

Alexander Sergevich Pushkin (1799-1837)

BLACK EUROPEANS: A British Library Online Gallery feature by guest curator Mike Phillips

Abram was the son of an African ruler; possibly from Chad, possibly from what is now Eritrea. At the age of eight he was either abducted or sent to the court of the Turkish Sultan in Constantinople. He might have stayed there had it not been for the desire of the Russian Emperor, Peter the Great, to emulate Western fashions. Peter was a great moderniser. For example, he banned his nobles from wearing beards in the old Russian style. He had seen black pages at the court of Louis XIV of France and in aristocratic circles in England, so it was only a matter of time before he acquired one. One more generous contemporary view was that, as part of his modernising project, Peter used Abram's education and career to demonstrate that anyone, "even from among wild men, such as Negroes" could be trained to give valuable service to sovereign and state.

Bought from the Sultan, Abram arrived in Russia and was baptised with Tsar Peter standing as his godfather. Peter visited France in 1717, and at the same time Abram was sent to study there, as one of Peter's emergent and foreign educated officer class. He returned with the conventional skills of an officer of artillery, but he had also acquired a new name, Hannibal. The name had echoes of republican defiance which, later on, were significant to Pushkin. A respected military engineer, he was promoted under successive rulers and lived on into the reign of Catherine the Great, dying only 18 years before A.S. Pushkin was born.

His third son (of 11) Osip Abramovich married Marya Alexeevna, and his share of Abram's inheritance was the estate of Mikhailovskoe (5000 acres and about 200 serfs) His daughter with Marya Alexeevna was Pushkin's mother Nadezhda.

Pushkin's father was a captain in the Chasseur Guards, became a civil servant in 1800, and retired in 1817. He came from a family of boyars (nobles) who were flourishing in the times of Ivan the Terrible, but whose fortunes declined under Peter the Great. Sergei Lvovich inherited the family estates, notably Boldino, which supported 1200 serfs and which provided an income that might have kept the family in comfort if he had been a better manager. Sergei, however, only visited his estates twice during his lifetime. He had the reputation of being an idle, frivolous and miserly man, who disliked being burdened with domestic trivia, but he was also a fluent French speaker and had a large library of French literature and philosophy, both of which offered Pushkin a solid grounding for his later education. On the other hand, Pushkin's relations with his father have the sound of a generation comedy. A conventional but more or less indifferent father, he is also reported to have suffered agonies of apprehension about the trouble his son was risking in clashes with various authorities.

A.S. Pushkin complained bitterly about Sergei's meanness and his lack of affection, but his father was generous enough to sign over Boldino on the occasion of the poet's marriage.

Pushkin's mother inherited Mikhailovskoe from her father Osip, but he had left it so heavily encumbered with debt that, during her lifetime, the income went into paying it off. She was undoubtedly beautiful and elegant and also, in some ways, the mother from hell. She was disappointed in young Alexander's appearance. She found him dull and chubby, disliked his swarthy looks and flat nose, and openly preferred her daughter Olga, and younger son, Lev. She wanted him to run about, be more sprightly and charming, and she nagged him to such an extent that he would run away and hide. After such episodes Nadezhda Osipovna would be so annoyed that she refused to speak to him for days. He had two habits which got on her nerves, rubbing his hands together and losing his handkerchiefs. To cure him of the hand-rubbing, she once tied his hands together behind his back and let him go for an entire day without food. To remind him about the handkerchiefs she sewed one to his jacket.

Pushkin spent his schooldays at the Lyceum at Tsarskoe Seloe. The school had 30 pupils and was inaugurated in October 1811 at a ceremony attended by the Imperial family, where the boys were presented to Tsar Alexander who had briefly considered enrolling his brother, the future Tsar.

In the aristocratic circles to which the Pushkins belonged, Sergei Lvovich was regarded as impoverished, but the ancient nobility of his ancestry, along with the distinction of the Gannibals, meant that the family had an automatic entry to the highest rank of society. Appropriately, his son Alexander received the best education to be found in Russia. The school had been a palace occupied by various Grand Duchesses, and its facilities were impressive for the time and the place. The boys lived on the fourth floor, and on the floor below were classrooms, a physics lab, a reading room with newspapers and journals, and a library.

