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<https://doi.org/10.18485/slavistika.2023.27.1.2>
Оригиналан научни рад
примљено 6.5.2023.
прихваћено за штампу 9.6.2023.

THE SEARCH FOR CHEKHOV'S DAUGHTER – FIRST PART

The question of Anton Chekhov's possible paternity has recently been supported by some evidence, with circumstantial and written testimony in Russian and Serbian archives, to make an investigation necessary and possibly fruitful. This essay deals with Chekhov's relations with Nina Korsh, daughter of the theatre-owner, and the evidence for and against his being the father of her child Tatiana, who was born in 1901 and died in Serbia in 1938. Although this investigation is not conclusive, further research may now give us an answer.

Key words: Life of Anton Chekhov and his circle, Russian theatre at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Korsh family, Russian emigration to the Kingdom of SCS.

Питање могућег очинства Антона Чехова недавно су подржали извесни докази с индиректним исказима и писаним сведочанствима у руским и српским архивима, што чини истраживање потребним и могуће корисним. Овај чланак бави се односима Чехова и Нине Корш, кћерке власника позоришта, као и доказима у прилог и против тога да је он био отац њеног детета, Татјане, која је рођена 1901, а умрла у Србији 1938. године. Иако ово истраживање није коначно, даља истраживања нам сада могу пружити одговор.

Кључне речи: Живот Антона Чехова и његовог круга, руско позориште на прелазу из 19. у 20. век, породица Корш, руска емиграција у Краљевини СХС.

1 – Chekhov and Children

Tormented by the screams of his brother's baby daughter, as he studied for his final examinations, and tried at the same time to produce yet another weekly comic story, the 23-year-old Anton Chekhov wrote to his editor and publisher, 'I solemnly promise never to have any children.' To judge by what we know, the gods took note of that promise. Chekhov was generally kind to children in need of help: he gave a homeless urchin money and a train ticket to Iaroslavl, where a kindly elderly poet would take the boy in. Particularly at Christmas, Chekhov would produce a heart-wrenching Dickensian story about a destitute child, and he became a children's favourite writer with 'Kashtanka', a story of a dog lost and found. As a guest, he enjoyed entertaining his host's children. When he investigated the penal colony of the Island of Sakhalin, he was particularly upset by the prisoners' children, left without education or medical treatment, drifting into prostitution and crime. His sister Masha and wife Olga were unusually liberal: living together in Moscow, they allowed their maid (also Masha), who became pregnant almost every year, to keep her baby in the apartment with them. In the mid-1890s, as an estate owner, Chekhov built schools for the peasant children

and, when his servant girls got pregnant, gave them an allowance to save their offspring from a lethal baby farm. His efforts, however, disillusioned him: as he later told a young priest, peasant depravity was ineradicable: ‘Their children start drinking vodka at eight and, while still children, are debauched: they infect the whole district with syphilis.’

Chekhov kept his own young nephews, however, at a distance: when his eldest brother, the alcoholic Alexander, found himself unable to cope with his sons, now that his wife was dying of TB, Anton flatly refused to help, despite the moribund woman adding her pleas. He shunted them off to a sick, elderly aunt, explaining, ‘If I add two rooms for the children, nurse and children’s junk, ... in any spacious flat we would be crowded.’ There are photographs of Chekhov dandling his dachshunds and even a mongoose on his lap, but none of him with small children. Yet even this show of physical affection was precarious: the mongoose was soon given to Moscow Zoo, which Chekhov had just denounced (anonymously) as an ‘animals’ graveyard’, and when in 1899 he was compelled to abandon his estate at Melikhovo for the milder climate of the Crimea, the dachshunds were abandoned and died violent deaths.

Russian, and not only Russian, writers can be divided into those who are child-oriented and those who are not. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is built on the Rostov children, and the suffering and redemption of children is at the core of Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*. In Chekhov’s work, however, children are marginal, like the silent babies in their prams who breed the *Three Sisters* out of their home.

Chekhov repeatedly fended off girl friends who hoped to marry him and bear his children, and he disabused influential admirers who proposed rich, beautiful or talented girls as fiancées. He protested to close friends that after an initial encounter he would lose interest. Others were told that he wanted a woman who would rise, not like the sun every morning, but like the moon on occasional evenings; later he asserted that no sensible woman would want a husband infected with tubercular bacteria. When he spoke of having a wife and children, then it was in drunken banter: ‘When I have children, then I shall tell them not without pride, “You sons of bitches, in my day I had intercourse with a black-eyed Indian girl... in a coconut plantation on a moonlit night.”’

