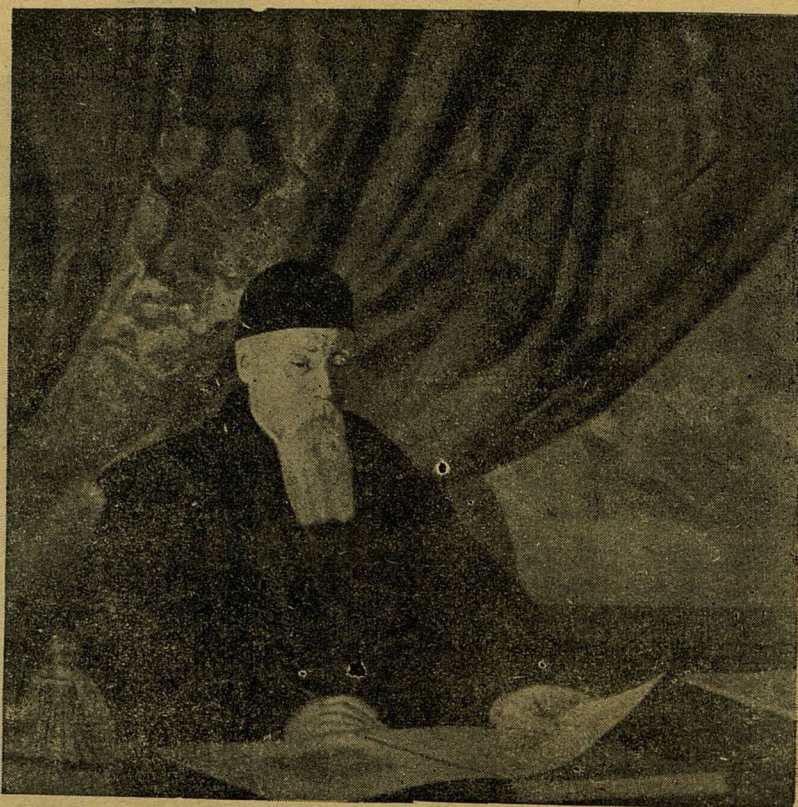


Svetoslav Roerich held the fateful telegram in his hands, looked out of the window on Bombay's gushing traffic and said: "This is terrible, you know. My father was as legendary as the snow-bound Himalayan Kulu Valley in which he had locked himself for the past five years. Even when the wind howled and sent shivers of ice down your spine he sat wielding his brush or coining those poetic Russian gems."

I met Svetoslav in his suite in the palatial Taj Mahal Hotel only three hours after news of Nicholas Roerich's sudden death in his Himalayan mountain retreat reached him. Leaving his father who was in the midst of painting his last picture, "The Master's Command" he never completed, Roerich Jr. came down to Bombay for a long-



NICHOLAS ROERICH

Painter who probed Nature and waged unceasing battle for his "panhuman idea" of protecting world culture.

desired whiff of modernism. His wife Devika Rani, the celebrated film actress and one time owner of the Bombay Talkies, accompanied him. In a lovely, silver-brocaded green saree she looked lithe and delicate.

She and her husband, cast down by the heaviness of their grief, found time to tell me something of the great painter's achievement, the ideals he pursued and the valuable ground he covered.

Coming to India in 1923 Nicholas Roerich surveyed the country for an ideal spot where he could settle down and carry on his mission of infusing beauty into the world. He selected the magnificent Kulu Valley in the Himalayas, overlooking the mystic land of

Tibet with its dust-covered, timeless monasteries. Except for brief trips to Europe and America and once to China and Central Asia, he painted and painted until he had 6,000 pictures to his credit, which found their way to art museums from Paris to New York and won tributes of admiration from Roose-

By:

K. R. SUNDAR RAJAN

velt to Stalin. Even the Dalai Lama, head of Tibet's religious hierarchy and the world's most aloof personality, wrote him a letter inviting him to Lhasa. But Roerich then was giving the finishing touches to his masterpiece, "Remember," standing before which Jacob Epstein later exclaimed:

"This is marvellous, it is like a vision."