The Lyceum was the scene of Pushkin's greatest youthful triumph, when at the age of 14 his first published work appeared in the journal *The Messenger of Europe* (1814). The following year he was invited to perform after the end of term examinations. The event was attended by various dignitaries, including the Minister of the Interior and the hugely respected 18th-century poet Derzhavin. His poem *Reminiscences of Tsarskoe Seloe* was a great success, and Derzhavin predicted that he would be replaced by the young poet. This was the first scene in Pushkin's life to be later immortalised on canvas.

Less than two years after leaving school Pushkin was already famous and already in trouble with the authorities. There was more than one reason for the reputation he acquired at this point and which was to help shape his entire life. He had appeared in St Petersburg and immediately launched into a life of gambling, women and poetry. All graduates of the Lyceum were obliged to enter either the military or the Civil Service and Pushkin had taken up a junior position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The post paid very little, but allowed him the time to spend most of his mornings in bed, his afternoons strolling along Nevsky Prospekt, and his evenings at fashionable parties, followed by drinking and cards. At the same time he wrote incessantly, producing a stream of poems, one of which, *Ode to Freedom*, caused his expulsion from the capital and later on threatened his survival. His first major epic, *Ruslan and Lyudmilla*, was also completed during this period, along with various satires - at least one of which (*Noelles*) openly mocked Tsar Alexander. Another poem which attracted the attention of the censors and the police was *The Village*, which is an overt attack on the horrors of serfdom.

Pushkin, influenced by French verse and the prose of such writers as Voltaire, wrote with an unaccustomed clarity and directness. His poems avoid decorative metaphors and lavish descriptions of landscapes, but his renderings of people and events have a fluency of mood and emotional tone which is immediately seductive. He also had no inhibitions about composing satirical verses in everyday, conversational Russian, subverting the formality of classical versifying. His epigrams, and his quatrains were often short, wicked (and sometimes obscene) gems of wit, qualities he also expressed in his longer works. His friends, the entire circle of young officers and courtiers in the capital, quoted and laughed over his words. His talents made his satires even more dangerous in the eyes of the authorities, especially because Pushkin compounded his notoriety by his wild behaviour. His gambling, womanising and drinking were not exceptional in his circle, apart from the fact that he sometimes went to extremes. He was said to have caught a cold waiting outside a prostitute's door one rainy night when she refused to let him in. Then he rolled out of his seat in a drunken stupor one night at the theatre, and on another occasion, applauded by beating on the bald head of a man sitting in front of him. Even worse, he had an uncertain temper, and he fought or threatened to fight duels on a regular basis. Everything about Pushkin made sure that he was unlikely to be overlooked.

In 1920 Pushkin was the subject of police suspicion because of the subversive tone of his poems, and he was called before the Governor General of St Petersburg to account for his political views. He had taken the precaution of burning his manuscripts in case his lodgings were searched, and he told the Governor this but offered to write down his verses from memory. He made a favourable impression, reinforced by the pleadings of more established poets on his behalf. Pushkin had mocked and insulted his old headmaster but when Tsar Alexander asked the man's opinion he defended the young poet. The Tsar, however, insisted on some punishment. He stopped short of sending Pushkin to Siberia, and instead dispatched him to the North Caucasus on a kind of sabbatical.

When Pushkin set off for Bessarabia (South Russia) in the autumn of 1820 he was not completely downcast to be leaving St Petersburg, already the scene of various quarrels and dangers. Although the realisation changed nothing about his behaviour or his writing, the danger in which he stood was real. This was not a good time to mock an autocratic ruler, especially Tsar Alexander. The Tsar had come to the throne with the connivance of a group of officers who murdered his father. He was popularly

suspected of being involved, and any reference to the affair disturbed him. Pushkin's *Ode* talked of the instruments of torture still in use, and also made indirect references to Alexander's guilt, so by the standards of the time he enjoyed a surprising tolerance. During his lifetime many of his close friends were to be hanged, imprisoned or exiled under harsher conditions. Given Pushkin's indiscretion, and willingness to air his opinion in his poetry, he might be said to have led a charmed life.