As an observer of marriages – his parents’, his brothers’, his friends’ and above all his patron and publisher Aleksei Suvorin’s – Chekhov saw nothing but quarrels, adulteries, misery and creative paralysis. His simultaneous conduct of multiple love affairs, some brief, others lasting more than a decade, was perhaps a protective ploy to make it impossible for any one woman to have a claim on him. Eventually, after his severe haemorrhage in spring 1897, and more than six months’ recuperation in the south of France, this defensive system broke down. He was too ill to climb stairs to pay visits to a *cocotte* (and his hotel in Nice would not countenance visits from such women), and on his return to Russia, stunned by his plays’ unexpected success at the newly founded Moscow Arts Theatre, for the first time Chekhov fell so hard for an actress that his letters show him pining for her company alone. Olga Knipper had all the requisites he had found lacking

in previous women: she was highly organized, she earned her own living, she could be serious and frivolous as required, she acted brilliantly, yet without too much fuss, she had good handwriting (which Chekhov valued highly), nursing skills (which he would need) and, given her German origins, useful international connections. Even she, however, had to manoeuvre Chekhov into consenting (if not proposing) to marry: she complained that she could not visit his bedroom in Yalta, because the creaking stairs woke his mother; she systematically made the acquaintance of nearly all his former and present women friends and was spectacularly rude, slanderous, or condescending about them. As the collective revenge of every woman Chekhov had disappointed, she took control.

Finally, the question and prospect of children arose — complicated by the fact that half the time Olga and Anton lived apart, she acting in Moscow, he convalescing or ailing, writing (or editing his past work for re-publication) in the Crimea, his strength and, no doubt, libido steadily declining. In March 1902, just 10 months after their marriage, and a week after a brief stay with her husband, Olga found she was pregnant. At the end of March she had what was claimed to be a sudden miscarriage, but it was so traumatic a case that Petersburg's leading specialist in surgery for ectopic pregnancies, Dr Ott, gynaecologist to the Empress, was summoned to operate at midnight. In the 1960s a Dr Möwe (an enthusiastic Chekhovian) wrote to Sergei, Chekhov's youngest nephew, expressing doubts on the official diagnosis: he had reason — a certificate showing that Olga Knipper was in her third month of pregnancy at the time — to conclude that Olga Knipper became pregnant, ectopically, by someone not her husband. Sergei Chekhov conceded that Möwe was right, and told him of Knipper's flagrant adultery, but thought the information unpublishable. 'To do so you need a surgeon's coldness and firmness.' (When I first published this diagnosis, now generally accepted, in 1997 in the first version of my biography of Chekhov, I was denounced, trolled for slandering 'a woman no longer able to defend herself', and removed from a list of speakers at a Moscow Chekhov conference.)

Not just Chekhov's professional knowledge, but his cold, estranged behaviour throughout summer 1902 suggests he knew the truth. Olga, who now seemed to have a damaged ovary, might never become pregnant again and, if she did, might well conceive from another man. They talked of children in their letters, but the banter sounds like a game of pretence. Olga lamented, 'Unwanted visitors [*menstruation*] have arrived and hopes for a little otter cub have collapsed. My darling Anton, will I really not have children?!' Anton complained, 'When our baby is 18 months old I shall probably be bald, grey and toothless,' or reassured, 'you'll definitely have children, that's what the doctors say. All you need is to be fully recovered. Everything is intact and in working order, rest assured, all you lack is a husband living with you all year round.' At one point, the promise of a child was a promise of divorce: Olga wrote, 'I'll present you with a good son next year. You write that if we have a child, I can do as I like.' In late March 1904, when Chekhov was too moribund to leave his bed for more than an hour or two, Olga still kept up a pretence: 'Do you want a baby? Darling, I do too. I shall do my best.'

Chekhov died without a legitimate heir. The question that remains is whether he had an illegitimate offspring and, if so, whether he was aware of him or her.

2 – Illegitimacy

Chekhov's drama and prose generally ignores the question of illegitimacy; his letters show no particular fear or defence of the illegitimate – to his eldest brother he justified their father's horror of the former's three illegitimate children by a divorcee, and tolerated his father's Old Testament view that 'those who live outside the law will die outside the law.'

Illegitimacy perhaps carried less stigma in Russia than elsewhere in Europe. Gradually, Russian law allowed the legitimisation particularly of middle-class illegitimates, even if those who were working-class or peasants had to face foundling institutes, followed by the army or domestic service. Often illegitimate boys were called Bogdan – meaning, 'given by God' and, conveniently not a saint's name. The offspring of upper-class males could be given half their father's surname, so that Obolensky fathered a Lensky, Trubetskoy a Betskoy. But an impressive number of prominent 19th century Russians – Herzen the philosopher, Fet the poet, Borodin the composer – were illegitimate.

Some of Chekhov's literary friends had illegitimate children, and usually acknowledged them, even with pride. When Chekhov repeatedly rejected Lika Mizinova, with whom he had his most intense and prolonged affair through most of the 1890s (she described herself as the piece of cheese he was too fastidious to nibble at), she became pregnant, with his complicity, by his close friend, Ignati Potapenko. In 1894, Lika spent her pregnancy alone in Switzerland, pretending to be Mme Chekhov, then, as prosperous young Russian women in her situation did, travelled to Paris to find an apartment, a midwife and a wet-nurse, returning to Russia, leaving even her closest relatives unaware for at least a year of what had happened. In this case, Chekhov virtually murdered the illegitimate child: in 1896, in his play *The Seagull* he parodies the relationship of Ignati Potapenko and Lika, and in the last act announces that the baby has died. In November 1896, the real Christina died.

