BIography

Taras Shevchenko: serfdom – freedom – exile – death

Taras Shevchenko (March 9, 1814 – March 10, 1861) was born in a village near Kyiv, Ukraine (then part of the Russian Empire), to a serf belonging to a wealthy aristocrat. His early years were marked by a series of misfortunes that left him orphaned at the age of 11. Living like a homeless urchin for the next three years, it was during this period that Taras’ artistic impulses first surfaced. At the age of 14, Taras was selected to serve as a page in the landowner’s household precisely because of his potential as an artist. First in Vilno (today’s Vilnius, Lithuania) and then in St. Petersburg (Russia), Shevchenko was catapulted from a rural setting outside of Kyiv into an urban world filled with cultural delights and intellectual gratification. It was the age of the Industrial Revolution and Romanticism, and Europe was being transformed by social and political ferment.

Shevchenko was introduced to aristocratic social circles and exposed to new and radical ideas. His innate talent for painting was nurtured to some degree, as permitted by his owner, through apprenticeships with well-known artists of the time. Though he enjoyed considerable latitude for a serf, his status remained that of vassal to his master. With memories from his youth of the often brutal treatment of the serfs, Shevchenko’s desire for emancipation began to take shape and
intensified as he mingled with intellectuals and the privileged classes. In 1838, despite attempts by his owner to thwart the process, Shevchenko’s release from serfdom was secured using the proceeds from the sale of a portrait of the poet Vasilii Zhukovsky painted expressly for that purpose by Karl Briullov, supplemented by donations from friends and, ironically, even members of the Imperial Family. Freed from bondage, he embarked on a new and promising journey—life as an artist.

Relying on scholarships, stipends, and the kindness of friends, Shevchenko enrolled at the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, where he studied under his mentor Briullov. By the time he graduated in 1845, Shevchenko was recognized as an accomplished artist, and by then had also attained considerable renown as a poet and writer, having published his first collection of poetry in 1840—the well-received *Kobzar*. His inspirational poetry and unconventional writing choices brought him celebrity as well as notoriety. Criticized by literati and censors not only for writing in Ukrainian (as opposed to Russian, which was considered the only suitable literary language in the Empire), but also for another serious misstep—writing poetry that was about Ukraine and its long history of subjugation and suffering under Russian domination—he was marked as a person of interest and potential danger to the Empire. Although he also wrote about less controversial subjects and published in the Russian language, his fate as a menace to the Tsar shadowed him for the rest of his life.

In 1843, while still at the Academy, Shevchenko received permission for visits to his native Ukraine, where he planned to eventually live and work. In 1847, he was arrested near Kyiv in connection with his association with a Ukrainian society of young intellectuals—the Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood—suspected to be a subversive organization by the Tsar and his officials. The arrest changed the trajectory of the rest of Shevchenko’s life. The trial, unfair even by Western standards of the day, resulted in a sentence of exile to Central Asia for an indefinite period of time. He spent the next 10 years of his life prohibited from returning to either Ukraine or Russia.

Assigned to a military unit in the eastern outposts of the Empire, and at various times in today’s Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Shevchenko survived his sentence by relying on his artistic talents.
He was by then a recognized political “celebrity.” Forbidden by the Tsar to paint or write as part of his punishment in exile, he was nevertheless engaged as the company artist and as a semi-official portraitist for military personnel. In 1850, while still serving his sentence, Shevchenko was arrested again, this time for violating the terms of his penal service—for painting—even though much of what he painted, paradoxically, was at the behest of his commanding officers. Finally, in 1857, with the help of loyal friends, who had appealed for leniency more than once, Shevchenko was released from exile.

Free to return to St. Petersburg, after an arduous, nearly eight-month journey back to Russia, Shevchenko immersed himself once again in the city’s cultural life and renewed his friendships. In the fall of 1858 he was introduced to the famous African American stage actor Ira Aldridge, best known for his Shakespearean roles. The story of their brief but genuine friendship was described in detail in the memoirs of Ekateryna Tolstoy, the daughter of Count Fyodor Petrovich Tolstoy.

