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**Kachanivka, a romantic place**

When, over almost three centuries ago in 1742, Fedir Bolharyn, a land owner of Greek descent from the town of Nizhyn sold a small village located at a scenic place dotted with tree groves and ravines, that he himself had founded, he could never guess, of course, the full import of the sale — the village was destined to become an estate of wide renown as a cultural centre, “new Athens” as it was referred to later. The man who bought the village from Bolharyn the Greek was Fedir Kachenovsky, a chorister of “the choir at the court of Her Imperial Majesty Elizabeth” in St Petersburg.

**Neglected estate**

Kachenovsky whose last name, in all likelihood, was actually Kachan (“Head of Cabbage”) changed to Kachenovsky for euphonic and prestigious reasons, did not do much with the village he had acquired, except for buying some more land around it. His only lasting contribution was the name — Kachanivka that the place became known by.

In 1770, the Russian Empress bought the estate to give it as a present to Petro Rumyantsev-Zadunaysky, the then governor general of Malorosiya (“Small Russia” as Ukraine was referred to in Russia at that time) and “glorious victor over the infidels.” Kachanivka which was situated in the vicinity of Chernihiv, an ancient Ukrainian town about a hundred miles north of Kyiv, was meant to become one of the chief residences of the Imperial viceroy who ruled over Ukraine that was being robbed of the last remaining vestiges of autonomy.

Rumyantsev had a palace built in Kachanivka — a magnificent place designed to properly reflect the status of its owner. A big orchard was planted around it, and a nearby forest was landscaped and turned into a wonderful park. But the owner of Kachanivka, being a person of much too “great involvement in the affairs of the state”, had little time to spare for his estate, paid only infrequent visits there, in fact neglecting it altogether. His son, a diplomat and statesman, followed in his father’s footsteps in neglecting Kachanivka. Hryhory Pocheka, Rumyantsev’s steward who took care of the estate and thus knew that the estate in its neglected state could be purchased for a song, did buy it. He began improving it but as he “died without issue” the estate became the property of Hryhory Tarnovsky, Pocheka’s wife’s son from her first marriage. It was Tarnovsky who gave Kachanivka a completely new status.

Kachanivka as “a cultural centre” flourished for only about seventy five years. The three generations of the Tarnavskys made a thoroughly romantic place out of a derelict “nobleman’s nest.” Kachanivka attracted, to use the words of Mykola Kostomarov, a prominent Ukrainian cultural figure of the nineteenth century, “the most learned birds of the Ukrainian world of literati, musicians and artists.” The Tarnavskys themselves were colourful figures in their own right, and besides, they were philanthropists, patrons of learning and arts, Ukrainian Maecenases.

Hryhory Tarnovsky, nominally “a titular counsellor” (a civil servant of a low rank in Czarist Russia), was a person distinguished in many respects. Paradoxically, he combined in himself a miser and most generous person, a womanizer and a faithful husband; he could alternately be rude and most civil, phlegmatic and full of energy to the overflowing. He was, by the standards of the social elite of that time, poorly educated (his knowledge of foreign languages, for example, was limited to a few polite phrases, a thing unheard of in the then polite society with French being the main means of communication), and yet among his friends were such polymaths as Hryhorovych, Secretary of the Art Academy. Hryhory Tarnovsky was known for being very little versed in musical notation and yet he composed orchestral pieces which were performed by his own orchestra made up of the musically gifted serfs he owned. He was even known to have tried to “better” Beethoven himself.

Thanks to Hryhory Tarnovsky Kachanivka gradually became a cultural focal point whose light was seen all over Ukraine. The atmosphere in Kachanivka was conducive to inspiring all kinds of creativity, and authors, musicians and artists flocked to it to spend weeks and months there, giving themselves fully to the creative urge. The revamped central palace was more like a fifty-room five-star hotel accommodating literati and artists than a specious dwelling of a retired civil servant. In addition to purchases of works of art made by Tarnovsky himself, famous painters donated their works to be hung on the walls of the palace and a newcomer never failed to be surprised and delighted to discover paintings by such famous artists as Bryullov, Kiprensky and Ivanov in Tarnovsky’s “humble abode.” Hryhory Tarnovsky, in addition to an orchestra, ran his own “home theatre” in whose repertoire were pieces performed both for his private enjoyment and that of his guests.

