chapter one

The Encounters of the Formative Years, 1907–1932

Eugene Sigel and a Strasbourg Childhood

It was in the heart of Alsace, in Schiltigheim, that Elisabeth was born on July 21, 1907. This village bordering on Strasbourg and affectionately called Schilick by its inhabitants, still conserves its rural charms, with its half-timbered peasant houses, its farms flanked by stables and barns. With the arrival of industrialization, the village little by little encroached on the surrounding countryside. There, in a new house on the outskirts, Charles Sigel and his second wife, Emma Altschul, set themselves up.

Elisabeth Charlotte Sigel was the eagerly awaited child of this couple who had married the previous year in Dresden. For the new household, her birth represented, for both Charles and Emma, the fulfillment of a dream. The first wife of Charles had sunk into dementia,
a profound emotional pathology most likely genetic, while Emma, the youngest child of a large family, did not have the dowry that would enable her to marry within her circle.

Nothing seemed to predestine Charles, the Lutheran, and Emma, the Austrian Jew, to find one another. Emma Altschul, whose name means “old synagogue” in Yiddish and perhaps indicates that there were rabbis among her ancestors, saw her dowry and hopes for marriage dwindle as her five older sisters found themselves husbands. Rather than wait in vain for a hypothetical suitor, Emma, to the surprise of those around her, decided to earn her own living. She learned bookkeeping and honed her foreign-language skills in view of doing office work. It is with this in mind that she visited one of her sisters who lived in Strasbourg and whose husband was a businessman. Emma did find a job and met Charles Sigel, an Alsatian who was working in the offices of the Fischer brewery.

Elisabeth described her father thus: “He was typical of the people who lived close to the border, bilingual, a man of a double culture like so many Alsatians, with a heart sometimes divided between a twofold allegiance, but solidly rooted in the land and the region and at the same time open to the fullness of European culture.” Charles belonged to the Strasbourg bourgeoisie. His marriage to Emma was not to the liking of the Sigel family. In spite of the cosmopolitan character of the city, open to both France and Germany and, like Charles, shaped by both cultures, espousing an Austro-Hungarian Jewess was not part of the customs of the Alsatian bourgeoisie of those times.

The Sigel family had deep roots in Strasbourg and were descended from modest artisans who had enriched themselves in the nineteenth century through their painting and glazing business. Their rise to the middle class enabled them to acquire several houses in the old city, not far from the imposing cathedral, and also to construct a church there. Emma Altschul was therefore received very coldly by her in-laws. Fortunately, the untypical marriage of Charles had had a precedent, namely, that of his father, Eugene, to a German, Catherine.

Elisabeth was well acquainted with the history of her grandfather, a familiar figure of whom she had legendary memories. The third of
the Sigel sons, born in Strasbourg in 1836, Eugene wanted to become a pastor and thus moved toward the study of theology, to the great satisfaction of his parents. Eugene’s religious education took place in the context of the Protestant liberalism of the end of the nineteenth century, marked by the development of scientific exegesis and, more specially, by the works of Ernest Renan. Under his influence as well as that of the German David Friedrich Strauss, Eugene questioned the historical certainty of the life of Christ. This rational questioning of the Gospel caused him to lose his faith. He then decided, in 1860, to end his theological studies. His father, disappointed by this choice, refused to pay for a substitute when the time for his military service came up, which he had done for Eugene’s two older brothers.

When his number was drawn for mobilization, Eugene began a military career. He participated in the Mexican campaign under the orders of General Achille Bazaine, who had begun the fight against the Mexican government of Benito Juárez in 1861. In 1866, Napoleon III ordered the withdrawal of the French troops and Eugene returned to Europe with the rank of lieutenant. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, Eugene again found himself serving under General Bazaine, who decided to shelter his army at Metz. Put under siege by the Prussians, the city surrendered on October 27, 1870, and Lieutenant Sigel was taken prisoner. He was imprisoned at Worms, in the Rhineland.

The conditions of detention were flexible, and the prisoner of war, who was well treated, was soon released after giving his word not to take up arms. He was now free to move around as he pleased in the German Empire. He became friendly with the Stressingers, a family of the Rhineland bourgeoisie, and fell in love with their daughter Catherine. In the middle of the war, Elisabeth’s grandfather married this German woman who was fifteen years younger than he. The couple settled for a time at Worms, where their son Charles was born in 1873. The bankruptcy of Catherine’s father forced Eugene and his family to return to Strasbourg, which was then under the German flag. Since its annexation in 1871 by the German Empire, the city had become the capital of Alsace-Lorraine.

After a chilly reception, the Sigels little by little accepted their German daughter-in-law. “Käthchen, a very sweet blonde, adapted to and
gained the affection of her new Alsatian family and became Francophile in the process,” Elisabeth wrote in her autobiographical notes. Eugene found work at the Journal d’Alsace-Lorraine, the only French newspaper authorized by the Germans at that time. During the period of German annexation, he became one of the rare Francophone Alsatian journalists. This native son, with deep ancestral roots in Strasbourg, remained very attached to France as did the rest of his family. When he gave bread crumbs to the pigeons in Kléber Park, he even spoke to them in French.

Thus, when Charles introduced his new wife, Emma, to his parents, Eugene and Catherine received her with understanding because they too had suffered from the same family ostracism to which this young couple had been exposed.

Elisabeth came into the world during the first hours of a beautiful Sunday morning after her mother’s difficult labor. Her family gave her the German name of Liselotte, and she would continue to go by that name for the rest of her life. At the age of one she was baptized in the Lutheran Church by a pastor who was a good friend of Charles and who also became her godfather. The little girl, whose cosmopolitan ancestry mirrored that of the city of her birth, an important center of the Reformation marked by a multitude of diverse influences, spoke her first words in German.

Young Elisabeth’s infancy was very sheltered. For the well-to-do of the bourgeoisie of which she was a part, the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by the Second Reich, from 1871 to 1918, was synonymous with prosperity. Strasbourg, in fact, experienced an important industrial surge because of its links with the extremely rich Ruhr region. Thanks to his job with Fischer, Charles was well off, and this assured the child of a life of ease. The Alsatian bourgeoisie did not consider the German presence an occupation by foreigners since it had always made it a point of honor to affirm itself on the fringe of French identity. The separation of Church and State proclaimed by the French Republic in 1905 turned the sympathies of the Alsatians, often monarchists, toward Germany. These years of annexation were thus a period of tranquility for the Sigels.
Everything was peaceful at Schillick as Elisabeth grew up. From an early age, the little girl became aware that she belonged to a dissident and somewhat eccentric branch of the Sigel family. Even though she was only three years old when her grandfather Eugene died, she knew his history well thanks to the many stories told about him. And she felt a special affinity with this ancestor whose scrambled destiny prefigured her own.