Inevitably, however, Chekhov must have been struck by the same thoughts as Guy de Maupassant, a writer whom he read avidly, at first as an acolyte and then as a colleague, and with whom he had many affinities – a love of the sea, rivers, and hunting game; a sympathy for prostitutes and for the military; scorn for the bourgeoisie; Schopenhauerian despair at the destructive power of women and sexual attraction; bleak agnosticism on the question of God and his creation; knowledge that he would soon die of an incurable illness. In an early story, two of Maupassant's Parisian characters calculate that in their adult prime they must have had 400 to 500 encounters with prostitutes or other women (from shop girls to their best friends' wives) and that periodically they must, unaware, cross paths with their unrecognised illegitimate offspring. A roué's fear, not so much of alimony claims as of socially degrading connections, is the topic of several

Maupassant stories, the most extreme being ‘The Hermit’, whose hero realises that a young prostitute he has just slept with is the daughter of a woman whom he seduced and abandoned 20 years previously: he is so shocked that he gives the girl half his fortune and then retires from the world.

For 20 years, from leaving school in 1878 to accepting his failing health in 1898, Chekhov was, like Maupassant (if less fervently), a regular enough client of prostitutes to make it likely that at least one or two pregnancies must have resulted. Female contraception in 19th century Russia was little known: pessaries with a 14 carat gold applicator were advertised in the more liberal Latvian press, but could not have been widely afforded. There is just one reference in literature: when Anna Karenina in the eponymous novel tells her sister-in-law that her doctor has told her how to avoid further pregnancies, both Dolly and the novel’s author are so shocked that the revelation is broken off by three dots. Condoms, often made from lamb gut and imported from France, were available from the 1860s, but not publicised until Auguste Forelle’s *The Sexual Question* was published in 1907 by Chekhov’s own publisher, Aleksei Suvorin. In 1889 Chekhov’s brother Aleksandr may be the first Russian male recorded to have bought a condom: ‘Engulfed by carnal lusts (after long abstinence) I bought in a chemists’ a condon (or condom — the devil knows) for 35 kopecks. But as soon as I tried to put it on, it burst, probably from fear at the sight of my shaft.’ Probably, any protection that prostitutes had from pregnancy came from periodical gonorrhoea infection (despite weekly police inspections).

Short of mass DNA sampling, biographers are right to assume that Chekhov had no descendants – or were right, until a little-known story surfaced in the 1990s...

3 – Alisa Hubbe-Shebalina’s Story of Nina Korsh

In the post-Stalin régime there was a general rule forbidding the ‘discrediting and vulgarisation’ of ‘great’ Russian writers. On this basis the Soviet *Politburo* issued a specific decree, when the otherwise excellent 30-volume edition of Chekhov’s works and letters began publication in 1983, excising sometimes single words, sometimes whole paragraphs that were felt to be denigrating. That may be why a story of an illegitimate daughter did not circulate outside a small family circle until the end of the USSR in 1991.

In 1979 a group of tourists was escorted round Chekhov’s former estate at Melikhovo, 45 miles south of Moscow. One of the visitors broke away from the group and asked to see the director, Iuri Avdeev. She was Alisa Maksimovna Shebalina, the 78-year-old widow of the high-ranking composer Iuri Shebalin (winner of a Stalin prize), and mother of the Borodin Quartet’s fine viola player, Dmitri; she had been educated at the Sorbonne and, although her father Max Hubbe had been a mere travelling salesman, her mother was Anna Pfaff of the sewing-machine manufacturing dynasty. Despite her age (she would live to 101), she was crystal-clear about her childhood. She had credibility. She told

Avdeev that as a little girl she had lived near Moscow, in the newly-built village of Golitsyno, where the theatre owner and director Fiodor Adamovich Korsh had retired. For several years, when Alisa's Germano-Russian family (her maiden name was Hubbe) was taking a summer vacation there, she played with a girl her own age, known as Tatiana Fiodorovna Korsh (the patronym implied that her father was Fiodor Korsh, the theatre director, and her actual grandfather). Some years later, at any rate before 1914 when the Hubbe family was deported as enemy aliens to Siberia, Alisa's mother was told either by Tatiana's mother Nina, or by her grandmother Ekaterina, that Tatiana was in fact illegitimate, and that the real father was Anton Chekhov (who had died in 1904).

