THE PALACE 
AND THE POET
WRITTEN BY SHELDON CHAD
PHOTOGRAPHED BY SERGEY MAXIMISHIN

At the international airport in St. Petersburg, Russia, a ticket checker waves me toward the distant domestic airport for my flight to Simferopol, even though the Crimean city is in independent Ukraine. “We always considered Crimea part of mother Russia,” she explains. “We still consider it our own.”

Many books have been written about Russia’s geopolitical interest in the strategic Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, dating back to the times of Peter the Great. But it only takes one slim volume of poetry to understand Crimea’s hold on the Russian soul: Alexander Pushkin’s 1824 “The Fountain of Bakchisarai.” It recounts a romantic legend set in the 500-year-old palace of the Crimean khanate—one of only three palaces of Islamic design surviving in Europe today—and it is the source of a national love affair with the locale itself.

Pushkin is regarded as the founder of Russian literature and its greatest lyric poet. Among his works, “The Fountain of Bakchisarai,” not only was one of his most popular poems, but also served as a kind of Russian One Thousand and One Nights, a 3500-word verse that recreates the world of the palace’s builders, the vanished Crimean Khanate.

The tale’s allure over these 200 years springs from the story: A love between a fearful conqueror and a captive maid, doomed by a vengeful harem queen. So deeply does his poem resonate that still today, moved largely by Pushkin, some 250,000 people a year come from all over Russia to the palace, primarily to set eyes on the poem’s set piece—the actual Fountain of Tears, which Pushkin turned into one of the most profound symbols of eternal love in all of literature.

But to today’s descendants of the 800-year-old Crimean Tatar Khanate, Bakchisarai (pronounced bah-chih-sah-rey) means even more, says Yakub Appazov, director of a local museum. The palace, he explains, “is the heart of the nation, and all that belongs to the nation is Bakchisaray.” The nameplate on the palace, he adds, reads “Bakchisarai Palace of the Crimean Khanate” not only in Ukrainian and Russian, but in Crimean Tatar as well.

Since ancient times, successive civilizations in Crimea have tended to erase the traces of their predecessors. This was recently the fate of both fountain and palace. But they endure because the story of “The Fountain of Tears” moved not only the Russian people, but also czars, a great empress and the First General Secretary of the Communist Party. If not for Pushkin’s poem, the palace would have been lost. But now let’s find it.

From the 16th to the late 18th centuries, the town of Bakchisarai, whose name means “the palace in the garden,” was the capital of the Crimean Khanate, the state that in 1438 broke away from the Golden Horde, the alliance of Mongol and Turkish tribes whose empire reached from the Pacific to the Volga River. The Khanate, extending east from the Black Sea to the Caspian–Volga region, was a formidable power, and its line of kings descended from Genghis Khan himself. The founder of the dynasty, Meñli Giray, took the imperial title “Sovereign of Two Continents and Khan of Khans of Two Seas.” Over some 250 years, from 1352 until 1783, the palace at Bakchisaray was the residence of 48
khan of the Giry dynasty, and the sump-
tuous complex lived up to its name, with
gardens and a life-giving, sustaining and
purifying supply of water as the focal point
of its design.
But now it’s been 235 years since the
khan was masters at Balkhchisaray.
Over these years, the palace has taken on
a Russianized, “Asian Baroque” appear-
ance—“greatly distorted compared to its
initial look,” admits the palace’s former
assistant-director Olesya Hazrachenskaya,
a devotee of Crimean Tatar art. Moreover,
the palace’s archives, the palace has
lacked any ethnographic information on
the everyday life of the khan and other inhab-
Itines there, as well as any documents from
the period, says Hazrachenskaya.
All of which suits Balkhchisaray better to
legend and poetry than history.
Examination of this text throughout
The vacant pleasantries and balls...
Where now the Khan? The Harem
where?
All now silent, all was dreary.
All had been altered ... but not there
Was what bestowed the spirit’s query...

Today’s “Palace in
the Garden” is less
than one-fourth its
original size. The
northern gates, above,
was once one of
two main gates. The
Fountain of Tears
stood in the domed
mausoleum at top
left—until it was
moved to the main
dome past the gate for Cath-
eine I’s visit in 1787.
Right: This 19th-
century lithograph
shows the palaces’
gardens for women
and children.