Elisabeth was soon able to set out to explore the empty lots and fallow gardens of the neighborhood in the company of her two friends, Herta and Jeanne:

One [was] German, the other Alsatian. But we only became aware of this difference later on. They were our neighbors. One was the daughter of a notary, the other of a family doctor. We played together from morning till night. When the weather was nice, we played in the doctor’s garden, which had a swing, but mostly in the “wild animal ditch,” the low garden behind the notary’s villa; when the weather was bad, we played in the big house with its nooks and crannies, its offices that we were not allowed to enter, its attic filled with old toys and mysteries.²

Elisabeth also remembered participating in the demanding farm work that mobilized the whole village according to the rhythms of the seasons: “As a child, I also helped at the bringing in of the hay and at the harvests. We would come home in big, sturdy wagons pulled with great solemnity by Brabançon horses, in the midst of sweet-smelling hay or sheaves of wheat. But I was only a guest at these important moments of rural life.”³ Among her first memories was the solemn sound of the great bell of Strasbourg’s cathedral, which lulled her to sleep when she visited her paternal grandparents. It was a peaceful and reassuring sound, like a song from an idyllic childhood.

The Jewish Side of the Family and Summers in Bohemia

Elisabeth had a more sustained relationship with her mother’s family than with her father’s Francophone side, who always kept their
distance from Emma. Elisabeth’s mother, who spoke Alsatian badly and knew little French, felt like a stranger in Alsace, a sentiment that would become stronger when the region was returned to France after the World War, with the ensuing anti-German phobia. Emma kept very much in touch with her family, especially through her sister Olga, who lived in Strasbourg and whose daughter Gertrude was one of Elisabeth’s playmates: “My cousin Trudel (the Alsatian diminutive for Gertrude) was ten years older than I and like a big sister. We amused ourselves by dressing up like dolls in Aunt Olga’s dressmaking shop, whose clients included the actresses and singers of the Strasbourg Grand Theater.”

Uncles, aunts, and cousins from Austria-Hungary had left their native village of Tcheska-Leipa in Bohemia to settle in Prague, Dresden, or Trieste. They often visited the Alsatian capital where they spent Christmas and Easter—pretexts for big family reunions—with the Sigels. Emma returned regularly to her childhood village in Bohemia at the foot of the Sudeten mountains where her father, Nathan Altschul, ran an upholstery business and where her mother, Sophie, still lived. It was there, in the house of her grandmother Sophie, that Liselotte spent most of her summers. The Altschul family was on the margins of the traditional bourgeoisie. They were not so rich, but they were more intellectual and owned a great deal of property. In her autobiographical fragments, Elisabeth gives a nostalgic description of these long-ago visits:

When I was small we would go to spend our vacations in Bohemia every other year. The journey was marvelous. We would leave in the evening. Mother would wrap me up in a plaid lap robe that cushioned the hard seat of the third-class coach, and I would fall asleep right away, lulled by the rhythmic movement of the train. When I woke up, we would have already gone very far, and everything seemed new and extraordinary to me. Sometimes we had some rather odd traveling companions, such as a woman who, to my amazement, opened a big black bag and took out a marmoset monkey who knew how to crack nuts. During the trip, we would usually stop at Dresden or Nuremberg, depending on the itinerary we had mapped out; and I recall, as if in a dream, glimpses of the old
houses and the flower-filled ramparts of Nuremberg in that summer of 1913, which was the last summer of peace. We finally arrived at Prague where our cousins fell all over us, lifting me up, hugging me. Papa was speaking French. Nobody understood much of what he said, but that didn’t matter. Like a magic charm, the language of the country synonymous with freedom provoked reactions of attentiveness and sympathy. Mama and her sisters spoke Czech—an impossible language, full of consonants—among themselves. But everyone knew German.

The little girl from Strasbourg, the youngest of all the cousins and the only Christian, was the idol of the Altschul family and especially of her grandmother Sophie. In spite of her Lutheran baptism, the child could be considered Jewish since this identity is inherited through the mother. Elisabeth had wonderful memories of the affectionate atmosphere that marked these vacations in Bohemia. She felt that she was deeply loved and badly spoiled.

This childhood, so surrounded with affection, was not very marked by religious practices. Elisabeth went to church just once a year, on Good Friday, in the company of her father, who went as well to fulfill his “Easter duty.” The Alsatian branch of the family had a special sentimental attachment to the new church building, which had been constructed, in part, by Elisabeth’s great-grandparents.

Emma, her mother, was a believer but she did not attend the Alsatian synagogues, which were all Francophone. She was not very attached to the practices of her religion since she had married a Christian and had had her child baptized. All the same, she remained faithful to one Jewish Holy Day: once a year, on the Day of Atonement, she withdrew to her room to read the traditional prayers. Also, on the evening of the Sabbath, she went to sleep turned eastward toward the Temple of Jerusalem. Emma was not very ostentatious about her religious practices, and it was only later that Elisabeth even would realize that her mother was Jewish. If Emma never talked to her daughter about religion, however, she did teach her to pray every evening. Thus it was that, in spite of the absence of a religious setting, Elisabeth acquired at an early age the habit of turning to God each day.
This sensitivity to the divine was reinforced by the catechetical instruction that Elisabeth was given when she started going to school. When she was six years old, she began to attend a Protestant private boarding school as a nonresident student. The school was known for the quality of its education, especially in religious matters. From the start, Elisabeth was fascinated by the biblical heroes whose stories intrigued her. In the context of an open-minded family, where free thinking took the place of systematic religious education, she seized the initiative by exploring the religious topics that held a special attraction for her.

