, a fine craftsman, and later a dealer of antiques. He bought out estates comprising not only furniture of an earlier period but also libraries of rare books, art objects, icons and musical instruments. There were small intriguing cabinets, which had secret drawers. I would go to this fascinating store and fondle these objects, caress the surfaces of colorful woods which were so exquisite to the touch. My fantasies ran rampant.

Father was a tall, handsome man with fine, firm, bony hands. He looked particularly grand in the winter when he wore his Astrakhan