This story would have bewildered Iuri Avdeev, who knew Chekhov's biography and letters very well and was aware that, although Nina Korsh and Chekhov had known one another for a decade — after all, her father had in 1887 and 1889 staged Chekhov's *Ivanov* in Moscow, and Fiodor Korsh and Anton Chekhov had both been lovers of the notorious actress Lidia Yavorskaya in the mid-1890s — nothing in Nina Korsh's correspondence with Chekhov suggested a love affair. Alisa Shebalina followed up her oral revelations with a letter and the loan of photographs of herself and the young Tatiana. (The house shown in the photograph of the two young girls was unmistakably the authentic house that Fiodor Korsh had built: its walls, made of Golitsyno's hollow insulated concrete blocks, formed on an imported Zuberbühler Canadian machine, were unique in Russia.) The letter read:

19 July 1979,
Nikolina Gora

Dear Iuri Nikolaevich (forgive me if I have got your patronym wrong). Under the fresh impression of everything I saw and heard at Melikhovo, that wonderful niche, I hasten to do what I promised you.

The photographs I am sending are amateur ones and, unfortunately, the faces are small. But if you look through a magnifying glass you will see Tania's close resemblance to her father. And doesn't her figure as a whole — thin, elegant — remind you of him?

Tania and I were born the same year, but I was stocky, not as tall as her: I was tough, she was delicate, sickly. But both our mothers, hers was Nina Fiodorovna Korsh (the daughter of the theatre director Fiodor Korsh) and my mother Anna Fiodorovna Hubbe (the two of them were schoolteachers) tried to toughen us up from childhood on. In Tanya's case, this was on doctor's orders, since she had tuberculosis. From spring to autumn we went about bare-foot, bathed in the cold Golitsyno pond; in winter we were lightly dressed and skated — on the enclosed rink 'At Lazarin's', on the outdoor rink on Moscow's Petrovka Street — and we skied.

Tanya's uncle, Fiodor, had an estate at Golitsyno. I often stayed there, and we were photographed together outside the house.



Alisa Hubbe and Tania Korsh, Golitsyno around 1908-9



Korsh family, Golitsyno c. 1910

standing: Ekaterina Ivanovna, Nina's mother; Nina; Vladimir Sablin
(Nina's brother-in-law); Evgeni, Nina's brother
sitting: two little girls; Fiodor Korsh; Varvara, Nina's sister;
front: Tania Korsh with dog

In winter we were always going to her grandfather's theatre and we saw a lot of performances. I remember the actor Radin in Goncharov's *The Gully*.

I never met Anton Chekhov in their house: after all, we were together only for three years, and my friendship with Tanya began when we were six, when I started at M. Kh. Sventitskaya's school at Sinii Vrazhek in Moscow, which was where Nina Korsh taught sewing and handicrafts. Nina was friends with my mother and confided in her the secret of her affair with Anton Chekhov and the birth of their daughter. My mother told me about this much later.

I know that just before the revolution Fiodor Korsh was in the Caucasus, where he fell seriously ill and summoned his daughter. Nina took Tania with her to see him, looked after her father, but he died [*here Shebalina is mistaken: in 1918 Fiodor Korsh managed to get through war-torn Russia back to Golitsyno, and lived until 1923. D.R.*] but Nina and her daughter could no longer get back to Moscow. They were cut off by the revolution. On some steamship or other they got to the Balkans, they lived in Serbia, and Nina wrote to my mother from Belgrade. Later she told us that Tania had got married and, apparently, Tania had a daughter. I don't remember exactly, since Tania and I didn't write to one another. Apparently, they were intending to go to Paris. That's where my information ends; I think my mother lost track of them, since we were left in Moscow while Nina and Tania were living abroad.

That's all I can tell you about my childhood friend Tania Korsh, who was adopted by her grandfather Fiodor Korsh.

I knew Olga Knipper: my husband, the composer Vissarion Shebalin, was a friend of Olga's nephew [*the composer*] Lev Knipper. We often visited them at their house, № 23 Gogolevsky boulevard. We had interesting evenings there with a lot of people from the Moscow Arts Theatre, and sometimes we stayed on until late with just Olga or Lev and his wife Maria. But I never heard anything from Olga about Tania — I don't think she knew of her existence. [*Shebalina was wrong: after Nina took Tania to see the moribund Chekhov in Yalta on 19 October 1903, he wrote to Olga, 'Today Nina Korsh brought her little girl: she had dinner with us.' D.R.*] I've seen Chekhov's letters to Nina among his published letters, but as far as I remember, they were very reserved. In any case it was a long time ago that I read them and now I remember them vaguely. But as for Tania, my bosom friend, I remember her very well: she was pretty, with a fine little nose and big blue eyes and dark eyebrows.



