

## *Prelude*

Late in 1918, amid the chaos of revolution and civil war engulfing Russia, the poet Anna Akhmatova moved into the Fountain House, the grand St. Petersburg palace of the Sheremetev family recently appropriated by the fledgling Bolshevik government. For the next three decades the Fountain House would be her main residence and a powerful source of artistic inspiration. From her earliest days there Akhmatova fell under the palace's spell, entranced by its history and the many stories, myths, and legends surrounding its generations of inhabitants.

Of all the stories, she was most fascinated by that of Countess Praskovia Sheremeteva. In Praskovia, known for nearly all her life as Parasha, whose ghost appeared to inhabit the empty halls of the Fountain House, Akhmatova glimpsed her double and in her tragic life, a reflection of her own. Like Akhmatova, Praskovia had been a brilliant artist forced to create her art in extreme conditions. Like Akhmatova, Praskovia had been a social outsider, the object of suspicion and cruel gossip. And like Akhmatova, Praskovia had been the other woman, the unlawful wife.

Akhmatova paid tribute to Praskovia's spirit in a sketch to her epic "Poem without a Hero":

What are you muttering, midnight?  
In any case, Parasha is dead,  
The young mistress of the palace.

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The gallery remains uncompleted—  
This capricious wedding gift,  
Where, prompted by Boreas,  
I am writing all this down for you.  
Incense streams from every window,  
The beloved lock has been cut,  
And the oval of her face grows dark.<sup>1</sup>

The young mistress of the palace had died in the Fountain House early on the morning of 23 February 1803 at the age of thirty-four, three weeks after having given birth to her first child, a son named Dmitry. She was buried three days later at the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in a lavish funeral.

Along the route, crowds gathered to witness the procession. As the cortege made its way down Nevsky Prospect, more police had to be summoned to hold back the throng. One group, however, was strangely absent. The city's nobles did not attend the funeral even though the Sheremetevs were one of Russia's richest and most distinguished families. They stayed home because they knew the secret about Praskovia's past that this blinding splendor had been intended to obscure. She was not the descendant of Polish nobility, as the silver plate on her coffin proclaimed. Rather, she had been one of the count's serfs, the daughter of his illiterate blacksmith, and his longtime mistress.

The nobles weren't the only ones who stayed away that day. Praskovia's husband, Count Nicholas Sheremetev, also didn't attend. He remained at the Fountain House crushed with grief, unable to rise from his bed.

Praskovia's death nearly killed Nicholas, and for months his thoughts dwelled on his own end as the only solution to his misery. Guilt fed his despair. He and Praskovia had wed, in secret, a year and a half earlier, yet it was only now that he had found the courage to inform the tsar and his family about the truth of their relationship. In his heart Nicholas knew he had wronged Praskovia. He should have revealed their secret sooner. It took her death for him to realize that society's prejudices about noble birth and the sanctity of lineage, prejudices that Nicholas had struggled for decades to free himself from, amounted to nothing alongside his love.

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In the end, Nicholas learned this truth, yet it had come at a terrible price.

Praskovia and Nicholas had known each other since the late 1770s and been lovers since the mid-1780s. In December 1798, Nicholas gave Praskovia her freedom, and three years later they married. Practically from the time of their meeting, Praskovia and Nicholas were bound to each other not only as master and serf, but by a shared passion for music. Music, opera in particular, was at the center of their lives, and it was Praskovia's rare talent as a singer and Nicholas's vision of creating the finest opera company in Russia that brought them together.

Praskovia debuted as a child and quickly became the star of the Sheremetev theater. While still a teenager, Praskovia, performing under the name "the Pearl," achieved acclaim, establishing herself as one of Russia's greatest singers. Empress Catherine the Great, her son, Tsar Paul I, and Stanislaw August Poniatowski, the last king of Poland, all came to hear her sing. The nobility flocked to Sheremetev's theater, which at its high point rivaled the opera companies of Vienna, Berlin, and Paris.