For Shevchenko, however, complete freedom remained an elusive dream. Under police surveillance during a trip to Ukraine in 1859, Shevchenko was arrested for “blasphemous and subversive” speech and advised to return to St. Petersburg. Though the case against him was soon dropped, the message was clear that his life would be made miserable should he attempt another return to Ukraine. Undeterred, he proceeded with plans to relocate to a modest home near his birthplace. But before his vision could be fulfilled, he was taken ill in St. Petersburg. He died on March 10, 1861, at age 47. Buried in a St. Petersburg cemetery, his remains were moved two months later (May 22) and, in accordance with his wishes, permanently interred on a hill overlooking the Dnipro River just outside of Kyiv, Ukraine. The site is now a public preserve and home to the Shevchenko Memorial Museum.

THE SPIRIT OF SHEVCHENKO LIVES ON

The catalogue raisonné of Taras Shevchenko’s known body of work includes 835 artworks in existence today, plus 278 that have never been located but are referenced in documentation. The
missing works are explained partly by Shevchenko patrons’ destruction of the paintings in their possession out of fear of being implicated in his “crimes.”

Reviled during his lifetime by the Tsarist authorities, Taras Shevchenko earned prominence and respect among Ukrainians, especially for his poetry, and his stature as the National Ukrainian Poet grew to untold proportions after his death in 1861. The late 19th century saw a national awakening sweep across Ukrainian lands, and Shevchenko’s contribution to its rise and spread cannot be underestimated. The coming of the communist revolution in the early 20th century brought his work under the scrutiny of censors once again. But recognizing the profound impact that Shevchenko had on the Ukrainian nation, Soviet leaders chose not to stifle his memory, opting instead to reinterpret it as revolutionary and anti-imperial in accordance with communist ideology.

Memorials honoring Shevchenko sprang up in towns and cities all over Ukraine and many other Soviet republics, even in Russia. Annual commemorative pilgrimages to place flowers at the monuments and recite his poetry became commonplace. The post-Stalinist period introduced a political thaw and a cultural renaissance (producing the literary generation of the 1960s known as the “Shistdesiatnyky”—the “1960-ers”). But dissent was also on the rise, and fearing the potential for organized political opposition, the authorities warned Ukrainians not to congregate at the Shevchenko statues on the anniversary dates. In 1967, the brutal dispersal of a crowd at a Shevchenko monument in Kyiv, gathered to commemorate the anniversary of his reinterment in Ukraine, ended with the arrest of several people. Repression as a means to control independent thought had returned. The “Shistdesiatnyky,” who had flourished under less restrictive policies, became victims of the backlash against the freedoms they so briefly enjoyed—an allegory for Shevchenko’s own life story.

Addressing a crowd of thousands in Kyiv on June 5, 2000, President Bill Clinton included the words of Taras Shevchenko in his speech: “Communism has lost in Ukraine, but a full commitment to free market democracy has not yet won. If your children are to live their dreams, it must win. So again I ask you, do not give up. Keep on fighting. Boritesya poborete.” The
phrase *Boritesya – poborete* (“Fight and you shall overcome”) is from the poem *Kavkaz* (“The Caucasus,” 1845), in which Shevchenko indicts Moscow for its tyranny against Ukraine.

Today, nearly every Ukrainian community in the world has a physical manifestation of homage to the “Father of the Ukrainian Nation.” In New York City, one can find the Shevchenko Scientific Society and an East Village street called Taras Shevchenko Place. In Washington, DC, a Shevchenko statue by sculptor Leo Mol stands in a central square. In Paris, a bust of Taras Shevchenko (“Chevtchenko” or “Ševčenko” in French) overlooks the eponymous park adjacent to a Ukrainian church. In Buenos Aires, another Leo Mol sculpture of Shevchenko resides in Parque Tres de Febrero (the Third of February Park) near the U.S. Embassy.

Ukrainians the world over carry their passion for Taras Shevchenko’s poetry with them wherever they go. Shevchenko remains a quintessential symbol of their quest for freedom and cultural recognition, even serving as inspiration for many of the protesters during the late 2013 Euromaidan demonstrations in Kyiv. Activists often cited Shevchenko’s poetry in their expressions of national awareness and solidarity. It was not surprising that the first tragic casualty among the Maidan protesters was an Armenian Ukrainian (Serhiy Nigoyan) who had been videotaped just days before his death reciting Taras Shevchenko’s poem *Kavkaz*.

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