Inside, the L-shaped Fountain Court’s
cement walls are barren. Its uneven floors
have been smoothed by millions of steps
over the centuries. It’s shaded and cool,
dappled with sunlight from the open door
to the harem garden.
The Fountain of Tears itself is tucked
into a corner, with a bust of Pushkin alongside.
From its grey marble and
floral arabesques, a sequence of nine basins descends.
“Poetically described to me as la fon-
taine des larmes (the fountain of tears), I
saw a broken fountain, from a rusty iron pipe
water dripped drop by drop,” wrote
Pushkin to a friend after first seeing
the fountain on his visit in 1820. But later, he
saw the glint of poetic gold in the image
of the fountain as a desolate eye,
weeping endlessly. From 1821 to
1823, he worked on his poem,
which was published in March
1824. It became his best-selling
poem. Soon afterward, in 1826,
he published a shorter, reflexive
verse titled “To the Palace of the
Fountain of Balkhchisaray.”
Frankly, Pushkin’s prose,
even shabbily, first impression in
1820 is still accurate. American
traveler Matt Brown reacted to his
first sight of the fountain: “Before
I walked in, I read Lonely Planet
where it described the weep-
ing fountain. You expect to walk
into the place and see such a fab-
ulous structure, and it was so
disappointing.”
But Russians disagree: Read
Pushkin’s poetic rendering, and
your reaction may be like those
unwedding lines of tourists who
approach the humble-looking fountain with solemnity, open-
mouthed curiosity and visible emo-
ton. With trembling hands, a few
put in place two white roses, min-
icking Pushkin’s hauntingly beauti-
ful gesture from his second poem:
The stream of love, the stream
distress,
I brought to thee two roses, as
a present,
I like the ceaseless murmuring thine,
And lyric tears, still and

Ludmila Nooyan is a Moscow fash-
ion designer who tries to visit the fountain
close to or even twice a year. She remembers
first hearing Pushkin in early childhood.

“Pashchina,” the magical world that
has nothing to do with the reality of
the Orenburg steppe (in Siberia). Magical
people, strange and beautiful clothes—a
dreamy story.”
She acknowledges,
barely, that the fountain
Itself is so modest. “While
the reality is not so strik-
ing, it still keeps that
dream intact,” she says.
“Here, I’m enshrined in
a different time. I see the
fountain, I see Zarema,
Maria, and Gray. It’s an
unfading love story.”
In the story Pushkin
tells, the palace was home,
long ago, to an “impe-
rious kind of rascals,”
a khan whom Pushkin
names simply Giray. In
the inner court was the
harem, where only Giray
was permitted entrance. There, Zarema
was “the harem’s queen, love’s bright-
est star”—until the arrival of Manta,
a “orphaned princess matched by arms”
from a castle in Poland. “She was her
gray-bearded father’s pride / joy of his years’
receding rule.” Giray secretly falls in love
with the beautiful Manta, but his love is
unrequited. She is shy, aloof, distrusted by
captivity, and chaste. She desper-
ately resists him and “in this spare lodger
set apart / From envious wives, she
gives her heart.” But that doesn’t stop
envious Zarema, who steals into Maria’s
room and murders her. Giray witnesses
the crime, and he casts Zarema out. That
night she, too, dies. Giray, grief-stricken by
her losses (“Then whisper something and it
seems / Tears scored his cheeks in scalding
streams”) and ennobled by romantic love,
gives orders to his sculptor.
Back home the Tatar chieftain came:
A marble fountain he erected
To honor poor Maria’s name
A folk tale,” says Haiworowski about Pushkin’s epic poem. “Actually, we don’t know how factual this story is of Dilara Bikotch, the noblewoman whom the Khan fell in love with. We know nothing about her.”

Most historians believe that the original location of the Fountain of Tears was a niche in an octagonal muskelen built on a hill above the palace by Khan Qırım Giray in 1764. On the muskelen was inscribed only a woman’s name: Dilara Bikotch.

Haiworowski, a Polish-Ukrainian who grew up in Balchik, is now in the third year of tea into a small porcelain bowl, in the Crimean Tatar style. “No evidence, just speculation: Even a Khan’s love could not be the basis for burying a woman in a muskelen as if she were a saint,” he says. “We can find much more substantial reasons for that, because we know Dilara Bikotch as a donor of mosques in the town.”

The women’s quarters, or harem, were made up of four buildings; only one survives. This salon, which was used by women and children of the ruling family, was called the “broken heart,” and then spilling over into the pairs of smaller basins, thus offering the relief that comes with tears—but then, as memories rise up again, the pool of tears fills and the heart repeats the cycle again and again in inexpressible grief and continuous love.

