

Sergei was at the wheel, I was riding shotgun—and from the backseat Tatyana read *Evgeniy Onegin* aloud, both in Russian and in English, a road trip luxury far greater than any audiobook on earth.

That we were gliding through one of the most stunningly beautiful places on earth amplified the experience. Crimea was an Eden garden of forests and sea views, mountains and coastal strands. Some of the hectares were segmented into vineyards, idyllic and agrarian. Past mid-May right now, the root stock had begun to leaf out. Poppies dotted the swales, a crimson blur among the vine-encrusted terraces. Our drive today had juxtaposed sheer limestone massifs and panoramic shimmers of seashore against rift valleys carpeted with spruce, larch and spreading cypress.

Tatyana was reading from a new edition of *Onegin*, something an Oxford scholar had brought out. The retooled translation lay side by side, book-matched, with the original Cyrillic verse.

*In the haze of noon I'll dwell on somber Russia,
Where I knew suffering, love and toil.
My heart is buried in her soil.*

I let the words wash over me as I gazed upon the hills and slopes.

Our destination was Bakhchisarai, one-time Islamic capital of Crimea, still 30 kilometers inland, one-time destination for Pushkin too. His poem “Fountain of Bakhchisarai” spun an elegiac tale about a famous cascade in the sultan’s palace there. Catherine the Great had in fact been a guest of the sultan for several days during her epic trip here in May 1787, a celebration of her Silver Jubilee year. Secret gardens awaited her, sheltered under arbors lush with wisteria. Roses, jasmine, orange trees and pomegranates scented the air. Crimea, known as Tavrída during that time, had been a hard-won acquisition for the empress following the defeat of the Ottoman Khanate only three years before. As a gift to her new subjects, she ordered the construction of two mosques for Bakhchisarai.

Little would be tranquil for Tavrída after that. Heaven and hell seemed to collide spectacularly on this peninsula, all of its Edenic splendor fusing sometimes with

catastrophic events. The Crimean War, for instance, took its toll in 1854, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and many White Russians fled the civil war in 1922 from Yalta's harbor. The Nazis occupied Crimea during the Great Patriotic War, and in 1944 once the Red Army had driven the Reich out, Stalin ordered the mass deportation of Tatar Muslims from the peninsula. Some of them had defected to the Nazis during the occupation. Stalin punished those who had aided the enemy and those who had not alike. Because Bakhchisarai remained Crimea's Islamic nerve center, the devastation hit that city especially hard. Men, women and children were herded like livestock into open freight cars from the train station and shipped by rail to Uzbekistan, a familiarly recurrent story line from that era.

Underscoring the leaden solemnity of that long past tragedy was the fact that today, 18 May, was the anniversary of the deportation, a day to mourn, a day to reflect on it all, a day to rail against any force on earth with the power to pour the population of a town, a nation, into rolling stock.

Thus our need for Pushkin today.

The Father of Russian Literature had forged a special bond with Bakhchisarai during his exile in Crimea, circa 1820. The fountain for which he wrote his famous poem still shimmered forth its sparkling flow in the sultan's palace. The palace was now a museum, and we were on our way to tour it.

In the driver's seat, Sergei steadied the steering wheel, occasionally addressing some prompt from his iPhone or giving his attention to the GPS. He was as fluent in English as I in Russian, which meant we shared little more than a halting patois—but we both laid claim to a bit of German. Last night I had looked up one of my favorite Goethe quotes, wanting to double check verb tense and case, and I'd bookmarked it on my iPad. As a treat for Sergei I would recite it at some point today.

Und wann der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt, gab mir ein Gott zu sagen was ich leide. And when people cry out in pain, give me a God to say what I suffer.

Goethe had been a contemporary of Pushkin's. No doubt the two knew of each other's work. Both were game changers in the *belles lettres* of their nations, both with strong reputations during their lives. I looked from Tatyana to Sergei. Our road trip, already steeped in language and culture, was about to level up. Something in Crimea's rich beauty, the snug way its landscape engulfed us, the unrelenting fact of its historical volatility and its geopolitical upheaval, demanded foundational poets of the Highest

Order. Goethe and Pushkin checked all the boxes. That today was 18 May underscored this. *Gab mir ein Gott!*

Sergei steered us along a sun-splashed ridge. Tatyana's voice sounded from the backseat. Because she was double-reading *Onegin*, it was slow going. We were barely past the verses of Chapter 1 which every Russian schoolchild had memorized.

It was good to go slowly, though, good to turbocharge Pushkin on a day like this. Maybe only he could really understand.