Tania Korsh, aged 9

‘Once, when she was coming home from school, crossing the yard where small boys were playing with snowballs wrapped round stones, she was struck by one in the eye. Fortunately, her mother was at home and took her straight away to the eye hospital on Tverskaya street, which was near where they lived then; Tania had stitches and the eye was saved, but her pupil had a diagonal scar and reminded me of a cat’s eye, not that it spoiled Tania’s looks, she was so pretty. Her mother and grandfather simply adored her, and she was very spoilt. I remember my mother once putting on a ‘raffle’ for us, and Tania got the best prize, an enchanting little wine-glass (which I had been secretly dreaming of), but she told her mother, with a contemptuous sneer of her pretty lips, ‘Ce n’est pas de grande chose!’, or something like that. In the Korsh household they spoke French, and the little girl had a perfect command of the language. I knew French well, too, and I was very amazed by this remark. (But we were just around 7 at the time.) This didn’t spoil our friendship, however, and the two of us never quarrelled.

We parted around 1914, possibly a little earlier, since my parents were exiled and stayed in exile until the 1917 revolution. When we got back to Moscow that year, Tania was no longer there and I never saw her again.

Shebalina (née Hubbe). 143030 Moscow Province, Odintsovo district, Uspenskoe post, Nikolina Gora, V. Ya. Shebalin avenue 6, tel. 561-64-22. Moscow address: 121433, Bolshaia Filevskaia 53/1, flat 28.

I urge you to return the photographs to me when you have made use of them. They are precious to me.

With respect, Shebalina, Alisa Maksimovna (born 1901)’

After Shebalina’s letter, the story went undercover again. It must have been

talked about in a narrow circle. Alisa's grandson Piotr Nikolaevich (in a letter to me) says that he vaguely remembers Alisa talking of it, and that Alisa's sister, too, had known Tania, and, when the two of them were walking past the Korsh theatre, told her daughter Oksana the story of Tania's origin.

When the USSR broke up, Chekhov and everything about him was 'declassified'. The most exciting result was the publication of suppressed letters, notably one from a Japanese-run brothel in Blagoveshchensk where Chekhov was ecstatic at an experience which he compared to a top-level equitation class. Others were shocked by Chekhov's use of obscenities in writing angrily to his brothers or lubriciously to male friends. In 1994, the Melikhovo museum had a new director, the late Iuri Bychkov: he publicised Shebalina's story and dramatized it, inventing a scene in which Fiodor Korsh promises Chekhov that his secret paternity will never be revealed. The play had just one amateur performance: its portrayal of Chekhov as an amiable man about town, saying 'my dear chap', was painfully unconvincing, as was most of the dialogue, e.g.:

Korsh: Thank God, your father understands you and is glad of a child coming into our family.

Nina: Anton is not to know. He will never know he has a child... *Weeps bitterly.*

Korsh: Whether it's a daughter or a son, when it's baptised I'll declare myself the baby's father and give him my patronym and surname [...] Dear Antosha, I shall take proper care of your posterity [...] And nobody, not a soul will know. This secret is great. Natürlich, old chap, Anton.

In 2004, Bychkov published *Simply Chekhov*. This time the story of Nina Korsh's daughter caught on, spreading over the internet, where several sites now list Nina Korsh not just as Chekhov's 'true love', but as his wife, thus obliterating Olga Knipper.

We need not doubt Shebalina's sincerity or her overall reliability, but what she relates came second-hand from her mother, and, presumably, originated from Nina Korsh. Is it likely, or even possible that Nina Korsh was telling the truth, or, like other unmarried women of the time, did she feel safer from condemnation if she pointed the finger at a famous man, especially after he had died and could no longer contradict her?

4 –The Korshes and Anton Chekhov

Nina Korsh's father, Fiodor Adamovich Korsh, with some justification considered himself the father of Chekhov the dramatist. When Chekhov disparaged a play staged by Fiodor Korsh's theatre as 'Pretentious, utterly loathsome,' Korsh responded 'Instead of criticising, you'd do better to write one of your own.' Within ten days Chekhov wrote the first version of his tragedy or comedy (at first, he couldn't decide which) *Ivanov*. Korsh immediately accepted the play as 'faultless' and staged it.

Fiodor Korsh, trained as a lawyer, after graduating in oriental languages, came from a prosperous and talented family (his father was an army doctor). He was born in Tetri Tsqaro in Georgia. The first Korshes in Russia, Abraham Korss or Korsch, a specialist in tunnelling, and his wife were invited by Peter the Great in 1720 to migrate from Johangeorg in Saxony to Russia to develop mining and lace-making respectively (he was to be paid 2 gold roubles a month, his wife one). Later generations of Korsh were prolific: one had 19 surviving children by two wives. By the mid-19th century they had become Russian gentry, and Fiodor Adamovich's cousins were a galaxy of outstanding talent: Fiodor Evgenich was one of Russia's great polyglot philologists, able to converse in almost every language of Europe and Asia, notable for translating Slovene poetry and, later, for having Chekhov himself translated into Slovene. Evgeni Valentinovich was a journalist; Aleksandr Vsevolodovich was a surgeon. Fiodor Adamovich took advantage of the ending of the state monopoly on Moscow theatres in 1881 and founded a theatre loved by many for its frequent new productions and its pioneering electrification (which enabled spectacular stagings, such as a play set in a railway carriage, with scenery apparently speeding past the windows). But Korsh was sometimes despised by the élite for too often putting on translated French, English and German farces (they forgot that Korsh staged Tolstoi's grimmest plays as well as Sardou's frothy comedies), for its cheap matinées and its sometimes inept actors.

