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ALEXANDER POTCHEV; 1837 COMMANDANT  
OF FORT ROSS

from an article in the Santa Rosa Press Democrat  
July 30, 1967

By VLADIMIR BEZYAEVICHNY, Asst. Prof., Moscow Polygraphic  
Institute

"One hundred and fifty-five years ago Russian hunters and traders from New Archangel (Sitka) landed on the coast of New Albion, as the Pacific coast of northern California was then called, a few miles north of Bodega Bay. There they built the fortifications which came to be known as the Ross settlement and fortifications of Fort Ross.

Alexander Baranov, the "Master of Alaska" and ruler of Russian America, wanted to establish a hunting and farming base on the uninhabited shores of Northern California (which Europeans had not yet reached) for the Russian American Company, which was looking for new places to hunt sea animals and get badly needed food supplies.

Nikolai Rezanov, another man active in the Russian-American Company, warmly supported the colonization of northern America, especially California. He arrived in California in 1806. His sudden death on his way back to St. Petersburg from Russian America prevented his far-reaching plan from being carried out.

The Russian expedition, headed by Baranov's assistant, Ivan Kuskov, landed at Bodega Bay and built a fort protected by cannons brought from Alaska. Inside the big log walls of the fort they erected workshops, warehouses, dwellings and numerous auxiliary buildings, as well as a Russian Orthodox chapel.

There was no convenient anchorage for sea-going vessels near Fort Ross, so a port with the necessary facilities was built on the shore of Bodega Bay. Small communities grew up around the fort. Russian settlers and Aleuts who had come with them and local Indians with whom friendly relations had been established cultivated the land on the hillsides near Fort Ross, bred cattle and hunted for fur-seal on the Farallon Islands.

Foreigners and visitors who have visited Fort Ross at various times have left a description of its appearance and structures, and also efforts of the small garrison to grow wheat and other cereals and vegetables, and to raise cattle.

Fort Ross existed during a troubled time. Separated from New Archangel, the center of Russian America, by many hundreds of miles, it not only had to manage its affairs on its own but also uphold its right to be there in the face of constant encroachment by the Spanish authorities. Under these conditions much depended on energy, resolution and ability on the part of Russia's chief representative in the most outlying corner of Russian America - on the commandant of Fort Ross.

After Ivan Kuskov left the shores of New Albion at the end of 1821, several men held the post of commandant. The last was Alexander Potchev, who arrived in New Archangel on April 16, 1836, and moved into the commandant's house in Fort Ross in 1838.

The history of Fort Ross has been well studied by modern scholars, chiefly American historians, but neither the authors of the valuable collection of essays, *The Russians in California*, put out in San Francisco in 1933 by the Historical Society of California; nor Robert A. Thompson, whose study of Fort Ross appeared in 1896 and was re-issued in 1951, had any information about Rotchev except what the pre-revolutionary Russian Brochhaus-Lfron encyclopedia and the Russian Biographical Dictionary contained. Neither of these sources has much about Rotchev, and what they had was far from exact.

From the research of scholars, the inaccuracies penetrated into fiction, into the novels of Gertrude Atherton, and the historical novel, *Saga of Fort Ross*, by Victor Petrov, which tells the story of Alexander Rotchev. It appeared in Russian in two volumes put out by the publishing house of Victor Kamkin book-shop in Washington in 1961-1963.

The present writer has been able to discover hitherto unknown documents of Rotchev in archives in Moscow and Leningrad, as well as many little-known printed sources that contain additional facts about him.

According to this material, Alexander Garvilovich Rotchev, "son of a sculptor of the city of Moscow," was born in 1807, and losing his father early, experienced adversity and hardships in his childhood.

At the age of 15, he entered what was then called "the ethical-political department" (later renamed the law department) of the Moscow University. Simultaneously, he attended lectures of other departments and took an interest in the theater and in literature. He was at home in Moscow's theatrical and journalistic circles, and was well acquainted with the literati from among the undergraduates and young people connected with the university. His friends included the poet Alexander Polezhayev, the bibliographer Sergei Poltoratsky and the prose-writer Nikolai Polevoi, and the young historian Mikhail Pogodin.

In 1825, when Rotchev was barely 18, he had his translation of Moliere's *Le Cocu Imaginaire* published, and one year later was contributing widely to magazines and almanacs, which printed his poems and translations of Byron, who was highly popular in Russia at that time. Like many other young men of letters at that time, Rotchev was a free-thinker, and this was reflected in a number of his poems. Ideas of American republicanism connected with the name of George Washington were evoking a response among the people he knew. It was characteristic that Rotchev should present one of his works to a friend with the following inscription: "To Poltoratsky, loyal subject of the magnificent Washington, from Rotchev."

Rotchev became the hero of a romantic story connected with his future wife, the daughter of Prince Pavel Gagarin. The Princess Elena, from the information we have, was a beautiful, proud, independent young woman who, having fallen in love with a writer of far from noble extraction and without a stable social position, was able to rise above social prejudices and family traditions. In the spring of 1828 she eloped with Rotchev; they were married in a small town near Moscow and made their home in the country, renting a flat.