Her career ended suddenly. In the late 1790s, Praskovia contracted a mysterious illness and was forced to retire. Without Praskovia, Nicholas saw no point in continuing and closed his theater. His lifework came to an end. The couple left Moscow for St. Petersburg, where Nicholas had been summoned to serve at court. Marriage offered a degree of solace to Praskovia, whose devout nature had caused her to suffer for years over the sinfulness of her relationship with Nicholas. But it did nothing to fill the emptiness she felt upon her retirement from the stage, nor did it stop the gossip that had hounded them ever since Nicholas took her to his bed.

After her death, Praskovia passed into legend. The story of her improbable journey from serf to countess inspired a folk song sung by millions of peasants across Russia. Penny prints depicting a romanticized first meeting with Nicholas hung in many Russian homes. In smoky taverns and roadside inns gypsy musicians performed a song about how "the church bells were calling, our sweet Parasha is to be married to the master."<sup>2</sup> Praskovia's tale was recalled in poems and novellas. By the end of the nineteenth century, nearly everyone had heard of the poor serf girl who had married Russia's richest aristocrat.

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Under the Soviets, Praskovia was transformed into a quasi-socialist celebrity. She became a symbol of the worker-peasant class whose talents had been exploited by their masters. Her image was put on postcards, and a crudely politicized version of her life fed to Soviet schoolchildren. The Sheremetev estates of Kuskovo and Ostankino were reopened as shrines to Praskovia and the genius of the Russian peasant. As for the Sheremetevs, visitors were instructed to gaze upon their palaces so that they might “better know their enemy, and consequently develop a deeper and more conscious hatred toward him.”<sup>3</sup> Writers cranked out books and brochures full of distortions and half-truths about Praskovia and Nicholas, and their story became the subject of a popular made-for-television movie. Praskovia remains today among the more recognizable female faces from Russia’s imperial past, a figure about whom most Russians and even many foreign visitors have heard but few know much about.

In the spring of 1872, Peter Bezsonov, an ethnographer, folklorist, and Praskovia’s first biographer, arrived at Kuskovo on the southeastern edge of Moscow. Bezsonov had long been interested in Praskovia’s folk song and had come to do research for a book he was writing on it and its heroine. Count Sergei Sheremetev, the grandson of Praskovia and Nicholas, warmly received Bezsonov and set him up in a comfortable dacha on the estate grounds.

Some of the family papers were stored in Kuskovo’s old wooden theater, the site of Praskovia’s dramatic triumphs, which now sat forgotten, its exterior flaked with brittle, chipping paint, its interior stripped of its sumptuous velvet seats, its luxurious taffetas, and gilded archways. Bezsonov was dismayed to find the condition of the archive no better. Documents lay about in large messy piles without any guide or index. Water from the hundred-year-old roof had leaked onto the papers, leaving behind rot and mold and rendering many of them illegible.<sup>4</sup>

As he worked his way through the surviving papers that summer, Bezsonov began to feel as if he were in search of a ghost; but for the occasional reference, Praskovia simply wasn’t there. She appeared to have mysteriously vanished. He suspected that someone had gone through the archive, carefully removing and presumably destroying anything on Praskovia that might have reflected poorly on her, Nicholas, or his family. His suspicion fell on Nicholas.<sup>5</sup>

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After Praskovia's death, Nicholas became the guardian of her memory and the author of her life story. Nicholas turned Praskovia's rooms in the Fountain House into a holy shrine. He completed the almshouse in Moscow begun many years earlier with Praskovia's encouragement and gave generously to numerous charities in her name. And he wrote a few brief accounts of Praskovia's life for their son, Dmitry. More hagiography than biography, these writings present Praskovia as Nicholas wished their son to think of his departed mother and as Nicholas himself wished to remember her.<sup>6</sup> All of these efforts were an attempt both to memorialize Praskovia and to create an image of her as a woman of near saintly purity, devoid of the slightest frailties.

It is tempting to think that Nicholas got rid of any evidence that contradicted this image. We know he was not above falsifying Praskovia's past in order to make her more acceptable to polite society as well as to the weaker elements of his own character. But did he go so far as to burn whatever letters, diary, or testimony she may have written? It is impossible to say for certain.