Her Schoolmates and the Liberation of Strasbourg

The peaceful harmony of Elisabeth’s infancy and early childhood was shattered by the cannons of the World War. She had no way of knowing the scope of the drama that was taking place around her. Coming and going to school, she found the spectacle of the military drills at the army barracks amusing. But she was aware of the anguish in this atmosphere of combat around her and wrote in her autobiographical notes that the war was “the first shadow that fell across this happy childhood.” On November 22, 1918, French troops entered Strasbourg, liberating a city with a mixed population and a complex national identity. The Alsatian Protestant bourgeoisie tended to be pro-French, while the common people and the villagers remained attached to their Alsatian heritage. Elisabeth saw her grandmother Catherine, a German, rejoice at the entry of the French troops among whom her husband Eugene had served.

The arrival of the French soldiers in the Alsatian capital was a traumatic experience for Elisabeth. The Germans who had settled in Strasbourg during the annexation period become the target of general contempt and were obliged to leave the city. At the age of eleven, Elisabeth personally experienced this eruption of nationalism and prejudice: the two charming German women who taught at her boarding school suddenly became the Boches and had to endure the sarcasm of those who previously had found them so kind.

The father of her best friend, Herta, had to abandon his grand villa in Schilick. Unable to face ruin, he committed suicide. Elisabeth
and Herta, profoundly shocked by this tragedy, did not know where to turn for support and consolation. In the end they finally went to church, there to seek refuge in God. This brutal catastrophe was followed by the forced departure to Germany of other classmates. The cruelty that marked this change in national identity left its impression on young Elisabeth. She would keep a deep-rooted hatred for any form of nationalism whose absurdity she had so violently experienced. And the direct confrontation with death, in the suicide of Herta’s father, opened within her an abyss of new questions.

The year 1918 was also another turning point in Elisabeth’s life, and this too was linked with the return of Alsace to France. She left the little private Protestant boarding school and entered the fifth-year class at the French-culture secondary school in conformity with her new nationality. The Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919, integrated her totally into the French State.

Since Elisabeth had received some of her primary-school education in French, she was immediately placed in a Francophone class. The majority of her classmates were French young people from the interior of the country who had come to settle in Alsace at the end of the war. This meant a strenuous and difficult year for the German-speaking child. In this new setting, however, Elisabeth showed herself to be an assiduous student and quickly caught up with the others. By the end of the year she had completely mastered French. Her schoolwork, which had been judged unsatisfactory at the beginning, received high praise.

The French secondary school offered a multidisciplined education in an atmosphere of dialogue and freedom that opened new horizons for her and played a decisive role in her passion for her studies. It was also a time of deep friendships, which would greatly influence her. Elisabeth became especially close friends with Madeleine Charlety, the daughter of the dean of the University of Strasbourg.

Elisabeth now felt completely assimilated to French culture and was eager to discover its new riches, which aroused her curiosity. German would remain the language spoken within the family. This preference saddened Elisabeth’s mother. Emma never took sides in the Franco-German conflicts and remained nostalgic for the Austria of
her youth, even though the Treaty of Versailles gave her Czechoslovakian citizenship. Elisabeth’s preference for French, coupled with her introverted personality, created a certain distance between mother and daughter.

After the return of Alsace to France, there was still a European climate in the Sigel household: one needed only to cross the Rhine to be in Germany, where Elisabeth felt as much at home as on the French side of the river. From this childhood, influenced by several converging cultures and peoples, she would retain a spirit of openness that enabled her to rise above any sentiment of nationalism, even though she chose French as her first language.

**Suzanne de Dietrich and the Fédé**

For Elisabeth, the transition from childhood to adolescence was marked by a growing spiritual search that led her to ask herself questions about her faith in God: “I was baptized in the Lutheran Church to which my father belonged. But I received hardly any religious education from my family. Like many children and adolescents who are spiritually left on their own, I asked myself a lot of metaphysical questions.”4 Freely, without any pressure from her family, she chose to make her profession of faith as a Lutheran, “a public act in which the young Protestant confirms his personal adherence to the faith confessed, on his behalf, by the godparents at the moment of his baptism and, at that time, unconsciously received by the infant.”5 By this profession, Elisabeth committed herself to an active life of faith.

“This confirmation was a moment of great fervor,” she wrote in her autobiographical notes. The catechism classes given by the pastor in preparation for the event gave her the chance to freely ask the essential questions that haunted her. But a shadow fell over the joy of this new path on which she had set out. Elisabeth had the painful feeling that her faith commitment was not understood by her mother and only emphasized the distance between them—a process initiated by their linguistic differences. “After a turbulent adolescence, I experienced a personal conversion to Christ. This was a source of suffering for my mother, who saw it as the intrusion of an outside element be-
tween the two of us. But she said nothing.”6 Elisabeth made her solemn profession of faith on April 9, 1922, the year she completed secondary school. She received her certificate on July 10, just before she turned fifteen. Influenced by a schoolmate, she then joined the Strasbourg “Fédé,” a branch of the World Federation of Christian Student Associations. To understand the decisive role that this movement would have in Elisabeth’s life, one must outline its origins.

The World Federation was founded in 1895: a small group of Protestants engaged in missionary activity—among them John R. Mott, an American active in evangelization—decided to bring together the different youth movements to form a universal union of students.7 At the time when Elisabeth joined the Fédé, the movement was enjoying a rapid expansion. It was already marked by an ecumenical and international openness inspired by its motto: “That all may be one, so that the world may believe.” “The Fédé played an important role in the ecumenical movement that emerged after the World War . . . We wanted to dedicate ourselves to the service of Christ and to the task of restoring unity among Christians who had become separated in the course of history.”8

This twofold objective—Christian unity, and renewal of the Gospel message so that it might become meaningful—had a significant influence on the orientation of Elisabeth’s faith. The cell-group to which she belonged, and which met regularly, included several Roman Catholics among its members. Their activities were centered on Bible studies and reflection on contemporary social problems.

Participation in the Fédé would prove to be very important for this young adolescent preoccupied with existential questions. Elisabeth was most appreciative of the atmosphere of deep fraternity that characterized the circles of Bible studies and the meetings of the group. There she became aware of the reality of the presence of Christ in her life: “It is in this circle that I had the spiritual experiences that determined the direction my life would take: up to this time I considered the Gospel as, essentially, a code, or rather a moral atmosphere. For the first time I felt personally loved by God, called by Christ, as was the young rich man, to follow Him without worrying about the rest.”9

During the different congresses of the World Federation, Elisabeth met a number of Protestants who would have a great influence...
on her. Foremost among them was Suzanne de Dietrich, the secretary of the French branch of the World Federation.

