

CHAPTER ONE

(UNTITLED)

According to a collateral descendant, this is what Genesis looks like in the case of the Rothschild family:

When God made man, he named him Mayer Amschel Rothschild. This man lived his seventy years and begat five sons, who dispersed into five major European cities. The London son, Nathan, called “the golden one,” the financial victor at the Battle of Waterloo, begat Lionel, the financier of the Suez Canal and a British member of parliament; Lionel lived his seventy years and begat Nathanael, the first lord among the Rothschilds, or in any other Jewish family, and Walter, a celebrated zoologist. The French son of Mayer Amschel, James, a British banker in Paris, lived nearly seventy-six years and begat Baron Edmond, known to all Jews as the initiator of the fund for the acquisition land in Palestine, a philanthropist and distinguished collector who invested a great deal of money and zeal in everything Jewish that grew or traipsed across the land of Palestine. And the remaining sons of Mayer Amschel were in Naples, Frankfurt, and Vienna, men of high credit and high principles: industrialists, builders, bankers, philanthropists, produced sons and daughters who were all worthy, diligent, and wealthy, but whose doors could be smashed in, their houses pillaged, and their bones scattered in evil times.

For our story, Edmond is the most important of these, a declared collector of artwork, a lover of both art and peo-

ple, to whom the first colonists in Palestine, around the year 1880, turned with a request for financial assistance. He responded, and little by little he took upon himself the care of all Jewish settlements, sending money, agricultural experts, and clerks to see to it that Jews were led back into the cultivation of wheat, grapes, vegetables, poultry, and cattle. He bought them, from Arabs and Turks, some 125,000 acres of land and established settlements across Samaria and Galilee. He died in 1934 at a very advanced age. Twenty years later, his grateful compatriots transported his remains to Israel.

The noble baron undertook, therefore, to buy the Jews a home, to redeem the land of the biblical fathers, lost so long ago. This was not at all simple, because the Turkish sultan pointedly opposed Jewish settlement in Palestine. Turkish common law, however, worked to the colonists' benefit: when a man raises four walls and plants three trees, no governmental authority can budge him from that spot, even if he bought the land contrary to the law. Thus each new bed of tomatoes, every row of onions, became a bulwark of the homeland.

Serious debates and divisions raged among Jews at the turn of the century. Emancipated, well-to-do Jews from the West were of the opinion that they should seek a homeland, receiving it or purchasing it wherever it might be: in Uganda, under a British protectorate; in Argentina, following the plan of Baron de Hirsch; in the former kingdom of the Hova in Madagascar; in southwestern Australia above Esperance; in the Amazon or in Palestine, if only the Sultan would sign a charter. Jews from the East, on the other

hand, constantly victimized in pogroms, plundered and murdered, looked to Palestine, which belonged to them by historical right, and they were not prepared to compromise. Western Zionism was their tactical ally. Assimilationists on both sides, however, maintained that emigration to Palestine would fatally weaken Judaism in the diaspora and would not solve the Jewish question. Hasidim in Poland simply pounced on Zionism, and reformists did not consider themselves to be members of a separate nation but instead a religious community. Finally, spurning the lot of them, both the well-heeled Rothschild land purchasers and the Zionist conjurers, as well as bourgeois nationalists and cosmopolitan assimilationists, and the Jewish syndicalists in Russia advocated cultural autonomy within a future Pan-Russian socialist federation; they saw their new home beneath the newly minted Soviet star.

Baron de Rothschild remained loyal to his concept of history created through purchase, but all of these varied takes on the Jewish question invariably awoke in him the desire to route his tutelage and his money in different directions. And, just as is the case with every true collector and philanthropist, while paying off one obligation he was already seeking a new one; it had to be that way; and so Rothschild, buying a home for poor relatives in Palestine, was already measuring for a roof over the head also for the neighboring poor people, and then a third, and maybe a fourth, small back-up homelands for his scattered compatriots, each of them under a different sky, each of these homelands different but equally private, as far as possible from world markets and holy bonfires. For it was right that a people for

centuries dispersed, without a homeland, will ultimately receive at least two. Threatened in the one, they can seek salvation in the second; driven out of the second, they will shelter in the third. And with these thoughts in mind, the baron was already seeking out suitable locations on the map of the world: swampy deltas unattractive to others, plateaus surrounded by natural obstacles, islands with steep coastlines and underwater shoals hard by their harbors, regions of jungle in which the state moved, encroached, or pulled back in concert with the vegetation and woodcutters. With a goose-feather quill in his hand, he traced on the map, romantically but intensely focused, the oceanic, telluric, and air currents that build, destroy, and alter the world. He pondered the forces that underlie the Gulf Stream and the Labrador Current; he wondered what governs the planetary winds, the migration of eels and birds, the movement of peoples, languages and money. He dipped his feather into the ink, wiped the superfluous bead on the crystal neck of the inkstand, and lowered the tapered tip to the eastern coast of the Levantine Sea. He let, as if distracted, a second drop fall onto the wood-free paper and be absorbed by the coastal blue next to ancient Jaffa, in order to that it would, suddenly, with the gesture of the artist who after long hesitation renders the first stroke, start out after his own imagination, to the West, along the coast of North Africa where it got stuck on the Rock of Gibraltar, paused at the Rio Guadalquivir, continued its path above the Pyrenees, and, in an arc through the middle of the continent of Europe, and just at the point where it dropped down to the Black Sea, or not; to the foot of the Caucasus and then

closed the ellipse of diaspora through Asia Minor the way the earth completes its trajectory around the sun, just at that moment the Baron de Rothschild made a capricious, baronial, or simply artistic reversal and skipping over obscure, cheerless Asia, stabbed his quill beyond all orbits, right into the bottom of Eastern Siberia.