Praskovia's papers may have indeed been burned, though not by Nicholas. Both the theatrical warehouse and the Sheremetevs' mansion in the heart of Moscow were consumed by the great fire of 1812 during Napoleon's invasion, which destroyed much of the city. The mansion housed the family's magnificent library and may have been the repository of Praskovia's papers as well.<sup>7</sup>

It's more likely, however, that there were never any papers to destroy. In the eighteenth century it was rare even for Russian noblemen and women to keep diaries or write memoirs. Few serfs were literate, and none are known to have left any substantial accounts of their lives. Even in England, which had higher literacy rates and a more developed theatrical life than Russia, none of the leading actresses of the time wrote memoirs.<sup>8</sup> Bezsonov's assertion was most likely motivated by a desire to cast the Sheremetevs in a bad light. His relations with Count Sergei Sheremetev had become strained, and he never had much sympathy for the nobility. After Bezsonov left Kuskovo and published his book, Sergei was outraged at the depiction of his grandfather and even accused Bezsonov of having stolen documents from the family archive.

This dearth of personal material is exacerbated by the attitudes of the day that saw little value in recording the lives of serfs. Even an artist of

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exceptional talent such as Praskovia did not receive nearly the attention given free performers. That we possess as many references as we do to Praskovia's career testifies to her greatness, a greatness that helped chip away at the barrier between free and serf artists so that in the nineteenth century serf actors, singers, dancers, and musicians did begin to receive their due recognition. It is a sad irony that one of the greatest voices in Russia was denied the voice to tell her story. Everything we know about Praskovia comes from the words of others.

The challenges of telling the story of Praskovia and Nicholas are more general, however, and confront any historian seeking to remove the veils that shield private life. As the literary biographer Richard Holmes has observed, "That ordinariness, and that family intimacy, is the very thing that the biographer—as opposed to the novelist—cannot share or recreate. Tolstoy in the opening of *Anna Karenina* writes that all families are happy in the same way; he might have added that they leave little record of that happiness, even though it is the stuff of life. The very closeness of husbands and wives precludes letters between them, and often the keeping of journals (unless one party is secretly unhappy). The private domestic world closes in on itself, and the biographer is shut out."<sup>9</sup>

For the biographer to enter the confidential space of couples, distance is required, either physical distance, which produces letters, or emotional, which produces revelations to one's diary or, in the extreme, court proceedings in which the intimate details of human life are brought before the world. We have nothing of the sort in this instance. Nicholas and Praskovia were rarely apart and so had no need of letters; what's more, Praskovia was rarely apart from her closest friends. It was only after her death created the greatest distance imaginable that Nicholas began to write about their lives together.

The one person who knew their story better than anyone else, Tatiana Shlykova, once the prima ballerina of Nicholas's troupe, Praskovia's best friend, and a witness to their secret wedding, lived to the age of ninety. As a boy in the 1850s, Count Sergei Sheremetev would sit at Tatiana's feet in her room in the Fountain House and listen to her tell of her life. Tatiana loved to reminisce about her past, but she was always careful not to disclose too much about Praskovia and Nicholas. "Much of the past in Tatiana Vasilievna's life remained forever secret," Sergei wrote, "about much we can only guess, but it is beyond doubt that a deep, resolute, and

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loyal friendship bound her to my grandmother Praskovia Ivanovna, and her words about my grandfather, and even the sound of her voice, spoke of a grateful memory. When she would talk about them, one could feel that her entire soul was with them.”<sup>10</sup> Tatiana died in 1863, taking these secrets with her to the grave.

For over five years I have searched the archives in Moscow and St. Petersburg, interviewed Praskovia’s and Nicholas’s descendants in Russia and abroad, and written to members of the extended Sheremetev family throughout the world in the hope of discovering some long-lost papers of Praskovia. At times I thought I was on the verge of making a startling discovery. While working at the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg, I was handed a file of documents dated 1809, the year of Nicholas’s death. Among the faded papers was a report titled “File Describing the Documents found at Ostankino in the Room of the Late Countess Praskovia Ivanovna.” With a racing heart I read the accompanying letter by one of Nicholas’s secretaries describing how the papers had been found in a dusty wardrobe in ten bundles held together by Dutch string and red ribbon. Weeks passed before I recovered from the disappointment of finding here nothing more than a collection of administrative reports compiled by Nicholas’s estate managers.<sup>11</sup> My searches did uncover, however, considerable new information that has eluded biographers until now, most notably a cache of documents in the State Hermitage Museum that held the answers to the mystery of their secret marriage. Nonetheless, I have found no misplaced diary or letters that would afford access to Praskovia’s inner world. So much of her life remains out of sight, irretrievable, frustratingly unknowable.