**Thriving on culture**

In 1854, Hryhory Tarnovsky died, also “without issue” and Kachanivka passed on to his relative, Vasyl Tarnovsky. Unlike Hryhory, Vasyl was well educated, with a university degree in law. His “civil stance” was that of a much more active participation in the life of society. Among other things, he was a member of the commission that was to work out the conditions of the agricultural reform (serfdom was abolished in 1861 and the freed peasants were to be given plots of land to cultivate). Vasyl Tarnovsky authored a number of scholarly works in law, economics and statistics. In spite of his social and scholarly commitments, he found time for Kachanivka — but now among those who were invited to come over to stay at Tarnovsky’s estate we find such figures as Taras Shevchenko and Mykola Gogol, that is people who were much more involved in social matters. Gogol, an outstanding Russian writer of Ukrainian descent, in his letter to Maksymovych, a prominent cultural figure and president of the St Volodymyr University in Kyiv, described Vasyl Tarnovsky as “a kind-hearted person of lively emotions… a bit too given to fancy ideas and dreams… always determined to get what he sets to achieve… for whom such things as social climbing, servility, respect for rank or vanity just do not exist…”

Vasyl Tarnovsky also turned out to be a touchy person — after a colleague of his at the Chernihiv Huberniya Zemstvo (huberniya — administrative district; zemstvo — elected district administrative assembly) said something that badly offended him, Tarnovsky had a nervous breakdown which led to his untimely death at the age of 56.

This time there was a son and Kachanivka passed on to Vasyl Tarnovsky Junior (in fact, Vasyl Tarnovsky Senior had several children, of whom Vasyl was the eldest). Kachanivka, never neglected by his father, became the main — if not the soul — occupation of Vasyl Tarnovsky Junior. In many respects, Vasyl Junior resembled Hryhory Tarnovsky, but with all the contradictory traits much more pronounced. Dmytro Yavornytsky, a nineteenth-century historian, thus characterized Vasyl Junior: “The articles he authored were so poorly written that it would have been much better if he had not written them at all; his mind was mediocre; he was wilful, inflexibly stubborn, volatile and hot tempered.” He did have a short fuse — when badly angered, he would pull out a revolver and start blindly shooting at the offender. He was known as a sophisticated swearer who used Russian obscenities rather than Ukrainian ones, and the cuss words with which he peppered his speech made even the hardened interlocutors cringe.

Fortunately, this “intimidator” had “a good genius” to tame his explosive and violent temper — his wife Sofiya. A person of great tact and civility, patient and kind, this well-read woman could in most cases control her rowdy husband but when he got completely out of hand she would collapse in a faint in front of him. Seeing her prostrate on the floor, unconscious, he would rush over to her, pick her up, put her carefully on a sofa, say soothing words. He was so happy when she came to, that he would clean forget about his tantrum or fit of wrath.

However, in spite of the violent and disorderly streak in his character, Vasyl Tarnovsky Junior, was not devoid of “a sense of beauty” and interest in culture. He never stopped acquiring curios, manuscripts, works of art directly related to Ukrainian culture and history. Besides, if Tarnovsky had been “mediocre,” would so many prominent individuals, luminaries in their fields of knowledge or creative endeavour have sought his company? During the years Tarnovsky “presided” over Kachanivka, almost everyone of any importance in the Ukrainian cultural elite of those years visited the estate or stayed there for some time. In spite of his own description of Tarnovsky, Yavornytsky was full of admiration for Kachanivka, calling it “an earthly paradise.” It was hard not to admire Kachanivka — a sea of flowers, a great many species of trees and bushes, some of a very rare kind, handsome statues, great care and impeccable order in everything did give the place an appearance of refined elegance. A particular admiration was aroused by a floating island, complete with willows, herbs and reeds, that drifted in the central lake of the park. Tarnovsky was very proud of this invention of his. Around the summer solstice when the religious feast of St John the Baptist was celebrated with many of the pagan elements still preserved in it (the heathen feast was called Ivan Kupaylo), the lake with the floating island had mermaids and mavkas, or forest nymphs, straight from the Ukrainian pagan mythology calling out in sweet voices to those who came close to the water and making sudden and startling appearances. Tarnovsky had gazebos and arboreta strategically placed around the park, and benches were placed at the spots most advantageous for watching the sunups and sunsets.

Vasyl Tarnovsky had become an avid collector in his student years, or maybe even earlier, at the age of eight when he had been privileged to see the great poet Taras Shevchenko who had come on a visit to Kachanivka. Meeting the great man had made such a lasting impression upon the young man that he had begun collecting everything that was in any way connected with the poet. By the end of his life, Tarnovsky’s collection boasted 758 Shevchenko-related items. Incidentally, it was Tarnovsky’s collection that became the foundation of the Museum of Shevchenko in Kyiv.