Alena tried to achieve a reconciliation with her parents, but when they refused, broke off all connections with the Gagarin family. She moved to St. Petersburg with her husband. There Rotchev found employment first in the management of the imperial theaters and then in the Chief Administration of the Russian-American Company.

Among the few passengers who left Kronstadt aboard a three-masted sailing vessel belonging to the Russian-American Company on August 5, 1835, were Rotchev and his wife and children.\* By coincidence, the vessel was named the Alena. Eight months and eleven days later it dropped anchor in the bay of the port of New Archangel.

Many years later, recalling their arrival at Fort Ross, Rotchev wrote: ". . . What a magic place California is! For eight months of the year the sky is clear and cloudless. During the remaining months, beginning with the end of November, it rains from time to time. The heat never exceeds 25 degrees Reaumur in the shade. In January everything comes to life: plants are in full growth, the air is fragrant and the cheerful humming-bird sways and glitters on a stalk or quivers like a precious stone over a flower. The virgin soil of California produces remarkable harvests. I have seen wheat harvests of 150! . . . The best years of my life were spent there; I reverently carry the memory of them in my soul. . ."

By the time the Rotchevs left Alaska and moved into the home of the commandant of Fort Ross, the Russian settlement had been in existence for over 20 years. However, in spite of the heroic efforts of those who lived behind its tried and tested walls, the days of Fort Ross were numbered. It had become more and more difficult to maintain relations, not only economically, but also diplomatically and politically, with the neighbors without the constant vigorous support of New Archangel and St. Petersburg.

There was an extreme lack of people, particularly experts. The nearest fields were poor because of heavy ocean fogs, and the garrison did not have the men to bring the rich land under cultivation. Nevertheless, even under these conditions Fort Ross and Bodega Bay, with the anchorage built there, and the communities in the environs of the Fort -- all that comprised the small Russian community in California -- was a solid part of life in those parts.

Fort Ross had become not so much a source of food for the Russian settlers in Alaska as a center for trade with the surrounding Spanish missions, which produced a large quantity of foodstuffs that had no other market. In spite of the opposition of the Spanish, and later the Mexican authorities, Fort Ross carried on a lively trade with its neighbors, who most often received, in exchange for farm produce, ironware, fabrics, tools and many other items only from the Russian colony.

As commandant of Fort Ross, Rotchev was an unusual figure compared to those commandants before him. A man with a university education, a poet and journalist with a knowledge of several foreign languages, he was a genial host to the fairly large number of visitors who put in at Port Bodega and stayed at Fort Ross. The fame of the remarkable Russian commandant and his beautiful wife spread not only through California, enabling them to become closely acquainted with members of the local administration, but also spread along the sea-lanes leading to the shores of New Albion.

Cyrille-Pierre Laplace, a Frenchman making a trip around the world on the

*First mention  
of children of  
any Commander  
28 yrs  
old*

frigate L'Artemise, heard a great deal about Fort Ross while he was in the Hawaiian Islands in the summer of 1839.

"The settlement," Laplace wrote later in an account of his travels published in Paris, "was managed by a man whom my acquaintances in Honolulu (that is, Honolulu, the chief Hawaiian town and port) often spoke of in my presence with acclaim, mentioning his education and his amiable and benevolent character. Such praise was more than enough to arouse in me a desire to visit the settlement . . .".

Captain Laplace has left an interesting description of Fort Ross and its hospitable hosts, in whose home he spent several days. It was strange, though, that he forgot to mention that more than an interest in the personality of the Russian commandant and the politeness of a gallant man brought him to Fort Bodega and then to Fort Ross.

The main reason that Captain Laplace stopped at Fort Ross was because the yard of the mainsail on the French frigate was damaged en route from the Hawaiian Islands to the North American continent, and Captain Laplace asked Rotchev to replace it.

"I worked with more than 75 men to saw down those yards in an impassable forest and to tow them out with the help of a light canoe from the fort to the port," Rotchev later wrote after he read the reminiscences of Captain Laplace.

Another French traveler, Duflot de Mofras, consellor of the French Embassy, who visited Fort Ross in 1841, was also touched by the hospitality of the Rotchevs and wrote with amazement that in their home he found a well chosen library, a piano with a Mozart score on it, and excellent French wine on an elegantly laid table.

Rotchev took steps to consolidate the position of the Russians on the territory of California, to study the valley of the Slavyanka (Russian River) up to the mountain that was named St. Helena (and is still called so today).

According to the California legend the name is connected with Elena Rotchev, who took part in the expedition along with her husband and other Russians, among them Ilya Voznesensky, a member of the Zoological Museum staff in St. Petersburg who visited Fort Ross in the summer of 1840. The expedition surveyed the basin of the Slavyanka, among other things. In the Moscow archives I found a map of the basin drawn up by a member of the expedition. On the map, the tributaries of the Slavyanka have Russian names: the Glkhovka River, the Voznesensky River, the Chernykh River and the Rotchev River.

Ilya Voznesensky has left diaries and drawings that reflect his impression of California. The drawings were published in 1951, by Evgenia Blomkvist, staff member of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and author of the interesting work DRAWING OF I. G. VOZNESENSKY (EXPEDITION OF 1839-1849).