A militant Protestant, a theologian, and a descendant of the Alsatian aristocracy, Suzanne de Dietrich put her intelligence and faith at the service of the discussion groups she led. She was a woman of character, trained as an electrical engineer, and she became like an older sister to Elisabeth. The two women would meet again later in other ecumenical gatherings. Suzanne de Dietrich was also a mystic who radiated a spiritual strength acquired through a real relationship with God. During one of the summer camps sponsored by the Fédé, she wrote this phrase in Elisabeth’s notebook: “My soul rests in God . . . in silence.”

Elisabeth also met Pastor Marc Boegner. She already knew his brother, who was the pastor of the Reformed parish she attended in Strasbourg. Marc Boegner, a pioneer of ecumenism, would play a decisive role in the creation of the World Council of Churches while, at the same time, working actively in the social center of the CIMADE, or Comité Inter-Mouvements pour l’Accueil des Évacués [Inter-Movement Committee of Aid to Refugees], an ecumenical Protestant organization. Later on, she would be active in both these organizations. Moreover, she ran across Pastor Pierre Maury, who was at that time the secretary general of the World Federation. Maury would have a great influence on a whole generation of young pastors and laypeople in France by introducing them to the thought of Karl Barth.

The Fédé was, in addition, a place where Elisabeth served a literary and aesthetic apprenticeship. In the France of the years of madness, when the traumas of war led certain intellectuals and writers to seek spiritual answers, Liselotte discovered Paul Claudel through his play Partage de Midi. She was enthusiastic about the works of Charles Péguy, especially Le Porche du Mystère de la deuxième vertu, which Pastor Westphal would read aloud during the emotion-filled evening meetings of the Fédé.

These years full of meetings and apprenticeships forged Elisabeth’s spirit. She acquired a rigorous knowledge of Holy Scripture as well as a freedom of conscience and of choice, all part of the Protestant legacy. The Fédé stimulated her questioning of the meaning of existence, gave her the opportunity to experience a faith both real and
lived out, and made her responsive to ecumenical dialogue. “The Féde has been a spiritual family, a place where I blossomed,” she would later say. Henceforth, she was driven by the desire to have a more profound relationship with the Living God. This desire would have a significant affect on all her future decisions.

Russian Scholarship Students at the University of Strasbourg and the Encounter with the Eastern Church

Studies in Philosophy

In July 1925, Elisabeth was awarded her high-school diploma *cum laude* in liberal arts, and this marked the end of her courses at the French secondary school in Strasbourg. Since she was deeply interested in metaphysical questions, she quite naturally turned to philosophical studies. In September 1925 she entered the School of Fine Arts of the University of Strasbourg. One of her fellow students was Emmanuel Levinas, who was a year older than she. Elisabeth remembered this “little Lithuanian Jew” with affection, and they would maintain a correspondence until his death in 1995. Several years later, after he had left Strasbourg to continue his studies in Paris, Levinas took Liselotte into his confidence in a very personal way: “Even with the faithful friendship of the Blanchot brothers and the relationships that one has at the Sorbonne, I sometimes feel very much alone. It’s not a physical solitude nor, still less, an intellectual solitude—it’s quite simply that, like a little child, I miss my mother. This sentiment of the depth and the supreme value of the concrete, of the material and physical and palpably concrete, seems to me, more and more, to be the truth itself.”

At the University of Strasbourg, Levinas, Elisabeth, and a third student made up a friendly trio inspired by the same thirst for reflection. The small size of their class—some thirty students—aided their work. The philosophical approaches were varied: some of the professors were Thomists, others disciples of Emile Durkheim. With the discovery of Henri Bergson, Elisabeth felt that she could get out of the rut of scientism, which was very popular at that time. Together with...
Levinas, she also became interested in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, a professor at Fribourg-en-Brisgau, on the other side of the Rhine.

But Elisabeth was not entirely satisfied with her philosophical studies. Her restless and constantly inquiring faith led her toward other fields: “The quest for a human wisdom left me unsatisfied, even though it provided me with great intellectual joys. I soon had the inner conviction that God was calling me to something else. When I was nineteen, I told my parents that I wanted to study theology. This upset my mother very much. But they gave me permission to go ahead on the condition that I first get my degree in philosophy.”11 Even though theological studies were, at that time, reserved for men, the innovative spirit that animated the Protestant Faculty of Theology at Strasbourg would enable Elisabeth to realize her desire when classes began in September 1927.

Before that, however, a tragic event threw a shadow over her life: Emma, her mother, had died on January 30, 1927, after running a high fever. This sudden death plunged the young woman into a period of depression and distress, intensified by the feeling that she had not sufficiently manifested her love for her mother. She mentioned this in her autobiographical fragments:

I did not know my mother well—I mean, I didn’t make the effort I needed to make to understand her as one understands a friend. When she died, at the age of forty-nine, I was only nineteen and just emerging from a prolonged adolescence, which was tormented and studious and which had left me wrapped up in myself. Mama certainly suffered from a certain coldness on my part, but beneath it there was a great deal of affection. I was extremely discreet and reserved and only showed my feelings in the letters I wrote to her during my vacations, when I was far away from her. I will always regret not having shown her enough tenderness—even though, in her final agony, she found the strength to murmur to my father and to myself that our love had made her happy. Actually, I’m afraid that I was more of a source of worry and concern for her, especially during the final years of her life. The war of 1914–1918 had created an abyss between her generation and mine.
Emma’s agony, however, brought the mother and daughter closer together, and this relieved Elisabeth’s sense of guilt: “During her long and terrible sickness our relationship deepened little by little. I had the consolation of feeling that there was an immense and silent tenderness between us.”

The wound of this premature loss left the scar of an emotional emptiness on Elisabeth. On her twentieth birthday, six months after the death of her mother, she wrote to a friend: “It seems to me as though these last few months have been a long, dusty road. I tried to pretend that I wasn’t tired, but now weariness overcomes me.” Emma’s death marked the end of an era for Elisabeth. Her childhood and postwar carefree life now belonged to another time.