One of the mosques in Balchik, the so-called Green Mosque, was inscribed with her name. We know the tradition of rich women building mosques did exist in the Crimean court. So perhaps it was not the Khan’s love that was the reason to bury her with such a special honor. Unfortunately, for now, we do not have any documents that would help us discover who she was.”

Visiting Balchik, as at about the same time as Pushkin, the traveler Murevich-Apostel wrote of the muskelen, which still stands, “Very strange that all the people here vouch that this beauty was a Georgian girl, but a Polish girl, alleg-edly kidnapped by Qırım Giray. However much Laura and them, no matter how I assured them that the traditional story has no historical basis, and that in the second half of the eighteenth century it was not so easy for Tatars to kidnap a Pole, all my arguments were useless. They maintain as one: The beauty was Maria Popocka.”

There may indeed have been a historical Maria Popocka, a Polish noblewoman who had been kidnapped on a Crimean Tatar raid and held in the Khan’s harem, and who ultimately became his wife. But the timing is off; Taille is first mentioned in the writings of Crimean historian Sayyid Muhammad Riza. In his account, it was Khan Feth Giray (ruled 1736–1737) who was given the captured maiden—and who restored her to her family in exchange for a ransom in gold. Since the fountain was built in 1764, the accepted historical wisdom is that it actually commemorates Dilara Bikotch, who was likely a Georgian girl who died young, for dilara is a Turkish word meaning “beloved,” and
A folk tale," says Oleksa Hainwronski, Info. We know, he says, that Dilbara Bilekhe funded the construction of a mosque—but we don't know who she was. And a Polish noblewoman may have languished in the palace harem—but that was decades before the legendary love story.

Opposite: The Pushkin restaurant, at far left, stands on a corner of Lenin Street in Bakhchisaray.

From Bakhchisaray, the empress wrote these words to Potemkin, as translated by Andrey Scholnik:

1) I stay one evening in the Khan’s summer-house,
In the midst of Muslims and the Islamic faith.
In front of this summer-house a mosque was built.
Where five times a day the Imam calls the people.
I thought of sleeping, but as soon as I closed my eyes,
He shot his ears and roared with all his might...
O, godly miracle! Who are among my ancestors
Slept peacefully from the borders and their khans?
But what prevents me from sleeping in Bakhchisaray?
Are tobacco smoke and this rain. Is this not the place of paradise?

One of history's great romantics, Catherine stayed three days in Bakhchisaray. As part of his coup de théâtre, Potemkin had moved the fountain that Pushkin immortalized 37 years later from its original location in the mausoleum to its present location, in an inner courtyard, so as to put it near the empress’s apartment, certain that she would appreciate what was then already local folklore: the tale of the Khan, the harem queen and the captive maiden. One can imagine Catherine and her suite whisking away the evening with their guests, listening for the fountain’s teardrops falling. The echoes are long in that courtyard.

The late afternoon at the palace, I met Arsat Reftov and his bride, Elizaveta, who had come with members of their family to the Great Khan Mosque in the palace for a blessing on their marriage. "It's our Crimean Tatar mosque," Reftov said. "Even the walls can bless the new family." Many of those walls, however, except in the oldest and best-preserved part of the palace, have long since been altered. When Pushkin came here in 1820, he told about "walking around the palace greatly irritated by the neglect in which it is decaying, and by the half-European alterations to some of the rooms."

He could blame Potemkin, in part, who had enlisted the services of the architect Joseph de Ribea, who was not well acquainted with Islamic styles or principles, to refurbish the palace. They wanted to please the empress with beautiful mansions that catered to European and imperial expectations, so they mixed Asian and European styles—not always with success.

Further changes to the palace usually coincided with the visit of the next czar or czarina. This came to mean demolition, too. In the 1820's alone, several buildings of the harem, the Winter Palace, a large...
Great filmmaker Yevgeni Pudovkin made his first feature film in 1907, which he titled “The Balchikchisaray Fountain.” But it was a ballet, based on Pushkin’s poem, that did the most to save the palace from destruction.

In 1943, during World War II, the Soviets deported Cossack Tatars en masse to territories in what is now Uzbekistan and other parts of Central Asia, in retaliation for the collaboration of some Tatars with Nazi Germany. Forty percent of the deportees died within two years.