All poets asked us to ponder their imagery and declamations, devising little puzzles for us in verse, some of which even looked like puzzles on the page, and Pushkin was abundantly gifted in all kinds of literary magic. He created storied edifices of wonder, micro-sagas that were as self-contained and beguiling as Faberge eggs.

Poor Pushkin, however--!

Just when we needed him to deliver a gut check of the greatest magnitude, a wound quite literally to his own gut took him down. At 37 years of age he died after a duel with his brother-in-law.

Death stopped him. Nothing else could have kept him silent, only death. There was nothing between us and Pushkin, save an image, a metaphor, a rhyme, those typical tools of the poet which were only there really to accentuate and elucidate the overall meaning, not to obscure it.

In all the years since he spoke, in all the quiet decades, we had had to hear the voices of others, listen to others drone on and on, subsist on their words—but we had never stopped tuning our ears to him, waiting.

"He was our literary Genghis," Tatyana had said when we first got in the car. Pushkin had unquestionably conquered the world of *belles lettres*, a distinctly Russian poet with a distinctly Russian vision. As Tatyana spoke, however, I realized her comparison to the notorious Khan extended beyond merely matters of literary conquest. Pushkin shared other Genghis-like proclivities. "He had 1000 women," she told me.

"Oh, my."

"1000, Barbara."

"Wow."

When Pushkin's poetry ran afoul of the imperial censor, Tsar Alexander I exiled him to Russia's southern frontier. Pushkin spent years yearning for his beloved Petersburg—the balls, the opulence, the luster. Some of those years were here in Crimea.

A Tatar village downcoast from Yalta claimed him hard, small quaint cute little homespun Gyrsuf. Its winding cobbled streets were still much like they had been during Pushkin's stay in 1823, and the rooftops of its Tatar huts little-touched from that time—still flat, still open to the sky, still perfect for drying tobacco. Exile was difficult for Pushkin, but something in the difficulty tempered his creativity too. He began *Onegin* during that period, arguably among his most transcendent works.

Fortunately there were plenty of women in Crimea, so exile became something of a harem-in-waiting for Pushkin. He was on the Wilt Chamberlain plan long before Wilt Chamberlain ever existed. To hear Tatyana tell it, he out-sultanned the sultan.

The Pushkin Museum in little Gyrsuf hinted at none of these gossipy things but quite soberly exhibited the furniture he had brought with him in exile—the chintz upholstered chair, a carved walnut writing table, its spindles lathe-turned. Travel in the early 1800's had been arduous over barely subdued wilds and across an untamed wilderness. It was tough enough to blaze a trail with only the clothes on your back, let alone while hauling a chifforobe in the latest of 18th Century styles. Chifforobes were known to end up discarded in ditches under hardships like that.

Yesterday, when I stood before the well-curated, well-dusted exhibit in Gyrsuf's Pushkin Museum, looking at the walnut writing table, I wasn't thinking of how his exile had entwined him deeply with Tatarish Crimea, but today I was. Today was the Day of Mourning. Pushkin had lived among the Tatar, yes. More significantly, he had suffered during his time here with them.

Exile was one thing, mass deportation quite another.

Deportation in 1944 meant the endless boxcars, a trip practically nonstop of 27 days, families given 15 minutes to report to the railway station. No chifforobes, no writing tables, no chintz upholstered anything.

Each train car held a maximum of 40 deportees, but many cars ended up with 130 aboard. Nearly 200,000 citizens endured the brutal trip. People died standing up, unable to fall, a recurrently familiar outcome of a liquidation campaign like this.

Because Pushkin was fated to become the Father of Russian Literature, destiny protected him in exile against a pulverizing experience like that. Destiny guarded him against harm. He suffered, but nothing like the Tatar. He suffered in Eden, the air thick with roses, jasmine, berries. Woman by woman, he served out his sentence in Russia's southern lands. Woman by woman, he suffered.

The Pushkin 1000, I mused. *Maybe he wanted 1001?* Even Wilt "The Big Dipper" Chamberlain eventually realized it was better to have one woman 1000 times than to have 1000 only once.

Tatyana read a bit more of *Onegin* in Russian, followed by a bit more in English—and then she stopped. She stared out the window, thinking.

Fields of alfalfa and wheat quilted the agricultural tracts nearest the highway. We were in the heart of flat sweeping steppe country now, the vast plateaus associated with the Tatar, all of it high ground and swaying with short-grass prairie. This far inland, the sky was its own ocean. No one would miss glimpses of the Black Sea or experience any kind of water grief with a curve of unbounded turquoise like that bending above them. Tatyana focused on the immensity.

"You know, these languages are not melding well. Something is not quite flowing."