He was sent to Ekaterinoslav, close to the Black Sea and Russia's borders with Turkey and what is now Romania. The town was far from the grandeur of St Petersburg, and many of the inhabitants lived in huts. Pushkin arrived in a bad mood, and when some local worthies came to visit, saying that they wanted to see the famous poet, he replied – "Well now you've seen him. Goodbye." As if to confirm everything the locals had heard, he attended his first social outing, a banquet given by the Governor, wearing see-through muslin trousers without underwear. Fortunately, Pushkin fell ill soon after and was taken off to visit the Caucasus by the family of a St Petersburg friend. This was the real frontier with Asia, still turbulent with resentment against Russian rule. Pushkin was deeply impressed by the untamed scenery and restless population. One of his most popular poems, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, about a romance between a Russian prisoner and a Circassian girl, drew on this period of his travels. The poem was written in Kishinev, where the Governor of the province had moved his headquarters - a town in Moldavia which had changed hands several times in Russia's struggles with the Ottoman Empire. Its population was a cosmopolitan mix of Greeks, Turks, Moldavian peasants and various nationalities from all over the region. Although Pushkin continued to feel isolated and lonely, he enjoyed the rich ethnic mix around him, and he explored the town and the region of Southern Bessarabia making friends with the gypsies and sometimes joining in their street performances.

As usual, he was writing furiously in Kishinev. *The Prisoner* signalled the end of his Byronic phase, although he retained an interest in the Greek struggle for independence. On the other hand, he began reading and writing more seriously, filling the first of a series of notebooks in which he would record his thoughts and literary plans. In this period he also completed *The Dagger*, celebrating the assassination of a reactionary official, followed by two of his bawdiest tales. In *The Gabrielad*, Mary, the mother of Jesus is seduced by the Devil, by the angel Gabriel and finally by God himself, all in one day. In *The Tsar Nikita and His Forty Daughters* a messenger has to return the missing private parts of the Tsar's daughters. At the same time he had begun the first part of his epic tale *Evgeny Onegin*; and as if all this wasn't enough Pushkin assuaged his boredom by incessantly picking quarrels, once challenging a Greek to a duel for expressing surprise that he hadn't read a particular book.

In the summer of 1823 Pushkin took a trip to Odessa, on the edge of the Black Sea, secured himself a post with the Governor, Count Vorontsov, and left Kishinev in the following month. Odessa was the administrative capital of Southern Russia, had fine European buildings and a French restaurant, but Pushkin was bored within a month. By this time he was

famous for his epic *Ruslan and Lyudmilla*, and he realised for the first time that it would be possible to make his living solely by writing. The obstacle in his way was official censorship, and the more he heard about his popularity in the North, the more his frustration at his enforced exile increased. In between writing *Evgeny Onegin* and lobbying for official release from government service, he spent his time initiating love affairs, and penning insulting epigrams about his new boss. Vorontsov believed (correctly) that the young poet was trying to seduce his wife, and within a few months the Count was pleading with his superiors to deliver him from Pushkin. Pushkin was not allowed to resign, but in June one of his letters to a friend in which he light-heartedly talked about taking 'lessons in atheism' was intercepted. It was all the excuse needed for his dismissal, and by August 1824 Pushkin's name had been struck from the list of Civil Servants and he was on his way back to his parents' estate in Mikhailovskoe, under police supervision.

Pushkin was pleasantly surprised by the warmth of his reception at Mikhailovskoe. Unfortunately, the local authorities imposed on his father the responsibility of supervising and reporting on his daily behaviour and his dangerous political tendencies. Sergei went as far as opening his son's letters and furious quarrels ensued. During one of them Sergei claimed that his son had threatened to strike him. Letters of complaint flew back and forth and in the end Sergei removed himself and the rest of the family to St Petersburg, never to return while Alexander was on the premises. After his departure Pushkin began to recover the happiest part of his childhood. Although he was not actually enthusiastic about having to live there, Mikhailovskoe was his refuge, and in later life he longed to be able to flee the bright lights of the city and retire there.

The estate was like a tiny kingdom. The Pushkins didn't only own the land, they owned the people who lived on it. At Mikhailovskoe Pushkin lived the life he had treasured as a child. In winter he went down to the lake and broke the ice with his fist to plunge in for a swim or he went riding or walking round the countryside, amusing and puzzling the peasants with his style of dress, a Russian shirt, baggy trousers and straw hat. They noted also his habit of jumping around, waving his arms and talking loudly to himself.

