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RUSSIAN ROMANTICS IN AMERICA:  
ALEXANDER AND HELENA ROTCHEV AT FORT ROSS

Daniel Brower

This story is not about Fort Ross itself but about two people, prominent in its history, to whom it represented an extraordinary adventure in their lives. Alexander and Helena Rotchev spent only six years at Fort Ross, but their presence there is remembered to this day. They figure among the notable personages enshrined in the museum at the Visitors' Center. Alexander appears in the photograph reproduced there in the garb of a middle-aged newspaper publicist, one of the many unsuccessful careers that he undertook after leaving America. The brief description of Helena turns her into an ornament of the Fort, a graceful aristocratic wife and mother honoring the Russian colony with her presence and her piano playing. Who those people really were and why they chose to come to Russian America are questions the museum, and the Fort Ross booklet, choose not to address, and rightly so since we cannot presume to dissect their complex personalities with the meager materials at hand. Nonetheless, they did leave behind clues which I propose to use here to draw a very tentative portrait of their personal and public lives. My hope is that in this manner we may better understand them and the meaning to Russians of Fort Ross itself.

One clue is provided by the portrait of young Rotchev, reproduced in the newsletter. It is the possession of his great-great grandson, Arsenii Arsenevich Smolenskii, whom I met in the spring of 1989 in Leningrad. He possesses as well a portrait of

Helena's father, Prince Pavel Gagarin, the stern Nikolaevan bureaucrat from whom she fled in 1828 to marry Alexander, a Moscow University student of common birth but great literary ambitions. He has also a portrait of Helena when an elderly lady living on a Ukrainian estate with a daughter and son-in-law (where she was buried on her death in the 1870s or 1880s). She had long since separated from Alexander (perhaps as early as the 1850s, when she assumed the position of director at the Irkutsk orphanage). His taste for travel had taken him back to California for the Gold Rush (he was one of those who went broke), to Central Asia shortly after its conquest by Russia to edit the new Russian newspaper, and to France during the Franco-Prussian war to work as war correspondent. During that trip he apparently rescued an young orphaned Frenchwoman who accompanied him in his last years as editor of a provincial newspaper in a town on the Volga. In the early 1870s he died there penniless and was buried with contributions from friends.

Rotchev's portrait, in shirt sleeves pensively staring into space, fits well the image of a young Romantic poet (perhaps amateur artist as well, since the drawing may be a self-portrait) from the 1820s and 1830s, such as Helena must have seen him when they met in Moscow. His studies at the university seem to have interested him less than his translations of Western drama (including Molière, Shakespeare, and Schiller) and his poetry. His first volume of poems, published in 1828 under the title "Imitations of the Koran," is dedicated to "P.[rincess] E.[lena] P.[avlovna]." They were married that year, living first in Moscow then in St. Petersburg. Two sons were born in those

years, while Alexander, having abandoned his studies, attempted to maintain his family by translations and other literary works. For a while he was employed by the new Academic (Alexandrovskii) Theater. In all probability the family lived in difficult conditions, for the literary profession received scant recognition still and poetry and translations brought in a miserly income.

It was a life far more modest than that to which Helena was accustomed. Its rewards came in the pursuit of personal and intellectual fulfillment. We can presume that theirs was a marriage of love, which for her brought the only possible release from the confining life of arranged marriages and aristocratic conventions of her family. In the dark years of the reign of

Nicholas I, their way of life revealed on their part a remarkable degree of independence and moral character. Rotchev acquired then the mannerisms and idealism which marked him to the end of his days as a "man of the 1830s." He was remembered by one of his colleagues on the Volga town newspaper as "a gentle soul, of almost childlike innocence and simplicity," who was "remarkably learned" and possessed still a great "love of humanity." Perhaps his idealism and romantic rebelliousness help explain Helena's initial attraction to him and her willingness to accept the hard life he brought her. By eloping with Rotchev, she had renounced completely the autocratic and aristocratic world of her father.

Both she and her husband were rebels at a time in Russia when public dissent was harshly punished. She remained true later in life to these ideals of independence and freedom. In the 1850s she welcomed at her home in the Siberian town of Irkutsk several political exiles who had settled there after having completed their terms of forced labor, punished for having gathered in St. Petersburg in the late 1840s to discuss Western socialism. Among the judges at their secret trial in 1849 had been her own father. One of her guests in Irkutsk, Fedor L'vov, later married one of her daughters, another event suggesting how great was the gulf between her way of life and that of her family.

St. Petersburg was the center in the 1830s of the intellectual life so attractive to Rotchev, who moved among writers as eminent as Pushkin and assisted the traveler Kiril Khlebnikov to publish an account of his life in North America. It was also the capital of the empire, filled with uniformed officers and bureaucrats. To escape from the stifling atmosphere of Nicholas I's autocratic regime, described by the poet Lermontov in one of his poems as the "country of lords and of slaves," was extremely difficult for an impoverished Romantic poet-translator and his family.

We can easily imagine, then, the lure of Russian America for both Alexander and Helena. It offered a place of refuge from autocratic Russia while providing Rotchev, originally appointed "special emissary" in the Russian-American Company, a decent income and secure standing. At the same time, it was a land of adventure on the most distant borderlands of the empire. Rotchev appears to have moved into the role of company emissary, commandant, and traveler with great ease. In his first two years he sailed along the Pacific shores of North America, and then

left on a trip of a year and a half to China and India (one of the Indian vases he brought back stands in his great-great grandson's quarters). His glowing accounts of California, based largely on his six years at Fort Ross, have often been repeated. We should remember that they are in part the poetic visions of an exile from Nikolaevan Petersburg who found for a brief time the romantic, adventuresome life of which he had dreamed. For him, Russian America was a crossroads of civilizations.

Helena confronted the adventures of life at Fort Ross from a different perspective. After their long voyage by sail in 1836 from St. Petersburg to Sitka and then Fort Ross, she was left with the care of their children (they had five in all, but the dates of birth of the last three are unknown). Perhaps she was able, when the presence of visitors created the opportunity, to form an intellectual circle for discussion like those she had known in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The presence of guests such as Father Veniaminov and the ethnographer and naturalist Il'ia Voznesensky encouraged an interest in the study of the peoples of northern California and of the abundant flora and fauna of the area, all of which were subjects opening up a new world of knowledge. We possess no records of this side of her life, though we might hope that some day family papers in the possession of her descendants would turn up her letters or papers.

However, she did leave evidence of the great care she took of the education of her children in the wonders of pristine nature. After having settled in the 1840s in Irkutsk, she

undertook the translation of a French children's book on nature and wrote a brief forward to the Russian edition (published finally in 1852). She disavowed any scientific knowledge of botany or zoology, but did claim to understand the proper moral and natural education of children, to whom "everything truthful and beautiful is accessible." The forward also hints at the burdens she had had to shoulder as pioneer woman when, "responsible for the education of my children," she had had "by necessity and by calling the opportunity to put my words into action." She found in the "playfulness of children" and "the simple joy of the child at the sight of surrounding nature" the inspiration to acquaint them with natural history. It had been an undertaking which brought "sufferings" but also rewards--she claimed "complete success." In this way she put into practice the Rousseau's principles of the natural innocence of children and the goodness that an understanding of nature was supposed to bring. Perhaps this unusual dimension to her activities at Fort Ross explains why Voznesensky destined his watercolor of Fort Ross for her. That gesture was his manner of honoring her presence there.