This cultural cleansing was followed by a cultural one, as historical and linguistic traces of the Crimean Tatar people on the peninsula were expunged. Crimean Tatar and Turkic place names of villages, towns and cities were Sovietized. Cemeteries and mosques were destroyed. The Soviets proposed to rename Balchikchisaray palace “Pushkinov” (“Pushkin”) or “Sadlovskov” (“Garden”). According to the director of the museum during those post-war years, Maria Yustava, who was in Moscow at the time, there were plans to raise the palace as well.

Fortunately, Boris Asafyev’s ballet “The Balchikchisaray Fountain” happened to have been first performed on stage some 10 years earlier, and it had toured all the major Soviet cities to great popular acclaim. Most importantly, one of its fans was none other than Soviet leader Joseph Stalin—and, indeed, it was his favorite ballet. Pushkin too was beyond Soviet reproach, having been claimed “entirely our own, a Soviet” in the Communist Party’s official newspaper Pravda on the centennial of the poet’s death in 1937.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the poet Pushkin’s imagination gave not only life but also, ultimately, sanctity to the fountain and palace, whose name remained unchanged, and whose buildings endured the Soviet era intact.

But if you go, know your history. And bring your Pushkin.

O magic shore! O visions’ balm! All there inspires peak and pine. The graceful water’s sheltering calm, The rose and amber of the vine, Cool brooks and topiar shade nearly...

The Heavenly Fountain

Inscribed in gold above the Fountain of Tears is a verse by Suraih al-Abu’l Qasim, which names, among the benefits the righteous will enjoy: “A spring on the fountain tomorrow, called Salab.” According to expert Abdalhadi Abu’l-Ab: “The name literally means ‘seek the way it refers to a particular spring in heaven, and it also contains allusions to such concepts as ‘rectify,’ ‘smooth’ and ‘easy on the throat.’”

The Arabic word sabih commonly refers to public fountains erected as pious acts to provide water for wayfarers.

The tradition of designing fountains called salab’s was widespread in Islamic architecture, especially in Iraq and Syria, and began around the Black Sea in the 13th and 14th centuries. These were not simple fountains. Rather, a salab’s often included several basins, and sometimes channels that distributed water through basins and pools. According to scholar Yasser Tabbou, salab’s were notable especially for the “alternating silkiness and movement of water…” and the use of water as a timelapse image.

At the Four Sees, water flows into the upper middle basin, out to a pair of side bowls, then back into a center basin, and repeats this pattern three times.

At the top of the Balchikchisaray salab’s are eight vases. These are smaller, praising Khan Qemir Giga, who in 1934 commissioned the Persian master Lor to construct the fountain.

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10 Saud Aramco World

Sasha Cherny, Ukraine’s Mykhailo Kononovytsky and dozens more. Artists came too: Russian romantic Karl Bryullov worked on a painting for 12 years, an orientalist, Gohylay-the-impresario, painted “The Fountain of Tears.” Like Pushkin’s poem, every Russian knows it. On the screen, the

Palace officials today say restoration is both a physical and cultural affair. In the palace square, DJs, dancers perform Crimean folk dances for tourists, and painters, tailors, apply colors and motifs that resemble those of the khateen era.
The Palace and the Poet

Written by Sheldon Chad
Photographed by Sergey Maximishin

In 1821 Russia’s beloved poet Alexander Pushkin visited the Islamic palace of the once-powerful Crimean khans. At this fountain where his bust now stands, he found inspiration to put a Crimean legend into verse so moving, and so popular, that it later saved the palace from Soviet bulldozers. To this day, hundreds of thousands visit each year in tribute to his tragic love story: “Each age the mournful mark reverses / And knows it as the Fount of Tears.”

12 The Other Side of Cork

Written and photographed by Ann Chandler

For more than 2000 years, people have hand-harvested cork from the trees that grow in only seven countries on the shores of the western Mediterranean Sea. Today cork’s uses vary more than ever, going far beyond stopping bottles, and the challenge of maintaining sustainable cork forests is a regional one.
A Heritage Takes Wing
Written by Meera Subramanian / Photographed by Tariq Dajani

In late 2010, the United Nations recognized falconry as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, and last year, raptor devotees flocked to the International Falconry Festival to celebrate their artful sport—and indeed, their obsession.

Linking Med to Red
Written by John Cooper

Sailing from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea is an ambition far older than today’s Suez Canal. The first to make the trip were ships put in service 2500 years ago under Darius I of Persia. From then until the 19th century, off and on, two main Nile-to-Suez canals opened their gates with each fall’s flooding of Egypt’s great river.

Suggestions for Reading

Classroom Guide
Written by Julie Weiss

Events & Exhibitions