Pushkin was not reputed to be a particularly dutiful manager. The village chieftain (*starost*), took care of the land, while Arina Rodionova, his old nanny and a sort of surrogate mother to Pushkin looked after the house. In the evening Arina told him fairy stories and Russian folk tales. One thing Pushkin did well at Mikhailovskoe was to write, composing much of his best work there. He wrote down Irina's folk tales, finished *The Gypsies* which he had started in Odessa, expanded the collection which was to be the core of his great library, continued his studies of Russian history, and composed a play, *Boris Godunov*, based on a little-known historical episode. At the same time he cultivated a family of distant relations, the Osipovs, who lived a mere two miles away, and would turn up at any hour to tell stories read his poems or flirt with the women of the family.

In December of 1824 Tsar Alexander died. The legitimate heir was his brother Constantine, who declined the honour and abdicated in favour of his younger brother Nicholas. Neither brother was popular, but public opinion feared Nicholas more. A group of young officers saw the accession as their chance for action. They became known as the Decembrists but they had been meeting and debating revolutionary topics for a number of years. Many of them had been Pushkin's schoolfriends, influenced by the ideas of the Lyceum's first director, Malinowsky, who had written in favour of the emancipation of slaves and permanent peace, and who had been forbidden to speak at the inauguration of the school.

The Decembrists planned for all the regiments who supported them to assemble in the Senate Square during the oath of allegiance to Nicholas and to shout for Constantine and a constitution. In the event few of the regiments turned up, and neither did the Decembrist leader, Prince Trubetskoy. Nicholas ordered his supporters to open fire and the rebels dispersed. After the subsequent arrests and interrogations, five of Pushkin's close friends were hanged, and 100 officers were exiled to Siberia.

Whether Pushkin owed the fact that he survived the Decembrist revolt to luck or intuition is not clear. He had set out for St Petersburg on 1 December but turned back because a couple of hares ran across his path. He was therefore far away from St Petersburg at the time of the revolt, but over the next few months various agents made attempts to claim that he was implicated. This was the time of Pushkin's greatest danger, because some of the conspirators had confessed to being influenced by *Ode to Freedom*. The following September Nicholas ordered Pushkin to present himself at his headquarters in Moscow. After the resulting interview the Tsar freed Pushkin to travel anywhere within the Empire apart from St Petersburg, to enter which he would need special permission. Nicholas also declared that in future he himself would be the poet's censor. Pushkin left in a state of euphoria, but Nicholas had been less generous than he appeared. The actual censor was Count Benckendorff, the Tsar's chief of security, whose first step was to call Pushkin to account for reading *Boris Godunov* to a group of friends without asking permission.

After the interview with Tsar Nicholas, Pushkin's career was at its most successful. His earlier work was being published and he was received everywhere with great acclaim. His release had energised him, and as if to mark a new chapter in his life he began writing his novel, *The Negro of Peter the Great*. He had been thinking about a project involving Abram for some time. After leaving school in 1817, he had met the last surviving son of Abram's, his grandfather's brother, Peter, who kept calling for vodka until they were both legless. In 1825 he wrote in his diaries that he was "counting on seeing my old Negro of a Great-uncle, who I guess is going to die one of these fine days, and I must get from him some memoirs about my great-grandfather". He made the trip a week or so later, leaving with an unpublished biography of Abram and a memoir about the family written by Peter. Nevertheless, while Pushkin clearly knew the facts, there is no evidence that his *Negro*, Ibrahim, shared the attitudes or

experiences of the real Abram Hannibal. This makes it all the more tempting to see in the racism which surrounds the character in the novel a statement about Pushkin's own experience.

Pushkin referred frequently to his African blood and his 'negro' temperament, but he said little about any personal difficulties such characteristics might have caused in Russian society, and his feelings can only be deduced from his account in *The Negro of Peter the Great* of Ibrahim's environment. For instance, in the novel, when Ibrahim leaves France he writes to his lover asking why she would want to unite herself to the "unhappy lot of a negro", "a pitiful creature whom people scarcely deign to recognise as human". In St Petersburg, the parents of the girl that the Tsar has picked out for his protégé can hardly conceal her horror at the prospect, while her mother whines about the ugliness of his features. Pushkin himself had more than once been abused as "monkey face", and in the circumstances it seems significant that at the time he wrote *The Negro* Pushkin himself had started looking for a wife.