Every person who has ever scribbled on a large-scale map feels like Columbus, like an adventurer, a visionary and the spiritual proprietor of a new world, and Baron Edmond was all three. God and History had deployed his co-nationals across a broad swath encompassing the Mediterranean and Black Seas, propelled them on several occasions onto the path across the Atlantic, to the two Americas. Now the quivering drop of Edmond's ink was going to transmit Semitic seed to the very end of the world, and there erect a new nursery, but a safe one, God willing, a greenhouse out of which, strengthened by the harsh environment of the Siberian races, will arise a new and fortified Jewish generation. That place in northeastern Asia where the Baron's inky arrow stuck lay outside of the roads and currents along with Jewry had, up to that time, moved and suffered, outside of its desires and fears. The Baron, through thick lashes on his fleshy eyelids, goggled at the previously unknown, measly little rivers Bira and Bidzhan, which sprang forth from his quill and slithered towards the Amur. That spot was incalculably distant from Mt. Zion, to which his spirit returned with gratitude as if to a high-altitude resort, from those inland landscapes to which he compared the exhibits of his art collection, so far from the bluish olive trees, cedars, Mediterranean pine,

dates, oranges — the first Jewish wetland since the Great Flood. One homeland would be in the Near East and the other in the Far East; one historical, the other para-historical; if the latter should prove to be uninhabitable, it will still serve a purpose: to be let out, exchanged, sold, or used as a temporary lodging, and as an unlimited one in case of emergency.

Then the Baron noticed that another drop of his ink had spilled on the map of the world. The blur, later named *Rotšildoovo*, became the subject of scholarly curiosity; Jewish cognoscenti in the coming decades read into it important inklings. It's true, at an auction in London in 1953, at which were on offer some less well known specimens from the Baron's collection, plus a set of his personal documents, one very old gentleman, with the face of a mummy, expressed his doubts in the matter of the origin of the cobalt blue spot on the atlas, maintaining that Baron de Rothschild, despite his modern world view, did not use blue ink, then a technological novelty on the basis of aniline dye, but rather black, prepared especially for him from a mixture of ferrous compounds and coal, of which the ancient Semites availed themselves, or even, less frequently, a wondrous fluid of charred fir resin, wine yeast, and gum arabic, made from an Egyptian recipe. With such ink Moses must have written in his youth, said the friend of the house of Rothschild, and maybe he even used it to write out the concept of the Law that in the decisive hour, in the name of the Lord, he would carve into clay tablets.

The biographers of this prominent member of the Rothschild family nowhere explicitly mention his east Siberian

point and the plans potentially connected with it, but the facts do show that even during the Baron's lifetime, in the first decades of this century, steps were taken towards its realization. The truth is that in Eastern Siberia, in contrast to Palestine, the Baron's money was not at work, but rather Soviet power. The planners of revolutionary changes, during their conspiratorial apprenticeships in Europe, had to follow on the heels of the Baron's brainchild; they cross-bred it with the ideas of Leon Trotsky on this issue and soon after the proclamation of the new Union they set about exploring the possibility of Jewish colonization of the Amur basin. The report of the first expedition was, truth be told, not exactly encouraging: it acknowledged that the terrain in the area in question was not very suitable for living, and major preparatory work would be indispensable, but there was no giving up on the plan for the first Jewish convoy to head to Birobidzhan as early as 1929.

The aged Baron had no more influence on the real world, but there were Soviet and other exponents. Their call to the Jewish population of Soviet Russia didn't have the resonance they wanted, but in Poland, Romania, Great Britain, and the United States the Birobidzhan idea won over many champions. Money was collected for colonization; contingents of farm equipment from all over the world arrived in Moscow to be forwarded from there to the East. Along with the machinery, people were dispatched as well: according to the Soviet government's program, to the Autonomous Jewish Oblast of Birobidzhan should be conveyed in 1932 18,000 Jews, the following year 31,000, but in these two years only one-fifth of that number arrived,

and the ones who came largely scattered, and this was the subject of an article in a Western newspaper.

The Jewish press followed the Birobidzhan campaign from afar, relying on the accounts of the relatively few eyewitnesses. The territory envisioned for the settlement of Jews, they reported, was a hideous marshland with an unhealthy climate, short humid summers, and long rainy winters, which impelled even Ukrainian peasants, the predecessor of the Jews in this experiment, to return to the place from which they had been brought. But the authorities did not give up. In 1934 Kalinin signed a decree on the establishment of the Autonomous Jewish Territory and announced that by 1937 there would be 150,000 Jews living there. A film from that time, *In Search of Happiness*, showed the joy of the settlers, the new Birobidzhanis. The film even swayed a number of Russian Jews and impelled them, despite all sorts of bitter experiences, set out on the road to the new promised land.

