
CHAPTER ONE

From Prince to Pauper: Origins and Childhood, 1914-1922

*"The child is the only part of a person that is truly eternal."*¹

Tragic and cataclysmic – such was the background to the life of the child who was to become known by the somewhat forbidding title of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh. Sourozh itself – the courtesy title of an archdiocese that in fact comprised Great Britain and Ireland – has long since vanished from the map. Some traces of the ancient city, visited, according to legend, by St Andrew the First Called at the dawn of Christianity, are still to be found amongst archaeological digs in the pleasant resort town of Sudak in Crimea, Cymeraria, the Shadowland, home through the centuries to Greeks, Jews, Tartars, Ukrainians and Russians – and for many years a “virtual” see of the Russian Orthodox Church with no resident hierarch. The title, however, remained in the gift of the Moscow Patriarchate, together with that of the equally non-existent diocese of Sergievo, and they were conferred successively on Anthony, upon his consecration and upon his being raised to the rank of Archbishop. With hindsight, these ancient Russian sees were, by virtue of their phantom nature, peculiarly fitted to convey the dignity of a homeless monk in a world the history of which he once compared to “a transparent ribbon of film” projected against the solid background of the Cross, the Resurrection and the Ascension, events that “are always current, as it were, at the very centre of history, always events not of the past but of the present day”.²

The future Metropolitan Archbishop was born into this transient and transparent world on 19 June 1914 in the home of his maternal grandfather, Nikolai Scriabin, a retired diplomat from a predominantly military family who had taken up residence in Lausanne with his Italian wife, whose Orthodox name was Ol’ga. Their daughter Ksenia’s husband, Boris Eduardovich Bloom, whom she had originally met as one of her father’s aides, a fellow Orientalist and representative of the Russian “serving nobility” of mixed Scottish, Dutch and Russian ancestry, was between postings, and

the young couple were on a visit to the Scriabins at the time of the birth. Their son was baptised Andrew, Andreiⁱ in Russian, by the resident Greek Orthodox priest.ⁱⁱ Within a couple of months, however, the outbreak of World War One precipitated Bloom's recall to Moscow, where the family took up residence with Scriabin relatives on Bol'shoi Nikolopeskovskii Pereulok in a house occupied by Nikolai's son by his first marriage, the composer Aleksandr Scriabin.ⁱⁱⁱ

The child could not have been fully aware of the depletion of his immediate family that set in almost immediately, with the death of his grandfather Nikolai in 1914. Ksenia Nikolaevna's older full brother, and later both younger brothers, were killed in action during World War One and the ensuing civil war. Her half-brother, Aleksandr, died in the spring of 1915 at the age of forty-three. Thus it came about that when Boris Eduardovich Bloom received his next posting to Persia, he took with him not only his wife and infant son, but also his widowed mother-in-law Ol'ga Il'inichna, in her early fifties at the time, who was to remain an inalienable part of Andrei's life until her death in London in 1957.

Bloom's service as representative of Imperial Russia with the title of Consul-in-Chief in Persia required frequent changes of residence. Andrei's memories of the time were correspondingly kaleidoscopic. As children do, he remembered things in close-up: a ram with "an odd habit of coming into the drawing room, and pulling all the flowers out of the vases with his teeth and then, rather than eating them, laying them on the table next to the vases, after which he lay down in the armchair";³ a favourite dog; how he proudly informed his mother that he *knew* all fruit must be washed before eating and had carefully rinsed the piece of pineapple he had been caught with in a little ditch by the roadside.⁴ Not surprisingly, he suffered from almost chronic dysentery. When he was confined to the house, his grandmother would read to him most beautifully old tales and fairy stories in French and so, he recalled, he saw no particular reason to make the effort to learn to read to himself. There was an indulgent Russian nanny to take care of him

- i. I prefer this spelling to the French "André", which entails a different pronunciation of the "a" to the Russian, which is more like that of the English Andrew.
- ii. Many years later, Metropolitan Anthony recalled, "I met the priest who had baptized me. It was a very amusing meeting, because I arrived there [in Lausanne, 1961] as a young bishop (young in consecration), met him and said, 'Father Constantine, I am so glad to see you again!' He looked at me and said, 'Forgive me, you must be mistaken, for I do not think that we have ever met.' I replied, 'Father Constantine, you should be ashamed of yourself. We have known each other for years, and you do not recognise me?' 'No, forgive me, I do not recognise you. . . .' 'But you baptised me!'" (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, "Without Notes" in *Encounter*, trans. from the Russian by Tatiana Wolff, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005. Further "Without Notes", p.170.)
- iii. The street has been renamed Ulitsa Vakhtangova.



Andrei Bloom with his mother and grandmother, June 1914

for the first three or four years,⁵ Persian servants, flowering gardens and cool, enclosed courtyards, which gave him a lasting image for the cloistered life. Beyond these, in contrast, lay the bustling activity of eastern cities with mules, camels and donkeys laden with colourful merchandise, great desolate expanses of arid plain and mountain, wild beasts and a series of domestic pets always at risk from the predators without. Ksenia Nikolaevna was a splendid horsewoman who loved hunting, an authority to whom Andrei could only look up as a very small boy just learning to master a recalcitrant donkey, all the more so as riding was an essential skill. Andrei would be seven years old before he saw a car!⁶ Boris Eduardovich was even then a quiet, retiring figure, but the child could not have been unaware of his father's status, not just within the household but amongst all they met.