*Admission to Theological Studies, September 1927*

During the summer of 1927, Elisabeth stayed at the Fédé house at Mouterhouse, in the department of the Vosges. Suzanne de Dietrich was a familiar face there. On several occasions young Liselotte would spend time at Mouterhouse in the summer months. It was a peaceful place where she could absorb the spirit of the Fédé and find comfort. When she returned to the university, the fact of being admitted to the Faculty of Theology helped her to forget her sorrow a bit. The previous year a woman student had been allowed to sit in on the classes, but it was only in September 1927 that Elisabeth became one of the first women to start a course in theology while she continued to work toward her degree in philosophy. Such an innovation was not surprising at an institution very much influenced by the German mentality, which was open to change and used to an international mix.

Elisabeth recalled her first theology classes with a sense of humor. When the three ground-breaking female students entered the lecture hall, they were greeted with a thunderous stomping of feet underneath the benches. This somewhat derisive reception given to these pioneers by their male fellow students soon turned to friendship. Elisabeth, who had the advantage of her two years of philosophical studies and her aptitude for reflection, did very well and became totally assimilated into her class.

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The Faculty of Strasbourg, faithful to its spirit of openness, also offered scholarships to foreign students. Elisabeth’s class included three young Orthodox students—a Romanian and two Russians, all recent émigrès, with whom the young woman sympathized. One of the two Russian scholars, Georges Serikoff, would become a priest. Elisabeth had more contact with the other, Paul Fidler. She described Fidler, almost ten years older than she, as “good-natured and, at the same time, a bit crazy and amoral.” They shared a number of interests including music and theological reflection. He introduced her to an Alsatian couple who were artists—the Jaggis—and Elisabeth became a frequent visitor to their home, quite close to the Faculty. Madame Jaggi, who was a painter, did a portrait of Elisabeth with her head inclined, her eyes closed as if she were dozing off. Elisabeth explained this position by the fact that she was listening attentively to the music that the artist’s husband was playing as a distraction during the long posing sessions.13

Through Paul Fidler, the young woman entered into contact with the world of the Russian émigrès, which fascinated her right from the start. It was thanks to her classmate that Elisabeth first discovered Russian religious thought, and this would turn out to be of capital importance to her. The future theologian became enthusiastic about the works of the nineteenth-century Slavophile writer Alexis Khomiakov, especially his book *The Church Is One*. The reflections of this religious philosopher opened up for her a whole new vision of the Church, no longer envisaged as an institution but, above all, as a living community of faith and love: “The Church is a living organism, the organism of truth and of love, or, more exactly, truth and love as organism.”14 These were the definitions of the Church that the young Lutheran theology student assimilated and that counteracted the rather *a priori* negative and hierarchical conception she previously had held. Khomiakov wrote: “No one is saved alone. The person who is saved is saved in the Church, in union with all its other members. If a person believes, it is within a community of faith; if a person loves, it is within a community of love; if a person prays, it is within a community of prayer.”15

An indication of the importance that Khomiakov attached to the quest for Christian unity can be found in the correspondence he
maintained for ten years, from 1844 to 1854, with the Anglican William Palmer, a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, who was engaged in the renewal of the Anglican Church. Khomiakov wrote to his friend: “I really believe that there are many cultivated Russians who recite the petition in the liturgy, to grant unity to all Christians, with all their heart and soul and not just with their lips.”

Elisabeth was deeply moved by this desire for unity as well as by Khomiakov’s idea of returning to the Tradition of the undivided Church—a return that would make it possible to “overcome the antagonism between Protestant individualism and the constraining and authoritarian unity of Roman Catholicism.”

The interdenominational friendship with Serikoff and Fidler, which put Elisabeth into contact with Russian religious thought, was not an isolated experience. It was in the context of the climate of openness that prevailed at the time. The budding ecumenical movement, rooted in a desire to know one another better, found concrete expression in the first Faith and Order conference in 1927. This meeting at Lausanne gathered members of the Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox Churches—notably Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, one of the principal theologians of the Russian émigré community—and inaugurated an era of ecumenical reflection on the fundamental aspects of Christian faith in view of trying to find a way to bring the Churches closer to one another. The World Federation had, in fact, an ecumenical dimension insofar as its members were affiliated with associations of different denominations such as the Russian Christian Student Association, a movement of Orthodox young people founded in Czechoslovakia in 1923 by Russian exiles. Elisabeth wrote of these burgeoning interdenominational contacts: “Within the Fédé, the relations between the associations of Protestant inspiration and the Russian Christian Student Association (which defined itself as a movement within Orthodoxy) were frequent and warm, without any trace of proselytism on either side. We wanted to know one another better and love one another better. So I started studying Russian.”

Elisabeth participated actively in this overture to others and became president of the Strasbourg branch of the Fédé. The meetings she organized were the occasion for dynamic exchanges among the different denominations. Her three Orthodox friends were invited to
these circles of reflection where each one could speak about the particularities of his or her Church. However, Elisabeth’s enthusiastic discovery of Russian thought and of the émigré community through her friendship with Paul Fidler was not without its ambiguities. The relations between the two classmates became more complex as a sentimental dimension was added to the intellectual one. Fidler, who was already married, pretended to have fallen in love with Elisabeth. His attitude toward her caused her a painful emotional confusion.

The Experience of Easter Joy

In the spring of 1928, Elisabeth participated in the organization of a congress of the French Fédé for the feast day of Easter. This meeting brought all the regional Fédés to the Paris area and Elisabeth invited her three Orthodox friends. The gap between the Gregorian calendar, which Western Christians follow, and the Julian calendar, which was followed by the Orthodox, allowed her Russian friends to invite Liselotte to attend the Orthodox Easter Vigil celebrated at the St. Sergius Theological Institute. This school of theology, founded by Russian émigrés in 1925, sat on a little hill in the 19th arrondissement of Paris, on the site of a former Lutheran church.

This Easter Vigil at St. Sergius was an extremely moving experience for her, “a passage from darkness to light, symbolized by the church being first in darkness and then suddenly illuminated by hundreds of candles.” To describe her experience, Elisabeth made her own the words of the emissaries of Grand Prince Vladimir when, in the tenth century, they discovered the Christian religion in the basilica of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: “I no longer knew if I was in heaven or on earth.”

After assisting at Matins, celebrated by Fr. Sergius Bulgakov and punctuated by the joyous acclamations of the Resurrection, the group of friends went to the nearby park of Buttes-Chaumont. Elisabeth felt carried away by a wave of exultation where all the sentimental difficulties and existential questions that had been plaguing her were swept aside. The painful situation created by Fidler’s feelings about her was transcended at that moment: “That day was an extraordinary experience; I lived this liturgy steeped in Easter joy, as if it were an anticipa-
tion, *hic et nunc*, of the fullness of the kingdom of God. I felt cleansed of all the problems that were weighing on me.”