Regarding their fate, however, there are no reports. Here and there one can find in the press, before the war, some references to Birobidzhan, but not to the Birobidzhanians. In the Moscow paper *Izvestiia*, in June of 1939, on the occasion of a census, it was stated that in this territory there lived more than 100,000 people, but in an article published in the West, not even 30,000 of them were Jews. Before the German invasion, Jews fled by the hundreds of thousands to the east, to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, but scarcely any moved on to Birobidzhan. They also did not want to go there after the war, although their homes in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland had been torched

and their relatives slain. Then, along with other words and people, Birobidzhan ceased to be mentioned in public. Except that in 1945 Kalinin did assert, to a New York reporter, that the Soviet government would, in accordance with the Constitution, turn the Autonomous Territory into a Jewish Republic as soon as it contained 100,000 Jews. To the journalist's question about why there were not already that many Jews there, the president of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet answered that the numbers were only a little short. The journalist, of course, knew that at that time in Birobidzhan there were, at least, ten thousand, or even twenty thousand fewer people than before the war. That many people had died off or dispersed. In the subsequent years the Autonomous Jewish Territory became a zone of ethnically neutral, standard deportations, a great concentration camp following the vision of Lavrentii Pavlovitch Beria. After Stalin's death, and Beria's liquidation, Malenkov again trotted out the idea of the judaization of Birobidzhan. True enough, the Yiddish-language paper, the *Birobidzhaner Stern*, had already been shut down, there were no data about the schools, and the national composition of the population was kept under wraps. The newspaper Pravda in Moscow, at the beginning of 1954, stated that in the imminent elections the Autonomous Jewish Territory would be selecting five deputies, and the *Birobidzhanskaya Zvezda* gleefully foretold the arrival of new Jews from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus...

(Available handbooks shed no light on the mystery. The *Encyclopedia* of the Leksikografski Zavod of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia from 1955 states only

that Birobidzhan was a city of 38,000 inhabitants along the Trans-Siberian railway, and that the population lived by processing wood and meat and the production of bricks. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* from 1955-56 estimated the Jewish population at 100,000 souls, comprising half the population of the Territory. Yiddish, at one time recognized as the official language, was pushed aside by Russian; the Yiddish-language theater had been closed. Of the sixty-four state farms, eighteen were Jewish. The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* of 1970 specified that the city of Birobidzhan, founded in 1928 on the site of the flag-stop called Tikhonkaya, the center of eponymous oblast of the Khabarovsk district of the RSFSR, that it had 56,000 residents, plants for the production of knit fabrics, clothing, and shoes, two theaters, one Russian and one Jewish, and two Territory-wide papers: the *Birobidzhaner Stern*, which came out three times a week in Yiddish and had a circulation of 12,000, and the *Birobidzhanskaya Zvezda* in Russian, five times a week, with a print run of 15,000. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from 1987, the city of Birobidzhan had 75,000 inhabitants, and the entire territory 200,000. The Region, it said, was predominantly flat, marshy, and dotted with boggy forests and pastureland that are now for the most part ideal for human use. In the north and northwest the valley is closed off by the Khingan Range and the Bureya Massif, covered with forests of spruce, pine, fir, and larch. The winters are dry and very harsh, the summers hot and humid. The population lived mostly along the Trans-Siberian Railroad line and the Amur River. They grew wheat, rye, oats, soybeans, sunflowers, and vegetables; in the

Amur they caught fish, mostly salmon. Along with building materials, shoes and textiles, they produced trailers for use with tractors.)

The connection of the Rot family in Novi Sad with Birobidzhan was of a mythical nature, as was the case of the Baron's. Such was, at any rate, also the mutual connection of the Rots and the Rothschilds, embodied in the shared first syllable of their last names. In the years between the two world wars, when they themselves had become reasonably well-to-do, the Rots began following the paths and undertakings of the Rothschilds with a familial interest and indulgence: the power of the Rothschilds somehow resided in the second syllable of their family name, in the "*schild*," the coat of arms, red of course, which had adorned the family house in Frankfurt-am-Main for four centuries now, while the folks from Novi Sad had no memories of any such real estate, which meant that the monosyllabic color in their last name was something they had to had to transmit through time only in their veins, leaving weathered red tracks on the cobblestones and dust. The lacuna in their genealogy the Rots filled with a story about the Bavarian city of Rothenburg, which, people claimed, got its name from the blood of Jews shed there at the time of the infamous Rintfleisch Massacre, and later pogroms in times of plague. One distant forefather of the Rots supposedly managed to dodge the mobs by concealing his origins and covering his tracks; he took a German last name from the city that took from him everything, and with this tailless syllable slung over his shoulder he shoved off into the wide world of peddlers. In a one-syllable world, the Rots and