Besides his renowned paintings, which brought him a fortune of two million dollars, the Professor also wrote twentyseven volumes on varied subjects and articles and essays too numerous to mention. Pandit Nehru, our Prime Minister, opened in December an exhibition of Roerich pieces in Delhi and Svetoslav, himself an adept artist, said he hoped to house them in an art museum in Kulu Valley "which might be the Mecca of the world's beauty-seekers."

The "mystic dreamer, master-painter and world citizen" who was once described by the great Russian novelist Maxim Gorky as "one of the greatest intuitive minds of the age" never once left the gorgeous valley during the past five years. Some months back Roerich wanted to come down to the plains for medical treatment but the colossal September floods isolated his estate from the rest of the world. It was

during this period, enough to make any man sullen, that the painter exerted himself to complete "The Master's Command". "But even Nicholas Roerich could not compete with the gathering shadows of death," Devika Rani told me.

Little has been written of how Roerich developed his great fascination for India and her culture, the endless theme of his paintings, his poetry, his writings and the soil which whetted his appetite for scientific exploration and investigation. His ties with India began when he was a mere child and the name of India seeped down into his imagination ever since he came to know that his own house bore the title "Ishwara". An uncle of the Roerich family had been to India in the middle of the 19th century and after his return he posed at court balls in flowing Rajput garments. He left behind him a wealth of tales about this country, dramatised by the uncle's romantic touch, and these were communicated to young Roerich who was only too eager, even in that small age, to devour anything that savoured of the beautiful in Man. When he began wielding his brush with such great breadth and vision he dedicated many of his paintings to India. Already before his trip to India some of his pieces associated with this country had attracted world-wide attention, for instance the pictures: "Deva Sari", "Dreams of India", and "Boundaries of the Kingdom." Since coming to India in 1923 the painter has dedicated many of his works to the majesty of the Himalayas, the ancient sages of India and her fabled wisdom. But so much has been written and said about this aspect of Roerich that I naturally



Devika Rani—from the Celluloid to the canvas and Malad to Kulu Valley

asked Svetoslav Roerich, his son, for information on other points of his father's life. "Don't forget," he told me, "that my father was not merely a painter. A very great portion of his life's work lies on the scientific canvas; equally great was his contribution to the movement he sponsored for the protection of world culture from the ravages of war and conquest."

Svetoslav was referring to the "Roerich Pact For the Preservation of Cultural Monuments," signed by 21 nations of the Americas at an unique Washington Ceremony in Easter Week 1935. The Pact made Roerich famous as a crusader but the work he inaugurated is still

incomplete. It is to further this task that his son and daughter-in-law have planned to tour the United States this year. "The thunder of a third world war again demands that active attention should be paid to the defence of our common, cultural treasures," Roerich wrote shortly before his death. India, under the leadership of Pandit Nehru, has promised to append her signature to this historic anchor-sheet on which may well rest the preservation or the destruction of the many cultural treasures to which mankind has always turned for inspiration.

Calling it "this panhuman idea", Roerich got 27 countries to sign

this Pact which stipulated that historic monuments, museums, scientific, artistic, educational and cultural institutions should be considered as "neutral" and as such respected and protected by the belligerents. In order to identify these cultural treasures, he created a distinctive flag, the Banner of Peace, portraying a red circle on a white background with a triple red sphere inside. No less a person than the late President Roosevelt commended the Treaty as "possessing a spiritual significance far deeper than the text of the instrument itself." The Peace Banner was endorsed by statesmen, leaders of religion and representatives of fine arts and science, among whom Svetoslav recalled the names of President Masaryk, Pope Pius XI, Henry Wallace, Leopold st o k o w s k i, Professor Einstein and the Academie Francaise. But with the would-be destroyers of art like Hitler and Mussolini spurning the Pact, it was powerless to prevent the desecration of cultural treasures that swept Europe from September 3, 1939. The emergence of the United Nations Organisation as a world force strengthened Roerich's belief that his purpose could yet be fulfilled.