After the experience of this fiery Easter joy, Elisabeth felt a great desire to know better “this strange Orthodox Church, both so ancient, so archaic and yet so young and alive.” But at Strasbourg there was no Orthodox community where she could become familiar with Eastern tradition. This is the reason why, at the end of the academic year, the young woman, very determined, asked to continue her studies of theology at the Protestant Faculty of Paris.

**Year of Study in Paris, September 1928–June 1929**

*Meeting Fr. Lev Gillet*

After receiving permission to do her second year of theology in Paris, Elisabeth moved into an international students’ residence near the Sorbonne, at 93, boulevard Saint Michel in September 1928. She continued her studies at the Faculty of Protestant Theology, on the boulevard Arago, where she had the occasion to become more familiar with French Protestant Calvinism, and also at the Sorbonne. Her Russian friends in Strasbourg, Fidler and Serikoff, gave her the address of a French priest recently converted to Orthodoxy and living in Paris, Fr. Lev Gillet. Accordingly, Elisabeth wrote to him explaining her situation: she was a young Protestant, a theology student, who wanted information on the Orthodox Church. Lev Gillet then went to see her in the reception room of the women’s residence where she was lodging.

It was immediately obvious to Elisabeth that the priest understood her—and this was so, given the similarity of their journeys through life. Father Lev, who was fourteen years older than Elisabeth, had previously been a Benedictine monk. He had become fascinated with Russian spirituality to the point that he felt inwardly torn apart by the separation of the Eastern and Western Churches. This led him to embrace the Catholic Byzantine rite in the hope of healing the breaches between the Churches. In 1928 the papal encyclical *Mortalium animos* condemned attempts at ecumenism and declared that...
the only way to end divisions among Christians was by adherence to Roman Catholicism. Father Lev felt himself personally attacked by this warning against any type of ecumenism. This helped the Benedictine monk to decide to enter the Orthodox Church in the hope that this step would have a prophetic bearing on reconciliation among the Christian denominations. In the course of his career, Fr. Lev had acquired a spiritual openness, rational and without prejudices, toward the contemporary world. It was this openness that immediately impressed the young woman and inspired trust.

Their personal affinity was complemented by a spiritual resemblance on many points, and this helps to explain the closeness of Elisabeth and Fr. Lev: both had inherited the evolutions of the Western Church, both felt an immense attraction to Russian spirituality. They suffered from the divisions among the Churches that prevented them from living in full communion with the Eastern Tradition they loved so much. It was to the Orthodox Church that they both turned in their search for an authentic Christianity that would be meaningful in the modern world. Trying to define the reasons for such an attraction, Elisabeth asked herself: “Could it be that historical Orthodoxy, as heir of the ecclesiology of the undivided Church, purified and enlivened by suffering in the Russian Church, is called to become the matrix of the harmonious unity of the reconciled Church of the new era?”

The former Benedictine assumed the role of intermediary for Elisabeth in her passage from Protestantism to Orthodoxy. When he had been studying psychoanalysis at Geneva, Fr. Lev had had the opportunity to enter into close contact with the Protestant Churches. He got to know them from within, and this inspired a desire to rediscover a Church that was stripped down to the essentials and free. Such a state of mind predisposed him to be most accessible to Elisabeth, and it allowed her, with him as intermediary, to open herself little by little to the Eastern Tradition.

For Elisabeth, her meeting with “the Monk of the Eastern Church”—the pseudonym he would later use for most of his writings—was providential: “I discovered a man with a very charismatic ability to listen and sympathize, along with a rigorous and lucid intelligence, who helped me to see myself clearly.” This first meeting in the reception room of the student residence was to be the point of de-
parture for a friendship that, in the course of its development, would have a decisive impact on both of them. So that she might get a better look at this Church, which inspired her so much, and know it in its daily reality, Fr. Lev invited Elisabeth to the French-speaking Orthodox parish that he had started with the help of some Russian émigrés.

Young Russians of the First Francophone Parish

Metropolitan Evlogy, the bishop of the Russian émigrés in the Paris area, took the initiative for the first French-language parish in his diocese, which was to be for what he called “denaturalized Russian children,” that is, the descendants of the first generation of émigrés who no longer understood Slavonic. When he explained the founding of this parish in his memoirs, the metropolitan wrote: “We must think of the future: even if the Russian language is lost, we must try to save the Orthodox faith and pass it on to these French-speaking Russians.”

The majority of the parishioners were young Russian intellectuals, most of them members of the Confraternity of Saint Photius. The goal of this brotherhood, founded in 1925, was to preserve the purity of the Orthodox faith in the context of the émigrés. At that moment it was trying to rediscover elements of the Tradition of the undivided Church that existed in the West and that would facilitate the implantation of an authentic local Orthodoxy. It was the members of the Confraternity, especially Evgraf Kovalevsky, who called the attention of the metropolitan to the need for a Francophone parish.

The choice of Fr. Lev as its first rector was not accidental. His past experience in the Catholic Church and his recent decision to embrace Orthodoxy were representative of a desire to see the two traditions come together again in their common origin. In the first issue of his parish bulletin, Fr. Lev laid down the foundations of a local community: “Because Orthodoxy is not Byzantine or Slavic but universal, it is up to the Orthodox living in the West to create a type of Orthodoxy appropriate to Western culture. Since to do so would imply returning to local traditional sources, a Western Orthodoxy could differ notably, in certain aspects, from Eastern Orthodoxy.” But it was more his great love for Russian spirituality that led Fr. Lev toward such a project.
among the Russian émigrés, rather than any desire to convert the French to Orthodoxy.

When she first took part in the liturgy at the little parish, dedicated to the Transfiguration and Saint Genevieve and initially located at the offices of ACER, the Russian Christian Students Association, Elisabeth was impressed by the intensity of the ceremony. Father Lev officiated without ostentation. He was the spokesman for the assembly and made the whole community participate in the liturgy by reciting the prayers aloud, even the Eucharistic prayers, which were usually heard only by the priest. When he offered the bread and the wine to God so that they might be consecrated and said, “We offer to You these gifts for all and on behalf of all,” he represented the active participation of each person in the sacrifice of thanksgiving. The aesthetic element was not neglected: the parish choir, partly made up of members of the Kedroff family, who were all musicians, put itself at the service of the liturgy.

