

# In honor of a great Russian poet



## Katya Tsetsura

● Other voices

This Sunday all Russians celebrate the bicentennial birthday of the most famous, talented, loved and greatest Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin.

By right, Pushkin is considered as one of the brightest diamonds in the Russian literary necklace. Very likely, Pushkin's works have the same importance for Russian readers that works of Shakespeare have for English readers. Pushkin, indeed, is the greatest Russian poet and writer.

Living in the 19th century, he was the main character in the Golden Age of Russian poetry.

He brought to Russian literature a whole new understanding of clear poetic language. His fresh, completely new attempt to use modern language in poetic texts became the event for the literature of that period. Before, poetry was always highly stylized and complex, hardly understandable and triumphal.

And Pushkin, that mischievous child, as critics called him, made poetry available to the public by using simple, everyday language. "Simplicity is beauty" was the principle that later reflected the dramatic change in the language of Russian literature.

Alexander Pushkin ruined all rules and became the most fabulous poet ever.

Pushkin was born June 6, 1799, in Moscow. Among his ancestors and relatives were many interesting persons, including his great-grandfather Ibrahim Gannibal, who came to Russia from the African continent.

The education Pushkin received in his childhood and adolescence had an impressive impact on the future poet. Growing up

on Russian literary masterpieces, Pushkin mixed their glory with his restless character and the gaiety that inspired him to cheerful poems. Pushkin was merry and joyous. He could make stinging remarks as easily as he made memorable compliments.

We can talk for weeks about Pushkin's literary legacy as well as his outstanding effect on the public and especially about the women in his life and their influence on his creativity.

Even though Pushkin was not very handsome, something had to be in that man, physically and emotionally, for all Russian beauties of the beginning of the 19th century to be truly in love with the poet. Probably, they liked his wonderful physical condition: Pushkin perfectly fenced, swam, boxed, bathed in the ice-holes during the wintertime.

But most likely, women were conquered by his genius and talent, original personality, incredible sense of humor and his ability to get attention from anyone.

Stories about Pushkin's love adventures were and are very popular. One day Pushkin wrote his well-known "Don Juan List" in the album of his friends, the sisters Ushakovy, that included the names of 37 women who were victims of Pushkin's infatuation and love victories. Among those women were a number of glamorous beau-

ties, but the list ended with the name Natalya.

Natalya Goncharova was the most elegant Russian lady of the 1830s and became Pushkin's only wife. To the point, it is to be mentioned that Natalya became an involuntary cause of the death of the greatest poet, who, defending his wife's honor, was shot in a duel by French D'Antes, on Jan. 29, 1837. Pushkin was just 37.

Nevertheless, he was very productive in his short life and left a tremendous number of poems, stories, novels, diaries, travelling notes and even the unique — for Russia — novel in poem form, "Eugene Onegin."

But Pushkin sparkled in the 19th century in many different ways. He was not only lucky man, a great poet and a successful Russian *Don Juan* — he also was a famous figure on the Russian political stage. Among his friends were many disgraced persons (such as Russian "dekabristy," representatives of the intelligentsia whose rebellion in 1825 became history).

Pushkin wrote poems, novels and materials for magazines, unpleasant for the authorities, which caused his exile from the capital to the south of Russia, where he was inspired to other marvelous works.

Dozens of poems by Pushkin, his stories and poem tales (literary versions of old folk tales his nurse told him in childhood) are well known by all Russian people who read and learn them from the early ages. Pushkin's works often are the only thing Russians remember from literature course in middle school. Russians are engrossed in Pushkin reading. In other words, Russians adore Pushkin.

Pushkin's literary genius put him in the

same rank as great Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov, but he is virtually unknown outside Russia compared to them. This paradox is one of the most mysterious questions in world literature: Why is Pushkin not popular in other countries? Is it that the unique Russian language makes it impossible to translate Pushkin's poems? Is it the incompetence of foreign translators? Is it that no other language can express Pushkin's humor and the uniquely Russian details of life and world perception? Perhaps all of these.

But it mostly seems that Pushkin was not, is not and will not be the literary event for English language because in another tongue he can be understood but cannot be keenly felt. It is impracticable to translate from Russian someone who united lyrical Keats, skeptical and witty Byron, zealous Milton and epic and wholly quotable Shakespeare.

In spite of that, thousands of foreign speakers admire Pushkin's works, study them, translate them, read them and enjoy them. And this year, the official UNESCO "Year of Pushkin," hundreds of people celebrate his bicentennial birthday. The United States joins in this celebration. On Friday, a project planned by the American-Russian Cultural Cooperation Foundation together with the joint American and Russian public, began to be realized. In Washington, D.C., the first stone was put in place in the American capital for a Pushkin monument to honor the great poet whose works form the classic core of the whole of Russian literature.

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