"What an epoch-making day might be before us when over all countries, all centres of spirit, beauty and knowledge, could be unfurled the one Banner of Culture. This sign would call everyone to revere the treasures of human genius, to respect culture and to have a new valuation of labour as the only measure of true values," Nicholas Roerich wrote on Sep. 5, 1939, only forty eight hours after the outbreak of the war whose inexorable course saw such a ruthless dissolution of European centres of



A scene from the balcony of Roerich Bangalow

culture, the protection of which was the guiding passion of the great painter's life. He detested all "destructions and negations." Positive creativeness was the fundamental quality of the human spirit according to him. Roerich knew that there were sceptics who would smile at him and lampoon him for pursuing impossible ideals. To them he addressed these admonishing words: "We must not fear enthusiasm.

Only the ignorant and the spiritually impotent would scoff at this noble feeling...Nothing can impede us from dedicating ourselves to the service of Culture."

Meeting Rabindranath Tagore in Kensington (London) in the early twenties, Roerich developed a friendship that proved enduring for nearly 25 years. In his essay "Tagore and Tolstoy," Roerich put his memories of his first meeting

with Tagore in beautiful words. In the same article the painter recalled Mme. Roerich's first ties with India sprang from an appreciation of Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's works and philosophy. He was so often reminded of Tagore's "Gitanjali":

"Messenger, My Messenger;
Thou standest and smilest
And thou dost not know what
thou hast brought
Thou has brought me the gift
of healing. Each tear of mine
Shall heal the wounds of the
world....."

Every critic of Roerich has admitted that his art had an individuality of its own and Tagore said of it that "it is jealous of its independence because it is great." Both in colour and form, in expression and suggestion, in design and purpose, Roerich's art spelt out something extraordinarily different from the ordinary conceptions maintained by artists. "Your paintings profoundly moved me," Rabin-dranath Tagore wrote to him. "They made me realise one thing which is obvious and yet which one needs to discover for oneself over and over again; it is that truth is infinite—your pictures are distinct and yet are not definable in words."

Truth is infinite! And Roerich pursued its many-pronged paths. Known as a painter the world over, he was no less a great scientist, explorer, botanist, ethnographer, historiographer of religion, all rolled into one. His son explained that while studying in the Kulu Valley Professor Roerich's ideal was to establish a scientific centre for the study of the western Himalayas in particular and the greater Himalayas in general later on. Under his guidance a

complete botanical survey was prepared. The work of collection was given to Dr. Koeltz of Michigan and was systematized by Dr. Merrill of the New York Botanical Gardens. A zoological and ornithological survey was also prepared by Dr. Koeltz, while Dr. Sultan of the Lenin Institute of Botanical Research helped in the collection of Tibetan plants. The vast collections have now been divided between United States, France and England for comparative studies and duplicates are now kept in the Kulu Valley house of Roerich. In 1935 Roerich led an expedition to Inner Mongolia and Central Asia where he busied himself with some notable excavations and gathered valuable historical data dating back to the earliest periods.

These manifold incursions into the bowl of the dead past helped Roerich to place the evolution of world culture in proper perspective, besides, of course, whetting his profound appetite for scientific diver-

sions. No one knew better than he that a true synthesis of culture was not possible without fusing the material and the spiritual into a shapely mould. He always cried out for the understanding of culture and taking it to the common man. To him culture was not hide-bound but a living, throbbing, dynamic thing.

Devika Rani, who will go with her husband Svetoslav to the United States this year, is hopeful that the message of Roerich can still powerfully permeate the world and "salvage civilisation from the wreckage." To them, as it was to Nicholas Roerich, the Banner of Peace is the one sure embankment to halt the surging tides of cultural annihilation. They know their task is great and they have to run the race with the speeding shadows of atomic war. But there was confidence, unmistakable optimism, in their words.

Roerich is dead but has left behind idealists who are determined to unfurl his Banner of Peace!

For

**The Defence of your Nation
be Strong and Healthy.**

**Let us help you with healthy wholesome
Punjabi & Indian Dishes at
Moderate Rates.**

**SHER-E-PUNJAB
KHALSA HOTEL**

**Frere Road, Fort,
BOMBAY.**

Centrally Situated near G. P. O.,
Victoria Terminus & other offices.

A TRIAL VISIT SOLICITED