The liturgical texts had to be translated into French. Metropolitan Evlogy remembered how “a commission was set up for this. It included Fr. Deibner, who was very skilled in literary French, and the Kovalevsky brothers. Our Eucharistic liturgy was eventually translated by Fr. Vladimir Guettée, a French Catholic priest who had converted to Orthodoxy.”27 This manner of celebrating the liturgy was extended into the simple and evangelical lifestyle of the parish. The little community was composed of about thirty persons, mostly from the Russian intelligentsia. There was a great deal of theological excitement within the group. The young intellectuals, such as Paul Evdokimov, Evgraf Kovalevsky, and Vladimir Lossky, sought to actualize Orthodox Tradition in a spirit of evangelical freedom. This intellectual elite, who saw the emigration following the Bolshevik Revolution as providential, wanted to bear witness to Orthodoxy in France. Khomiakov’s writings also nourished Elisabeth’s reflections on the Church and on the true meaning of community. In this little parish, she found an incarnation of “the communion in faith and in love” that had impressed her so much when she had read the Russian thinker.

There appeared at this first French-speaking parish future members of Orthodox Action, an organization of social assistance, such as Ilya Fondaminsky; and intellectuals such as the famous philosopher
Nicolas Berdiaev and the historian Georges Fedotov, with whom Elisabeth would collaborate for her master’s degree. The parish also had the support of Lev Zander and Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, whose universalist outlook fully approved of this initiative of a Christianity lived beyond all national divisions.

The parishioners had in place an important social assistance program for émigrés in need. Marguerite Zagorovsky, a social worker linked with the university movement of mutual aid, became the head of this organization. She assumed the role of deaconess, visiting the needy and coordinating assistance through columns in the parish bulletin, *The Way*. Right beneath the Gospel meditations of Fr. Lev could be found appeals for food contributions or job offers.

Liselotte felt that she had become part of this Orthodox community, as its youngest member. The aura of Fr. Lev, the authentic charismatic atmosphere of the parish, the youth and also the poverty of its members made her feel at home. It was there that she forged a deep friendship with those whom she called “the three young Russians”: Paul Evdokimov, Evgraf Kovalevsky, and Vladimir Lossky. Of the three, it was with Paul Evdokimov—or “Pavlik,” as she called him—that she felt closest. At the Sorbonne, she and Vladimir took Etienne Gilson’s courses on Thomism. These classes would have a decisive influence on both Lossky’s and Elisabeth’s thinking. They acted like a spur, goading her on to return to the Fathers of the Church and to her desire to be firmly rooted in the primitive Tradition. The rediscovery of the Church Fathers would lead to the neopatristic movement in which both Lossky and Fr. Georges Florovsky became important actors.

Elisabeth also became friends with the women of the community: the writer Nadezhda Gorodetsky, who translated the texts of Fr. Lev into Russian for *Put’* (The way) and *Novy Grad* (The new city), both reviews of the émigré community; Natalia Evdokimov, the wife of Paul, who had been a Protestant; and Marguerite Zagorovsky, whose husband was warden at Saint Alexander Nevsky, the rue Daru cathedral of the Russian diocese. The latter two women were among the French minority in the parish. This evangelical atmosphere, where the social was intimately linked with the spiritual, left Elisabeth with the impression of a community both rooted in its tradition and open to the world around it.
After having discovered Christ in the context of the Fédé, Elisabeth was now seeking a Church that would satisfy her thirst for an authentic Christianity, which also would provide the structure for a real communion with God. She found herself divided among the different communities with which she alternately prayed. In addition to the little Orthodox parish, she attended Lutheran services at the Passy church, where she met up again with Pastor Marc Boegner, whom she had already known from meetings of the Fédé. She was also attracted by a community of Benedictines on the rue de la Source.

One of her fellow students at the Faculty of Protestant Theology on the boulevard Arago was also in search of a church home. His name was Louis Bouyer, and he too attended at the little Orthodox parish, where he was entrusted with the reading of the Epistle. Such an ecumenical openness was frowned upon by the authorities of the Protestant Faculty, and Louis Bouyer’s attraction to Orthodoxy caused difficulties insofar as he was studying to become a pastor. Elisabeth then counseled him to continue his studies at the University of Strasbourg, where the atmosphere was less narrow-minded. The future eminent Catholic theologian did so the following year.

In the course of this year so rich in discoveries, Elisabeth found herself immersed in the Paris intellectual circles where a growing ecumenism was lived spontaneously, without yet being institutionalized. Interdenominational connections were common, especially between Protestants and Orthodox. The post–World War political and social context aroused new excitement in the ranks of the young intellectuals.

Members of the Franco-Russian Studio

The traumas of the First World War, where two nations claiming the same God slaughtered one another, led a whole generation of intellectuals to try to establish the foundations of a world that would be peaceful and fraternal. In the religious dimension, this desire for unity, manifested by the emergence of ecumenical dialogue, coincided with the arrival in France of the Russian émigrés.

The historical context that brought together French intellectuals in quest of an authentic spirituality and émigré Russian intellectuals
fascinated by the Western world was at the origin of a very fruitful dialogue. If some of the French thinkers opted for Communism, then Marcel Péguy (son of Charles), Emmanuel Mounier, and many others sought a Christianity that would fight for justice while remaining faithful to its message. Whereas the Catholicism of that time appeared to be focused on the institutional aspect of the Church, not hospitable to individual questioning and wary of any ecumenical overtures, the Russian intelligentsia, by its spirit of openness and freedom, was most attractive to the French thinkers.

This émigré circle, made up of an Orthodox elite, was heir to the Silver Age, that prerevolutionary period of Russian thought, so rich in its theological reflection, in which a fundamental renewal of the Tradition began. The group of Russian intellectuals whom Elisabeth met during her year in Paris—Bulgakov, Fedotov, Berdiaev—all had similar backgrounds. They had rejected the Church in the name of Positivism or Marxism before returning to the Orthodox Tradition, but with a spirit of creativity.

The Franco-Russian Studio represented a high point in the coming together of two intellectual worlds. This center of exchange and reflection, encouraged by Nadezhda Gorodetsky, one of the pillars of the Francophone parish, Vsevolod de Vogt, and Marcel Péguy, enabled French and Russian intellectuals to learn about one another and share their respective wealth of ideas. In the words of the historian Antoine Arjakovsky, “These meetings sought to reinforce the encounters between the East and the West . . . by a mutual discovery of the cultural treasures of Russia and France.”