Rotchev and his family and other people stationed at Fort Ross left California after witnessing the sale of the fort to Captain John Sutter, a Swiss emigrant,

who owned the New Helvetia Fort (Sutter's Fort) in the valley of the Sacramento. The sale took place at the very end of 1841.

A few years later the name of the new owner of Fort Ross and the name of the Sacramento River became known to practically the whole world when gold was discovered near New Helvetia and the "gold rush" was on in California. In 1849, the year of the discovery, the magazine Otechestvennie Zapiski, in St. Petersburg, carried an article by the former commandant of the Fort Ross stating that he was the one who showed John Sutter, who had come to him for help and advice, the place for a settlement on the banks of the Sacramento. At that time, of course, no one suspected the wealth that lay in the valley of the river.

That is not quite true, however. When numerous articles appeared about California and its wealth at the beginning of the "gold rush" it was recalled that a well-known German scientist, Adolf Erman, who spent several weeks at Fort Ross in 1828, told the administrations of the Russian-American Company of the results of his study of the soil near the Russian settlement. In Erman's opinion, the soil "is exactly the same as the gold-bearing soil of the Urals," which he had also studied. But no one paid any attention to his statement.

After Rotchev returned home he helped to survey gold-bearing deposits in Siberia, then worked in St. Petersburg and wrote articles for the papers. Finally, in 1851, he decided to try his luck once again and set out for California, where he joined the thousands from all over the world who had come in search of gold. He began to wash gravel for gold in the upper reaches of the Yuba, but was unsuccessful and hurried to leave America. He did not even have the money for the return fare and was forced to borrow a large sum.

From the Hawaiian Islands he went on to India, where he had been before, travelled across the country and reached Cairo and Alexandria across the Suez Peninsula, from where he went to London. There he came to know Alexander Herozen and was recieved in the home of Charles Dickens. An indefatigable traveler, he planned to go first to Australia and then to Peru, but the aggravated situation on the eve of the Crimean war forced him to return to Russia.

Rotchev published a series of articles about his travels, including his stay in California, in St. Petersburg magazines, wrote a book, The Truth About England And the Story of the Expansion of Her Possessions in All Parts of the World, and was active in the literary and theatrical life of the Russian capital. In 1867, at the age of 60, Rotchev again set out on a journey, this time to Central Asia.

Soon after, he turned up in France as a correspondent for a Russian newspaper. Finally, in 1872 fate took him to the town of Saratov on the Volga, where he edited the local newspaper and where he died on August 20 (Sept 2) 1873 at 9 6'Clock in the evening. At his request, the significant words "He was a man, and like all men he erred", was inscribed on his modest tombstone.

What of Elena Rotchev, whose romantic image so charmed the American authoress

Gertrude Atherton and many other authors who wrote of Fort Ross and its last Commandant, and who is famous for her beauty to this day?

I have discovered quite a large number of new facts about Elena Rotchev's life. After she returned to Russia, she lived ~~with~~ in St. Petersburg busy with the upbringing of her children. While her husband was away on his second trip round the world in hope of getting rich, Elena, who possessed undoubted literary talent, earned a living for herself and her children two daughters and a son. In 1855 she moved to Siberia with her children, where she taught at a school for orphaned girls in Irkutsk.

Contemporary authors of memoirs who know Elena portray her as a proud, independent woman who held herself with dignity in Irkutsk society. She maintained a close friendship with some of the exiled revolutionaries living there, including participants in the December 1825 uprisings, and a member of the Petrashevsky circle exiled to Siberia. Her home became a kind of literary salon, where the educated and liberal minded gathered.

Elena Rotchev left her husband. The romantic love that carried her across oceans and continents was now a thing of the past. Both of the Rotchev daughters married in Irkutsk. In 1863 Elena left Siberia for the Poltava Gubernia, to live on the estate of her son-in-law Archilles Laborinsky. She died there in 1889, finding her last resting place in the quite church yard in the village of Chorbovka. Time did not spare any of the family relics, not a single letter, note or picture.

That, in short, is the story of two people whose lives make up one of the most interesting pages connected with the history of America.

Fort Ross was the southernmost point in the Russian advances down the North American Continent, the farthest point in Russian-America. The sale of Fort Ross in 1841 presages the conclusion between the United States of America and Russia on March 30, 1867 of a treaty on the sale of Russian possessions in North America.

The Russian flag was lowered at New Archangel on an Autumn day in October 1867. The story of Russian America was over.

But the memory of those who 225 years ago discovered Alaska, founded the first Russian settlements on the remote rocky islands, and did so much to study and develop the "land of icy silence" the Aluetian Islands and California-the memory of dedicated Russian explorers-lives on in geographical names, monuments and legends.

These names should rightfully include those of Alexander Rotchev, the last Commandant of Fort Ross, and his wife Elena, a reminder of whom is Mt. St. Helena, not far from the Slavianka, now called the Russian River, carries its waters through the Russian Gorge to the might ocean that not only separates but also unites two continents. (NOVCSTI PRESS AGENCY, APN)