If Korsh had known that Chekhov was the pseudonymous author of the weekly Petersburg articles called *Moscow Fragments*, making fun of Muscovite vulgarity for the amusement of snobbish Petersburgers, he would not have been so receptive to the prospect of staging a Chekhov play. In 1883 Chekhov, and many Muscovites, made public fun of a furious row between Korsh and an actor playing Hamlet whose buttons flew off his costume during the performance. Chekhov wrote in 1883–4, 'Once again Mr Korsh will quarrel with his actors, and his actors will quarrel with him,' 'the *Russische Theater* in which the former (alas!) entrepreneur Mr Korsh has had such inhuman bad luck,' 'why do those who frequent German beer halls enjoy success [*in the theatre*]?', '[*Korsh's actors are*] a whole regiment of debutants', 'the reason for the premature death of Russian theatre is to be found in Mr Korsh himself'.



The Korsh Theatre in Moscow

Korsh's early theatrical years were, in fact, precarious: there were rumours of bankruptcy, and in 1885 the building had to be sold to an opera company. Four months later, after 'a farewell performance', Korsh managed to find new premises (today part of Moscow Arts Theatre) and seemed to have become financially viable. But in autumn 1888, Korsh, tormented by lack of profit, welcomed an expression of interest from Aleksei Suvorin, the Petersburg newspaper tycoon, in buying his theatre (eventually Suvorin would found his own theatre). By now Chekhov was almost notorious for being Suvorin's discovery, protégé and, it seemed, even prospective son-in-law, and it was Anton Chekhov whom Korsh chose as an intermediary. Chekhov told Suvorin that Korsh was excited, intimidated, flustered and overjoyed by the prospect of his theatre being taken over by such 'reliable hands'. Korsh immediately offered to show Chekhov all the accounts, but Chekhov told him he had no head for figures. Korsh named his price — 150,000 roubles — and then wrote a letter for Chekhov to forward to Suvorin, offering to sell the theatre in Lent 1889. The letter revealed that Korsh had made only 7,000 roubles net profit in 1887. A few days later, Chekhov advised Suvorin not to spend his money on buying Korsh's theatre. For the rest of the year, Chekhov complained of Korsh's meanness and sloppiness: the theatre's coffee machine had exploded, scalding an actress and thus cancelling performances of Chekhov's farce *The Bear*.

Korsh somehow restored his finances. His actors grudgingly acknowledged his flair for choosing and varying repertoire, for recruiting new actors. One battle-horse of the stage, Glama Meshcherskaya, declared 'he knew where his ad-

vantage lay, he drew the best actors from the provinces and didn't stint.' Korsh was a valued committee member of the *Society of Dramatists and Composers*, which was very efficient in seeing that its members were paid 2% of the gross takings for every act performed of a play or opera. Korsh persuaded Chekhov to join the Society, thus making every play, even the least successful, 'a pension' in Chekhov's eyes. In 1897, Korsh was rewarded with a *bratina*, a spherical wine bowl, in acknowledgement of his work for the Society as 'an exemplary payer'.

Chekhov's *Ivanov* for all its promise was not a great success – neither actors nor audience could understand whether the anti-hero Ivanov was sick or villainous, and Chekhov's sympathy for Ivanov's Jewish wife clashed with Moscow's anti-Semitic sentiments. But a revised version of *Ivanov* in 1889 showed Korsh's faith in the author and established Chekhov's future as a dramatist. Korsh went on to stage the farce *The Bear* and asked for the rights to subsequent plays, from *The Wood Demon* to *Uncle Vanya*. Chekhov, for various reasons, refused outright. Korsh was at first aggrieved, and when *The Wood Demon* was staged by a rival Moscow theatre sent a claque to the theatre to hiss and boo at the end of each act. *The Wood Demon* was so defective a play, however, that it would have flopped, claque or no claque: Chekhov's relations with Korsh remained amiable, if not always warm.

Chekhov had been a frequent patron of Korsh's theatre, both for his own amusement and for his journalism even before 1887. He conceded that Korsh had good actors; he defended him from attacks by his fellow writers, and told friends he would use his good offices to recommend their work for Korsh's theatre. He found fault with Korsh for promising 10 rehearsals, but allowing only four, and complained that Korsh was 'a bit mean'. He became, however, a friend of the family and must have been struck by the way in which Korsh's wife, son and schoolgirl daughter Nina all helped with repertoire and staging. Chekhov even agreed (but failed) to edit for Korsh a translation of Hermann Sudermann's *The End of Sodom*. In 1887, the eleven-year-old Nina Korsh was entranced by Chekhov, both as a man and a writer, and he, a connoisseur of female beauty, even if he refrained from making advances to under-age girls, must have been struck by her intelligence and precocious beauty, although twelve years would pass before she wrote to him and he invited her to stay with him at Melikhovo.