The spirit of openness characteristic of the era, the general impression of renewal and change, favored the discovery of Orthodoxy such as it was presented by the émigrés: tradition and innovation seemed to coexist harmoniously. In the same spirit, Nicolas Berdiaev, along with the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, organized Sunday afternoon meetings at his house in Clamart. Elisabeth occasionally took part in these ecumenical exchanges.

Immersed in this atmosphere of intellectual, ecumenical, and spiritual excitement, Elisabeth deepened her knowledge of Russian spirituality and the Orthodox Church. Even though she was fascinated by the Slavic world, she maintained her pluralistic outlook: the
neo-Thomism of Maritain interested her, as did the neopatristic movement spearheaded by Florovsky. She felt very close to the group of the Veilleurs, a lay movement much like the Catholic third orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans, founded in 1923 by Pastor Wilfred Monod, one of her professors at the Protestant Faculty.

This community, born out of a desire for a spiritual and mystical life, defined itself by a twofold dynamic: the keeping of a rule of prayer made up of liturgical texts from the different Christian traditions, and the carrying out of social action in the spirit of the Beatitudes, which the members of the community recited at noon every day. Through this organization, Wilfred Monod wanted to propose a lifestyle that would reconcile the personal aspect of Christianity with its social dimension. The Veilleurs would later lead to the founding of the Protestant community of Pomeyrol, in the south of France, by members of Monod’s third order. Thus, going from one community to another, Elisabeth was enriched by new encounters that witnessed to a Christianity lived and rooted in the life of Christ. It was through them that she sought her own path.

Turning Point at Strasbourg, September 1929–September 1931

Reception into the Orthodox Church

By the end of this year of studies in Paris—a year rich in fruitful encounters and reflections—Elisabeth was sure of having found a Church within which she could realize her desire to live in Christ. Her contact, both intellectual and spiritual, with the Tradition of the Eastern Church and her budding friendship with Fr. Lev and the young Russians of the first Francophile parish played a decisive role in her choice. When she left the capital, Elisabeth decided to join the Orthodox Church as soon as circumstances would permit.

After a summer tour of the Austrian mountains in the company of a roommate from the Paris residence for women students and a stay with her father at Menton, Elisabeth returned to Strasbourg in September 1929. There, she continued with her courses at the Protestant Faculty of Theology. At the end of the calendar year, her Russian
friends invited Fr. Lev to celebrate the liturgy at the church of Saint Paul, which Pastor André Boegner put at their disposal. It was during this visit of Fr. Lev that Elisabeth received the sacrament of Chrismation—also called Confirmation—which sealed her reception into the Orthodox Church. Since Fr. Lev, out of respect for the Lutherans, did not want to administer the sacrament within their church, he did so in the room of a student by the name of André Behr, a cousin of Evgraf Kovalevsky. It was there that Elisabeth was confirmed on December 13, 1929, on the feast day of Saint Odile, the patron of Alsace. The young theologian was henceforth “united” to the Orthodox Church as attested by a certificate of the act, signed by Fr. Lev.

When she analyzed the motives that had led her to such a decision, Elisabeth discerned two principal causes. First, the discovery, made possible by the new ecumenical context, of a Tradition incarnate in everyday life in which Christ could be found. She felt drawn toward Orthodox ecclesiology as Khomiakov had defined it—as going beyond the mere institution to take root in a lived community of faith and love. It seemed to her that such a concept abolished the antagonism between Roman centralism and Protestant individualism that she herself had experienced.

Her quest for a theology that was more mystical and more lived out went hand in hand with a reflection on rites and practices, which might be partially explained, perhaps, by her Jewish ancestry. Her attendance at the Francophone Orthodox parish of the Transfiguration-Saint Genevieve answered these questions by putting her in contact with a liturgical practice that was both dense and theological. Liselotte discovered an Orthodox Church in rich, fruitful tension between tradition and freedom. Each believer, in a communion of love with the whole community, tried to live a creative tradition in a personal way, in a constant renewal through the liberating breath of the Holy Spirit.

Many years afterward, Elisabeth, made wiser by her later confrontation with the lived reality of the Orthodox faith, would see, in retrospect, the young idealist that she had been then in a more critical light. Along with this intellectual discovery there was the existential experience: the shock of the Easter Vigil at the St. Sergius Institute. This experience of faith, in which she sensed the reality of a new life bestowed by Christ, gave birth to a very profound hope that would not
cease to sustain her later in moments of difficulty. The presence of Fr. Lev was the catalyst in her progressive discovery of a lived Orthodoxy. Unhesitatingly, Elisabeth affirmed that without the mediation of the Monk of the Eastern Church, she would never have embraced the Orthodox tradition because it would have remained too foreign for her.

Moreover, this young woman with a critical spirit, always on the alert, was astonished, right from the beginning of her conversion, by the intransigent position of Orthodoxy regarding women and was perplexed as to what form her personal journey would take:

This Church into whose communion I felt myself, in conscience, called to enter, in which I discerned the sacramental fullness of the life of Christ through the Holy Spirit, this same Church, it seemed to me, would not know what to do with a woman theologian. After excluding women from any form of public ministry, the Church offered them, as a means of sanctification, either the monastic life or marriage, but it did not foresee that women could be entrusted with any official responsibilities.29

Many years later, this reflection on the place of women in the Orthodox Church would take on greater importance for her.

The young woman’s decision to enter the Orthodox Church was not an isolated case. It took place in the context of a general movement of reconciliation between Protestant minorities and the Orthodox, notably within the Fédé. The Protestant aspiration to return to the roots of the undivided Church was at the source of a new attention to the origins of Christianity, before it became institutionally organized. In this respect, Suzanne de Dietrich had a profound influence on the young student and thus prepared her for her encounter with the Orthodox Tradition in which Elisabeth hoped to find the atmosphere of the primitive Christian community penetrated by the Holy Spirit. Other Protestants, such as Natalia Brunel, the wife of Paul Evdokimov, also turned to the Orthodox tradition. Louis Bouyer was equally attracted by the Eastern Church, but the jurisdictional rupture that shattered the Russian Orthodox émigré community in 1931 contradicted