The Revolution in Russia did not at first impinge on the family's way of life, though the nanny departed to her home village in the nascent Soviet Union in 1918. Andrei then came more constantly under the care of his mother and grandmother, who spoke and read to him in French and Russian, which was not, of course, the grandmother's first language anyway. He was later to recount how she had acquired it largely through reading Turgenev and spoke fluently but quaintly in the idiom of the nineteenth-century novel. Both women kindled the child's creative imagination, encouraging him to draw the stories read to him. His father introduced him to adventure stories and heroic tales read in

Russian, and imbued him with his own sense of duty and an ethic of self-sacrifice, service and vocation. “What is important,” he was to say later, when Andrei was old enough to understand, “is not whether you live or die. What is important is what you are living for and for what you are prepared to die.”⁷ For now, he simply learned from his parents’ example and imbibed from them a beautiful, spontaneous and quite ineradicable old-world courtesy, which was constantly to astonish his contemporaries and win him many friends.

For instance, in answer to a question about “righteous wrath”, he was to tell his audience how once “I had invited a clergyman of a different denomination to speak to a group of Russian pupils. He gave a talk in which he reviled our faith from end to end, and I burned with rage and indignation, but, *being the host, I could do nothing about it.*”⁸ The words in italics are quite peripheral to the story he was telling, intended to show how we should bear one another’s burdens rather than call down the vengeance of the Lord on our enemies as in the Old Testament, but they express very well the absolute requirements of his early upbringing. Other instances of Anthony’s courtesy as guest rather than host I remember from personal contact: how this least self-indulgent and most abstemious of men, who, as far as possible, always avoided invitations to dinner before or after speaking, would – in a family environment – invariably praise the hostess’s cooking and partake enthusiastically of second helpings. After his mother’s death, he would graciously accept gifts of food from parishioners who felt he did not look after himself properly, but surreptitiously pass them on to even poorer members of his parish or take non-perishables as gifts to Russia. When I was living there from 1963 to 1974, he would almost always produce a very English bar of milk chocolate as to a god-daughter still considered as part-child. One Russian visitor to his hide-out in the Cathedral in Ennismore Gardens recalled with astonishment how, when he took his leave, the elderly Archbishop insisted on helping him into his overcoat.⁹ A priest recounts how, in the 1960s, his mother, “just another unknown old woman in a headscarf”, rushed up to the black limousine in which the Bishop had just taken his seat after a long and exhausting service, to ask a blessing, and how thrilled she had been when he opened the door and jumped out of the car to bestow it.¹⁰ When another young priest showed him the way to a quasi-clandestine venue in an eighth-floor Moscow flat to meet parishioners of Father Aleksandr Men’, only to discover that the lift was out of order, the 75-year-old Metropolitan, seeing the young man quite at a loss how to deal with the situation, assured him that the climb would do him good as he was missing his morning exercise – and set off cheerfully up the stairs.¹¹ “It is really high time you *civilised* him,” he reproached me in laughing protest as my late husband Kirill – tears in his eyes after a *panikbida* for his mother – thrust money into the Metropolitan’s hands instead of slipping it, as etiquette demanded, into the collection box for the Cathedral.



Andrei as a toddler with his father, Boris Eduardovich Bloom



Andrei as a child in Persia

That the boy Andrei grew up so truly “civilised” is certainly the result of early environment, but the environment was burning up all around him like a morning mist. The Empire his father represented was crumbling and his parents’ extended family and material possessions were disappearing into the vortex of revolution. By 1920, Tsar and Empire were no longer there to represent, and turmoil and civil war threatened to destabilise life in Persia itself. The family was forced to split up, Boris Eduardovich remaining behind to oversee the evacuation of the consulate before leaving for Europe, and the women and Andrei going on ahead by carriage and on horseback across the mountains in a

bid to reach the Blooms’ ancestral Scotland, initially travelling under the protection of “honest” bandits, who, Andrei recalled not without humour, his parents deemed more reliable than the Persian army of the time.

There could be no question of going back to Russia – all family possessions there had been confiscated and Bloom would not have considered putting his professional skills at the service of the Bolshevik government, which did not, at the time, enjoy much in the way of diplomatic recognition. His family owned only what they could take with them.

Having jolted their way across the mountains of north Persia and Kurdistan, grandmother, mother and the six-year-old Andrei changed onto barges to continue their journey down the Tigris and Euphrates. Andrei was struck by the wonder of their confluence but disillusioned by a glimpse of the scruffy tree in a parched enclosure said to be the site of the Garden of Eden:

It is a wonderful sight: the Euphrates is wide and blue and the Tigris is fast-flowing and its water is red, and it flows into the Euphrates and for several hundred metres it is possible to see the red water of the Tigris in the midst of the blue water of the Euphrates. In the forest there is a large meadow and in the middle of it, surrounded by a fence, is a little dried up tree. It was covered all over with little bits of rag. . . .¹²

In later life, he always insisted he had absolutely no desire to go on pilgrimage to experience the Holy Land at first hand.

From Basra the only safe route by sea was towards India, where they were delayed for a further month in a stifling but gloriously colourful Bombay before obtaining a passage to Southampton on a decrepit ship. The little boy hoped ardently for shipwreck on a desert island, but the vessel made it as far as Gibraltar, where the passengers, for their own safety, were put ashore with their baggage. One trunk, however, went on without them to Southampton, the one containing most of their favourite things, and was not retrieved until fourteen years later (shortly followed, in 1935, by a residue of personal effects from the Scriabin home in Lausanne).

This was a huge event, because this was one of those chests, into which everything which one *could* not leave was thrown at the last minute. First we had reasonably packed all that was *necessary*, and left that which we could not *possibly* take, and at the last minute – for the heart is not made of stone – into this chest were, of course, put all the most precious things, which I as a boy was a thousand times more interested in than in warm underwear or sensible shoes. . . .¹³