Nina Korsh, 1887-8

The Fiodor Korsh that Chekhov got to know in the early 1890s was very different: they now began to meet in Moscow hotels, both men pursuing actresses who worked in Korsh's theatre. Chekhov's earlier women friends had been schoolteacher colleagues of his sister, and in some cases editorial secretaries of journals to which he contributed. Now, ambitious actresses took a particular interest in what he, as an up-and-coming dramatist, might do for them. The future poet, translator and playwright Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik, barely out of school, applied to Korsh to act non-speaking parts: he was struck by her schoolgirl looks and the fact that she was the great-granddaughter of Russia's most famous actor, Mikhail Shchepkin. Tatiana loved both men and women, and she brought to their meetings her friend, a flamboyant actress, also bisexual, Lidia Yavorskaya (daughter of the Kiev Chief of Police). To judge by the surviving correspondence (Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik never threw a letter away), in 1893-4, when Chekhov began to take breaks from his agricultural preoccupations at Melikhovo, the two women engaged in orgies with Chekhov, Korsh and the painter Levitan.

Korsh was no longer the family man: Chekhov had to warn his bosom friend and publisher Aleksei Suvorin, that Fiodor Korsh, ‘this business-man with a tenor voice’ was Yavorskaya’s chief lover, even though they didn’t live together, and was jealous. For Korsh, the relationship was fruitful. Not only did Yavorskaya, as talented as she was promiscuous, bring his theatre notoriety, but Shchepkina-Kupernik proved to be such a superb translator of Edmond Rostand’s plays that Rostand began to recite his own work in Russian and, thanks to Korsh, made his mark in Russia. Korsh and the two women travelled all over France, enchanting Alexandre Dumas-fils and other French playwrights.

Korsh seemed to have forgiven Chekhov’s refusal to let him have the rights to a play and two farces. Yavorskaya begged Chekhov to write a play for her. He admired her starring role in the appropriately entitled *Madame Sans Gêne* (about a washer-woman who becomes a duchess and a friend of Napoleon) by Sardou and Moreau, and translated by Korsh himself. Chekhov promised to write *A Dream!* for Yavorskaya, but ended up in 1895 writing *The Seagull* instead. Yavorskaya and Korsh listened to a reading. Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik reported, ‘Korsh was there, considering Chekhov to be his man. Korsh was stunned. “My dear boy, this is unstageable: you have a man shoot himself off-stage and you don’t even let him make a speech before he dies!”’

In spring 1897 Chekhov had a haemorrhage that landed him in hospital and forced him to obey the doctors’ orders: to leave Moscow, preferably for the south of France, if not the Crimea. The ‘buzz of his fornication’ which had begun to worry, rather than amuse his brother and friends had to die down. There was no more need for Korsh, let alone Yavorskaya. Chekhov’s only contact with Korsh in 1897 was curtly to refuse to let him stage *Uncle Vanya*. Chekhov’s ‘frenemy’, the failed writer Nikolai Ezhov, felt he had a licence to sneer at Korsh in the papers: ‘The motto of Korsh’s theatre is “Everything here is done as you like, quickly, swiftly, on time, local seasonal novelties, and foreign ones of the most recent seasons”.’

Once Chekhov began to settle in Yalta, having fallen in love with Olga Knipper, the actress of the new Moscow Arts Theatre who under Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s direction had finally raised hopes of his own plays being performed as he meant them to be, he lost interest in Fiodor Korsh. Now his own health – he even found climbing stairs difficult – had made him passive, even platonic in his female friendships – and Olga Knipper was systematically isolating him from all but Crimean female society, largely by rebuffing or denouncing Anton’s Moscow girlfriends.

It was Fiodor Korsh who renewed relations and aroused interest by announcing his daughter’s visit to the Crimea on 17 January 1899: ‘Nina has seen *The Seagull* and is ecstatic about it; if you have the spare time to visit her at Shtangeeva’s dacha.’ On the 22nd Chekhov could announce to Lika Mizinova, his chief love for the past ten years, ‘Korsh’s daughter Nina has arrived in Yalta.’ A fortnight later he told his sister, ‘The Korsh maiden has had 100 roubles from me. Fiodor Adamovich will send you the money in Moscow.’ A month later, Nina was still in Yalta ‘at Iakhnenko’s dacha, living on the ground floor’ (an important consideration if he visited her, even though this dacha was a mere ten minutes’ walk from his own).

The 100 roubles were returned to Masha by Nina's father. Chekhov spent a few days in May 1899 at Melikhovo, preparing it for sale and his sister and mother for the move to the Crimea, removing furniture, and giving Olga Knipper a brief chance to see him as an estate owner. Nina wrote on 18 May, asking if she could come on the 20th. He replied, half jokingly, half practically:

‘Dear Nina Fiodorovna, I’ve have received your letter and have noted your promise to come. I’ve ordered a big cup, a big spoon and 35 pounds of cream cheese to be got ready. My sister and I will be expecting you and come out to meet you, but I doubt if we shall send horses, since ours are all out working.. On the 20th they’ll go to the station to fetch a family, then they’ll be taking someone off, etc. I’m constantly shouting and swearing, wearing out my throat, but I’m not being given horses for myself, or for my visitors.