It was true. Pushkin's Russian conveyed a depth of musicality that the Oxford scholar's translation lacked—and it wasn't on account of Tatyana's interpretation either.

"You read them both well," I said, "but the English words are stiff."

She nodded. "The elasticity isn't there. The lyricism."

English delivered the basics, the vanities and follies, the disasters of the human heart, and then attempted a few poetic leaps, too—but it lacked any spangle of acoustic refinement. Robert Frost had once said that the only thing missing from a translation of Pushkin was Pushkin.

He meant that the forces driving Pushkin's work, the pileup of consonants and vowels that seemed to forge the verse sub-atomically, as if from a nucleus of linguistic fusion, was missing.

Tatyana closed *Onegin*.

I looked at the book, perfect-bound in navy cloth, an august color befitting a respected Oxford press. Sometimes in Russia you reached places where even the Father

of Russian Literature was absolutely no help whatsoever. At any given moment Crimea was that kind of place.

Sergei pointed out a petro station just ahead, and he began braking for it. A restaurant stood right next door, a white on white confection of stone arches and linen-draped picture windows that looked like a Mom & Pop rural kind of eatery. I saw a brace of silos for grain storage nearby and next to that an implement vendor with a display of farm equipment parked out in front—threshers, mangles, combines. This was a high plains waystation for the heartland, and I could believe that the restaurant would cater to those who worked the fields, just like a diner on an old fashioned midwestern town's main square would. When we got out of the car Tatyana drew my attention to a flag flapping on a steel pole near the petro pumps.

"The Tatar revere the sky as a living presence. They chose a flag that captured almost nothing but sky."

I studied it. The expanse of pale blue fabric rippled and snapped in the wind. Its upper left corner had a mark in gold.

"The figure is a *tarak*," Tatyana told me, pointing out the mark. "Used for branding horses." The Tatar had been world-class horsemen from the 13th Century on. "As if born in the saddle," she said. The Khan of the Giray dynasty, which dominated the peninsula at the time, had relied on their expertise in untold battles here.

While Sergei tended to the vehicle, we wandered over to a blooming bed of lavender irises, the tall spikes showy in the breeze. Sunshine fired inside each flower. "A symbol chosen by the Tatar," Tatyana said. "Often planted in reverence on Muslim graves, too. Irises have had long funereal associations." We both knelt to sample the fragrances, delicate nosegays of the palest of scents wafting up from crepe-like petals.

Sergei finished servicing the car, and the three of us walked over to the restaurant. Soon enough we were bent over steaming bowls of noodles served in a coriander-tinged tomato broth and getting ready to sample small plates of dumplings stuffed with spiced meat. The Tatar had mastered a "zero kilometer cuisine" long before our contemporary American emphasis on locavore foods. Their dishes developed during a nomadic period, when everything had to be close at hand—spices, herbs, vegetables. Sergei pushed back from his bowl and shared iPhone pix of his kids. The school year was almost over. He had given his son and daughter bicycles the day before.

I polished off the last of the soup and opened my iPad, folding back its accordion-like cover and swiping through a couple photos there—mountains, forest, vineyards. The screen with the Goethe quote was the next thing I saw. *Gab mir ein Gott.*

Our waitress cleared the dishes away and then served demi-tasses of very black coffee. Lying on the saucers next to the little cups were smooth-striped lozenges of sugar. The technique was to tuck a sugar lozenge inside your cheek right up against your molars and then take a sip of coffee, allowing the lozenge to melt slowly, slowly, in a mouthful of richness.

Tatyana was joking with Sergei about something. They were both laughing. I heard the lozenge click against her teeth. She displayed a YouTube video of a mother cat nursing a baby squirrel alongside the cat's own kittens. The moment felt effervescent—a sugar high kicking in, topped off by a rush of caffeine. The veins crisscrossing my wrists throbbed. I looked at the Goethe quote.

It was German—Sergei would love it—but somehow it just did not fit. I closed my iPad's cover.

We hadn't even reached Bakhchisarai yet, but we had already jettisoned two foundational poets.

So much for belles lettres.

I considered the ballast that doesn't travel well over long distances—the belongings the Tatar were forced with 15 minutes' time to walk away from for good, the bodies of those who died en route, the metaphors, the allusions, the chifforobe jutting up from a ditch like crazy wreckage.

A sort of hopelessness all at once cloaked my view in spite of the sugar high. That feeling persisted as we drove the final 10 kilometers to Bakhchisarai. It intensified when we slowed to take a rickety railroad crossing and I glimpsed some distance up the tracks this scrubby shack of an old train depot, its wooden slats silvered over time and completely devoid of paint, as if stripped under generations of sun and wind. A frenzy of irises bloomed right up against the shack, many hundreds of them, all in lavender hues, most of them as tall as the window sills, crowded spears bobbing against each other. The lavender petals practically hid from view a small platform, its planks splintered and warped. Bakhchisarai Station.

