

Pushkin "Made" Russian Literature

Had There Been No Alexander Pushkin, Russia's Famed Thinkers, Tolstoi, Dostoievsky, Gogol and Others Might Have Written in French for want of a language. His great talent made him a court favorite; excited the envy of his unscrupulous enemies, and later caused his untimely death.



"D'Anthes fired, the ball lodging in the Poet's intestines."

By J. A. ROGERS

A Count Alexander Sergevitch Pushkin belongs to the unique distinction of having "made" a great European language.

Pushkin is known as "The Father of Russian Literature." But he is more. He took the half-formed and neglected Russian language that hitherto had been used only by slaves and the lower classes and shaped it into a thing of living beauty.

Prior to Pushkin, French was the language of the educated Russian. Russia has had many great writers since. She has had Count Tolstoi, Dostoievsky, Gogol, Gorky, Lenin. Had there been no Pushkin, Russia's famed thinkers might still be writing in French.

When a Russian writes or speaks his language he is more indebted to Pushkin than peoples of the Anglo-Saxon language are to Shakespeare.

Pushkin was a Negro. He was descended on his mother's side from Abraham Petrovitch Hannibal, surnamed "The Negro of Peter the Great."

As to Hannibal his story out-romances romance. Captured in a slave raid in Africa, he was taken to Constantinople and sold. A Russian officer, seeing him in a seraglio there, talked with him and found him so unusually intelligent, that he stole him and took him to Russia.

Adopted by Emperor

There he was taken to the emperor, Peter the Great, who was so impressed with him that he acted as his godfather on his conversion to Christianity and sent him, as was the custom, to be educated in the best schools in France.

On his return he was made a member of Peter the Great's own personal guard. Later, on the accession of the Empress Elizabeth to the throne he rose to be general-in-chief of the Russian army, and was promoted to the nobility. At his

death he left several estates, 1500 slaves and seven children.

Pushkin was born at Moscow, June 7, 1799, his father being a member of the Russian nobility. Like others of his class, his training was entirely in French; the Russian language he picked up from his niania or white "mammy," and the slaves on his father's plantation.

His "mammy" had come into extensive contact with Russian high society, she also knew Russian history, and told him stories that thrilled him. From the slaves he learned folk-songs and folk tales. But the sweetest of all tales, the tales that did most to fire his youthful imagination were those told of his ancestor, Hannibal.

At twelve he entered the Imperial Academy, where his outspoken criticism of men and things, his bold epigrams, and his poetic ability at once created a stir. At fifteen his first poem brought him immediate fame, exciting the admiration of Derzhavin, then the leading poet of Russia. This poem was recited everywhere, so profound an impression did it make on all classes of Russians, high and low. And it was all the more daring as it had been written in Russian and away from the conventional French forms. "With one cut of his sword," says a critic, "Pushkin had freed Russian literature from the ties which were keeping it enslaved."

Was Boy Prodigy

At eighteen Pushkin had become the greatest poet in Russia and the creator of a new school. He had the gift of taking the simplest things of life, the commonest feelings of the ordinary person and relating them in a manner that thrilled.

And he was the love poet, par excellence. His verses were the delight of millions of illiterate peasant women and slaves. "Pushkin," says another writer, "represented love under so many aspects, in such beautiful forms and with such a variety

of shades as one finds in no other an expression so refined, so high, that his higher comprehension of love left as deep a stamp upon subsequent Russian literature as Goethe's refined women left on the world's literature. After Pushkin had written it was impossible for Russian poets to speak of love in a lower sense than he did."

Pushkin was also the poet of Liberty. When Nature, or God, or Life, or whatever you will has some great mission to perform, it picks not a black, white, red, or yellow man, but a MAN. Pushkin had come upon a scene of autocracy and slavery, some thirty millions of his fellow-Russians, all white, were held in the grip of a hard, cruel slavery. And unlike the Negro, they were of the soil from time immemorial. Pushkin's poems had fulfilled the great desire for self-expression dormant in the Russian people, now they went further; they stirred that spirit of liberty slumbering in the oppressed masses.

Champion of Freedom

"He made poetry," says another critic, "the highest activity of the human spirit. He, therefore, proclaimed the right of human personality to be free. From the very first words of his poetic creations, he unequivocally declared himself a champion of freedom."

His great sympathy was with the oppressed. It was their sufferings, their simplicity, their patience, that had inspired him. At twenty he wrote his "Ode to Liberty," which was suppressed and caused his banishment to the Caucasus. Even in the days of slavery in America there was a certain measure of free speech. In Russia, however, it was autocracy, pure and simple.

In exile, Pushkin continued his satires against the rulers of his time. The secret police finally descended on him, and he had just enough time to burn his papers, thus

escaping the most dreaded punishment of the time, banishment to Siberia.

Later, he was given a government post in the Caucasus under the governor, Prince Vorontzoff, but he wrote a satire on the latter that caused his arrest. Finally he was sent back a prisoner to his family, who was held responsible for him. But his independent ways brought him into continual quarrels with them and fleeing from them, he went off to live among the slaves and peasants on a distant estate. Here he devoted himself to his work.

The next important event in Pushkin's life occurred in 1826. At this time a large number of his associates, who had pledged themselves to the overthrow of autocracy and the liberation of the slaves, were arrested and sent to Siberia. Pushkin was away at the time, and thus escaped. When the Czar, Nicholas I, learned that Pushkin had not been among the conspirators, he sent for him.

"We are very glad to learn, Count," he said, "that you were not among those arrested for conspiring against us."

"Your Majesty," replied Pushkin, with his usual frankness, "had I been present I would have been arrested for they are my comrades and friends."

Accepts Court Position

"And that would have caused us great sorrow," replied the Czar. "Count, we are highly grateful to you for all you have done for Russia. We wish you to be always near us. We name you imperial historian."

Pushkin thanked the Czar but declined saying such a post would hinder still further the freedom of his pen. At that time every book printed in Russia was first censored.

"In that case," countered the Czar, "we, ourselves, will undertake to be censor of your works, and you'll

find us a most indulgent one." (That is, the Czar himself would.)

After such an offer there was nothing else for Pushkin to do but accept.

But, as will be seen, this offer was to be Pushkin's undoing. Nor was it to be the Czar's fault, for he loved Pushkin as a brother, and spent a great deal of time in his company. At that first meeting, after Pushkin had left, he had said to the Czar:

"We have just been talking with the wittiest man in all Russia."

If Pushkin had been an important figure before, he was all the more so now. Editors fought for his manuscripts; everyone sought his autographs, he was in the eyes of all.

However, he could not have come into a more unfavorable environment than that of the Russian Court, or for that matter, any Court. At once the jealousy of the members of the Czar's retinue fastened itself on this young man, whose brilliancy and wit eclipsed theirs as an arc light does a candle. Above all he committed the unpardonable sin of winning what nearly everyone was striving for: the special favor of the Czar.

To aggravate matters Pushkin hated artificiality, hypocrisy, and intrigue, which are the life of Courts. "When I meet fools and hypocrites," he once said, "it is all I can do to keep from biting them." His life among the slaves and peasants had but served to heighten his hatred of cant.

Could Not Hate

But, as one of his friends said to him: "You have no hatred, even when you bite your friends." The fact is that Pushkin was incapable of doing physical hurt to any one.

But there was his pen, and his genius for repartee. With the keen rapier of his wit he attacked them, and they writhed helplessly. All

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