Natalya Ivanovna Goncharova came from an impoverished family. Her father was a notorious alcoholic and her mother, formerly a lady-in-waiting to the Empress, had been married off under suspicious circumstances. Pushkin's nickname for the mother was Mama Kars after a Turkish fortress. Natasha, on the other hand, was surrounded by admirers from an early age, and had the reputation of being one of the country's outstanding beauties. Pushkin had been kicking his heels in Moscow. Although he applied more than once for permission to go abroad Nicholas always refused. Marriage offered the only prospect of change in a life barely under his control. Pushkin proposed in the spring of 1829, but Natalya's mother did not accept him until a year later. Even so, the marriage kept being put off. An uncle died, then Pushkin was quarantined in Boldino, his father's estate, by an outbreak of cholera. On his return to Moscow another old friend died and the wedding was once again postponed until February, when it finally took place. The couple produced four children: Maria (1832), Alexander (1834), Grigory (1835), and Natalya (1836).

The autumn of 1835 in Boldino had been one of Pushkin's most productive and initiated a remarkable progression. He finished *Evgeny Onegin*, wrote four highly-regarded tragedies (including *Mozart and Salieri*), an innovative group of short stories, a narrative poem and about 30 shorter poems. His married life was relatively peaceful, apart from the pressure of his debts. He worked seriously on a history of the Cossack rebellion against the Empress Catherine, led by Emelyan Pugachev. Nicholas gave permission for it to be published and lent him the money to publish it at his own expense. Pushkin felt his future was assured. For Natalya, on the other hand, life was a constant round of economies, and struggling to make ends meet. The Tsar had met her a few months after the wedding - and, much taken by her beauty, began making her one of his circle. Pushkin, hard at work on researching *Pugachev*, was relatively untroubled.

At Boldino in the autumn of 1833 Pushkin finished his history of Pugachev, and wrote a verse fairy story, two short stories and a novel - then topped it all off with the epic poem *The Bronze Horseman*. It focuses on the statue of Peter the Great in St Petersburg and begins with an account of the great flood of 1824. There have been innumerable interpretations of the poem, and what it says about Peter or imperialism, but it remains a towering work which continues to overshadow much of Pushkin's output. On the other hand, the developing prose style of stories like *The Queen of Spades* was to exert a greater influence on succeeding generations of writers, both in Russia and beyond.

Pushkin and his wife met George D'Anthès in 1834. D'Anthès was the adopted son of the Dutch ambassador, a handsome and dashing Frenchman who had joined the Tsar's army to advance his career. He began paying court to Natalya in 1835, and at first Pushkin did not take the matter seriously. He was often absent, however, which allowed plenty of time for the relationship to develop, and vicious rumours began to circulate. Natalya was careless in her behaviour and D'Anthès made a point of dropping hints in private and in public. The whole affair came to a head early in November when Pushkin received a letter informing him that he had been elected to The Most Serene Order of Cuckolds. Pushkin immediately issued a challenge, but the duel was put off and delayed by a complex series of negotiations initiated by D'Anthès' adopted father. As a result D'Anthès proposed to Natalya's sister and married her within the month, but his secret meetings with Natalya continued. The inevitable duel took place on the afternoon of 27 January 1837. Pushkin was killed, although he managed to wound D'Anthès after being shot.

The grief which broke out on the news of Pushkin's death was unprecedented and took the authorities by surprise. The secret police saw such spontaneous demonstrations as threatening. The funeral was transferred from the cathedral at the last moment to a smaller church and every effort was made to play down public mourning. In the repressive atmosphere of the century, Pushkin continued to be viewed for decades as a threat to public order and a source of dangerous ideas.

It was more than 30 years later that the poet's genius received public acknowledgement, when a statue of Pushkin was unveiled in Moscow during 1880, and Dostoevsky delivered an emotional tribute. Since then Pushkin has been all things to all men, in response to the various shifts in the political and social climate in Russia. In the rest of the world the operas of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov brought Pushkin's imagination to a wider public. The Soviets highlighted his friendship with the Decembrists to claim his posthumous support.

Now he appears, in a continent struggling with the different claims of ethnicity and nationality, to be a figure who was capable of using the different strands of his identity to create and inspire new modes of seeing and new cultural achievements.

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