I looked at Tatyana, and her gaze locked with mine, as if to confirm. “The iris is well-suited to the Day of Mourning. It always blooms around 18 May.”

A percentage of Tatar survived the deportation. Returning from Uzbekistan at some point was never a given, however. No sooner had the boxcars shuttled away from this train station in 1944 than the state seized the land and property of the deportees and requisitioned it for other purposes. By 1954 Khrushchev had bestowed Crimea as a gift to the Ukraine S.S.R., and that complicated the fate of the Tatar. Slow Soviet decrees over slow Soviet decades gradually released restrictions on Tatar movement back from Uzbekistan. In 1990 Gorbachev rehabilitated the Tatar nation, an official governmental act that removed the stain of those Stalin-era condemnations. The Tatar began to repopulate Bakhchisarai and other Crimean towns and villages, like quaint little Gyrsuf where Pushkin had spent his exile.

Was it enough?

Could it ever be enough?

So much Russia had happened here. It was hard to imagine a square meter of the peninsula where that was not the case—even during its time as a gift to Ukraine, its non-Russian time. That time seemed like a blip now, a hiatus or an interruption in the hard-charging continuity of a volatile place like Crimea.

The sultan’s minarets came into view first—five of them standing high above the terra cotta rooftops of the Bakhchisarai palace compound, a stretch of sapphire sky behind them. Tile mosaics banded the surface of the stone walls of the fortress, some of them with chipped glass and polychrome pieces, and even articulated three-dimensional shapes that gave the mosaic art a free-flowing look. Turrets spiraled up above the tiles. These architectural flourishes announced a building style that typified Asian Russia. Like strong coffee sipped through a sugar lozenge, this was Russia as filtered through its Muslim self.

Sergei dropped us off at a cobblestone plaza that boasted a cylindrical monument, smooth-carved and stately. Its commemorative words were engraved both in Russian Cyrillic and in Tatar. “Part of the Catherine Mile,” Tatyana told me.

She described a network of monuments like this one scattered throughout the peninsula, marking the route of the monarch’s historic visit. Nicknamed Katkin Pillars, these relics bore witness to Catherine’s embrace of Crimea. Mile by mile, she claimed this place, fragrant and fertile, heaven on earth. Mile by mile, she solidified the feel of a

deeply Russian sense of identity here. The miles themselves signified more than just a distance traveled. During Catherine's reign the roads and byways scarcely even existed. A team of workers preceded the royal entourage, sometimes only by a day, furiously building and paving. Longtime inhabitants of this flower-bedecked land must have regarded that fury of labor like a kind of magic, as if a dynamic rising from the soil itself were fueling the workers and oxen forward, as if something from within Crimea rose to meet this toil. The Katkin Pillars remained, mute sentries of the magic.

We set off across the cobbles, and when we approached the palace we found that it was shuttered, its enormous wooden doors barred. An old woman in a tattered shawl sat next to a footbridge over a dry river bed nearby, selling rolls of Turkish Delight and other candies on a towel-draped tray before her. We drew close, and she moved a couple of the delectables forward, the better to show off their transparency and shine. Rosewater jellies lay next to pinwheels of pistachio paste dusted with shredded coconut. I saw candied oranges enrobed in saffron threads. Tatyana spoke to her in Tatarish.

"Because of the Day of Mourning," she translated back. Tatyana said it was improper on a day of such sadness to welcome visitors to the museum. "Disrespectful," she told me.

Out on the street a pick-up truck caromed around the corner near the Katkin Pillar, two car-flags flapping from either side of the truck's cab, both flags the pale blue of the sky so beloved by the Tatar. The old woman, watching the truck streak past, said something, and Tatyana turned to me. "A demonstration in town." She nodded as the truck disappeared in a cloud of dust. "To commemorate 18 May."

She and I bought a few sweets from the old woman, walked the periphery of the sultan's palace, snapped photos and then climbed back into the car when Sergei met us on the flagstone plaza.

Rumbling back toward the southern coast, retracing our route, we were quiet. The westering sun washed a distant limestone massif in mauve. Sergei rested his elbow on the center console, shifting his weight slightly toward me. Tatyana scooted forward a bit from the back, her knees wedged into the space between the front seats. We seemed to want that closeness. Like people huddled in prayer, we leaned slightly in. It was a way to brace ourselves for that next glimpse—the Bakhchisarai Station, its weathered slats, its irises, its lavender look.