If they won’t let you take the express, then come on train № 13, which leaves Moscow at 4.45. when you get to Lopasnia, hire a cab for 1 rouble. If you want to ride in a carriage with springs, all chic, so that any Grishutka you meet looks greedily at the road and watches you pass with delight in his eyes, then hire a sprung carriage, it costs 2 roubles maximum, and sometimes they take less. If you bring bonbons, some edible snacks, then I’ll be grateful and cover all your expenses with gratitude and even pay for the cab.

Be healthy!! I shake your hand and still remain the colourful writer who still sighs for the girl in blue. A Chekhov’.

In autumn, back in Yalta, Chekhov learnt that Nina was moving to Petersburg to study history and philology and the Bestuzhev Women’s Courses, an external university where some of Russia’s most distinguished academics taught. (Nina had in May 1899 arranged to be a student paramedic at the College for Paramedics and Medical Assistants in Petersburg, but withdraw that August.) He and Nina agreed to raise money from their respective rich contacts to pay for indigent consumptives who had come to Yalta hoping, like Chekhov, to stave off death. Chekhov’s notebooks and address book reveal that he knew quite a lot about Nina: he noted her birthday, 13 May; he had both her Moscow and Petersburg addresses. One note gives the Moscow address, followed by ‘3.20’, but this probably refers not to an appointment, but to the modest sum Nina had collected for charity. Chekhov also reminded himself to lobby for her to be made a school governor in Aleksin district.

Nina was by now automatically qualified to be a governess: she had matriculated from school with a silver medal. After taking the Bestuzhev courses, she could be employed to teach older girls in a grammar school. Even before leaving school, however, she had begun to make a living, and to be of inestimable service to her father, by translating plays from English, French and German (many of these translations were published from 1895 to 1914). They include plays by Eugène Scribe, Alexandre Dumas-fils, Thomas Brandon’s famous farce *Charley’s Aunt*, and Schiller’s *Kabale und Liebe*.

We have 12 (there may have been more) of Nina’s letters to Chekhov: they are restrained, polite, even dry. There is one other surviving letter of Chekhov’s to her (if there were more, then Nina failed to surrender them to his sister Maria

after his death): it shows some of his former flirtatious technique. Just as he used to tease Lika Mizinova by referring to a non-existent vulgar lover of hers called Trofim, so he teased Nina again on 15 November 1899 when she announced she was to study at the Bestuzhev courses:

‘I’m glad for you. Only keep it a secret that you are studying logic and philosophy, or else Grishutka might not like it. He may be an educated man, but he’d readily prefer cooking to any sciences. How’s your health? Are you putting on weight or losing it? It’s good that you don’t go to the theatre often; it would be even better if you didn’t go to the theatre at all, at least for a year or two, and instead spent your evenings at home with a book. Yes, I’m told that *Uncle Vanya* is acted well. It’s my fate not to see my plays. When you’re in Moscow, why not go to the Arts Theatre and then tell me. [...] In 2 or 3 days I’ll send you a proclamation about newly arrived consumptives. Don’t send money, just read it and you’ll see what we’re doing here, then send a few addresses of persons of both sexes who are known to you as charitable donors. I shall bombard philanthropists, metropolitan and provincial. No hurry for the addresses, there’s plenty of time, just send me news. Probably Petersburg is swamped with news nowadays.’

Nina merely replied that she had heard *Uncle Vanya* was being received even more favourably than *The Seagull* but that she wouldn’t see it until Christmas, and as for other matters, that she knew nothing about politics.

This is the first part of the study. The second part is expected to be published in the issue 27/2 of our journal with a full bibliography and a list of archive sources.

(Наставак следи)

Дональд Рейфильд

В ПОИСКАХ ДОЧЕРИ ЧЕХОВА – ПЕРВАЯ ЧАСТЬ

Резюме

Вопрос о возможном отцовстве Антона Чехова недавно был подкреплён некоторыми доказательствами, включая косвенные и письменные свидетельства в российских и сербских архивах, что делает расследование необходимым и, возможно, плодотворным. Эта статья посвящена отношениям Чехова с Ниной Корш, дочерью владельца театра, и доказательствам за и против того, что он был отцом ее ребенка Татьяны, которая родилась в 1901 году и умерла в Сербии в 1938 году. Хотя это исследование не является окончательным, дальнейшие исследования теперь могут дать нам ответ.

Ключевые слова: жизнь Антона Чехова и его круга, русский театр на рубеже XIX–XX веков, семья Корш, русская эмиграция в Королевстве сербов, хорватов и словенцев.