With equal or maybe even greater passion, Tarnovsky collected relics of the Cossack era — weapons, garments, banners, portraits — just anything that would remind him of the Cossack glory and exploits. In front of the palace stood several cannon from the times of Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky. The seventeen-century cannon were in perfect working condition and blanks were fired to salute the arriving distinguished guests or on holidays. Tarnovsky’s Cossack collection proudly displayed a sabre of Hetman Khmelnytsky, personal items that once belonged to Hetmans of Ukraine — Mazepa, Paliy, Polubotok, Rozumovsky, official documents and proclamations. The collection was estimated to be worth several hundred thousand roubles, which at that time was an enormous sum of money. Unfortunately, the collection was later dispersed with many items making their way into different museums — many have been lost without trace. Had Tarnovsky’s collection been preserved intact, it would be priceless.

**Ruined by philanthropy**

Tarnovsky’s philanthropy, fuelled by his flamboyancy, spread far beyond Kachanivka and his collecting ambitions. He financed the Kievskaya starina (“Kyiv Antiquities”) newspaper, he gave money for the erection of a monument to Bohdan Khmelnytsky in Kyiv, and for the erection of a cross at the grave of Taras Shevchenko in Kaniv. It was his money that made archaeological expeditions headed by Mykola Bilyashivsky, the founder of a historical museum and arts museum in Kyiv, possible.

But the late nineteenth century was a tough time for many old-style land owners in Ukraine. Capitalism was making great strides both in town and in the country and the old system of land use was crumbling. Tarnovsky spent much more than he could get from the land he owned, and he was no match for “the new sharks of capitalism” who knew much better than he did how to gain profits. His life style and his philanthropy eventually ruined him financially — he went bankrupt and in 1898 was forced to sell Kachanivka. It was a terrible shock for him and he succumbed to such a devastating depression that he died a year later. He was buried in Kyiv, at the Ascold Mohyla cemetery.

**Distinguished visitors**

Walking through the Kachanivka park, you can’t help imagining all those luminaries — poets, writers, artists, composers and cultural figures, strolling through the park’s alleys conducting quiet and heated conversations, enjoying the views, breathing the balmy air. You seem to hear their voices, to see their shadows…

Probably the greatest of them all was Taras Shevchenko, a cult figure of Ukrainian culture. When Shevchenko came to Kachanivka for the first time — it was in 1843 — he was not a cult figure at all. He was a man of 29, full of vigour and life (and he did not look the canonized Shevchenko in a tall fur hat with drooping moustache, weary and sad, the way he is portrayed now), and he fell passionately in love with Nadiya Tarnovska, Vasyl Tarnovsky’s niece. This love proved to be unrequited, much to the young genius’ dismay. He returned to Kachanivka many years later, in 1859, a man physically broken by years of exile and hardships.

On this second visit to Kachanivka, the poet wrote in Tarnovsky’s guest book: “Even the path that you once strode along, has overgrown with thistles…” — evidently, Shevchenko remembered the torments of love that was not reciprocated. Shevchenko planted an oak in the park saying that he hoped he would rest in its shade some day. He hoped in vain — two years later he died.

Mykola Gogol, a Ukrainian who became a towering figure in the Russian literature of all time, was among the regular visitors to Kachanivka. Four times in the period between 1835 and 1850 he came to Kachanivka to relax, to stroll around the park, to get inspired — and to write. It is believed that it was in Kachanivka that Gogol wrote and read to the host and other guests one of his better known novels, Taras Bulba. One of the oaks in the park is claimed to have seen Gogol.

In 1838, Mykhailo Glinka, the then most prominent Russian composer, came to Kachanivka looking for singers for the Imperial Choir. Ukraine was famous for producing excellent singers and Glinka in his travels across Ukraine kept bringing boys and young men to Kachanivka for audition. In Kachanivka, Glinka befriended a highly gifted artist, Vasyl Shternberg, doomed to die young, and a poet, Viktor Zabila whose poetry the composer liked so much that he wrote two wonderful romances which are still performed. It was Glinka who brought to Kachanivka Semen Hulak-Artemovsky, a young singer then, who was to become one of the leading Ukrainian composers of the nineteenth century. And it was in Kachanivka that Glinka experienced a great love of his life — he was enamoured of Mariya Zadorozhna, a niece of Hryhory Tarnovsky’s wife. There must have been something special in the very atmosphere of Kachanivka that inspired love. Glinka wrote his opera Ruslan and Lyudmila based on a wonderful fairy-tale poem by Pushkin, at the height of his loving feeling and the music definitely bears the imprint of love.

It would take much more space than could be given to a magazine article just to mention all those who visited Kachanivka and contributed to the development of Ukrainian and Russian culture. The Kachanivka park deserves a separate story as well. In the Soviet times, Kachanivka was badly neglected but in recent years, with Ukraine’s independence, restoration work began and the park came back to life. I dearly wish Kachanivka would one day become again “the cultural Athens” of Ukraine it once was.