In my search for Praskovia, I have had to adopt strategies that while not widely employed by historians are common among biographers. I have been to the places Praskovia and Nicholas lived to get a sense of the physical world they inhabited. I have explored the palace and grounds at Kuskovo, attended a concert in the Ostankino theater, witnessed a service in the church where they married, stood in reverent silence in the room where Praskovia gave birth to Dmitry and later died, and visited their graves. I have held in my hand Nicholas’s and Praskovia’s marriage certificate, which bears their signatures, and a lock of Praskovia’s auburn

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hair. I have spent hours examining Nicholas's and Praskovia's portraits for the faintest clues to my subjects' emotional histories.

Biography is impossible without the life-giving breath of fiction. When one writes a life it is never enough merely to string together along a chronological continuum the grubby facts retrieved from the archive. Lives don't reside in bundles of faded letters or in the foxed pages of old diaries patiently waiting for the biographer to come along and copy them down. Rather, they are actively created, shaped, and imbued with meaning and coherence in ways that have much in common with the work of the novelist. For a biography to be believable and true, imagination is required, imagination, the biographer Michael Holroyd reminds us, to capture the "dreams and fantasies, the shadow of the life that isn't lived but lingers within people."<sup>12</sup> The biographer must be a conjurer.

In writing the lives of Praskovia and Nicholas, I, too, have relied on the conjurer's tricks. I have had to summon my subjects' spirits and engage them in imagined conversations across the centuries for insights into the hidden pathways of their hearts. This has led me into the realm of speculation, especially with regard to Praskovia's story, yet, unlike the novelist, I have delivered all my findings from that shadowy landscape with a qualifying *perhaps*, a cautionary *maybe*. I have marked for the reader the doors that have withstood my attempts to open them and behind which so many secrets remain. Nonetheless, there are no imagined scenes in this book, no made-up characters, no invented dialogue. This, as best I know, is what happened.

I first learned about Praskovia and Nicholas on a visit to Kuskovo in the autumn of 1992. Like so many before me, I was immediately struck by the tragic beauty of their story. It is one of the most poignant love affairs in Russian history. Of course, masters had been taking serfs as their mistresses long before Nicholas, yet there is something new and different in Nicholas's and Praskovia's story. This difference is expressed not only by the fact that Nicholas married Praskovia, an unprecedented act for someone of his high social standing, but, more important, by the fact that he loved, indeed worshiped, her. Despite her lowly birth, Nicholas accepted Praskovia as his equal, worthy of his honor and respect. He saw in her the embodiment of goodness, sincerity, and Christian virtue. He called her his "tender friend and trusted companion," words that reveal

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an unmistakably modern sensibility toward marriage and the nature of a husband's and wife's affections.<sup>13</sup>

Today, such feelings appear uncontroversial, banal even, yet in eighteenth-century Russia they were revolutionary. For centuries, Russia's millions of serfs had been considered inferior beings, barely human, especially in relation to the aristocracy. Like all Russian noblemen, Nicholas was raised to hold these assumptions and educated to believe that his proud lineage constituted an unbridgeable chasm sanctioned by God, the emperor, and tradition separating him and the rest of his class from the dark peasant masses. Nicholas never completely freed himself of such beliefs. He was a reluctant revolutionary, someone who, when faced with the contradiction between what he had long held to be true and what he saw before him in the person of Praskovia, chose to renounce society's norms for the promise of an unknown future.

Nicholas's personal journey of moral transformation was one that Russian society as a whole had to undertake before serfdom could be ended. His relations with Praskovia showed Nicholas to be years ahead of his fellow nobles in his thinking, and his life issued a challenge to society that declared the common humanity in all people, nobles and serfs alike. Nicholas's actions reverberated throughout society, eventually inspiring others to change their beliefs as well. In the end, the example of their lives served to cast a harsh light on the gross injustice of serfdom and to help hasten its demise.

But theirs is not just a Russian story. It is a universal one of the power of love to transcend social convention and transform the human heart. Reflecting back on his life with Praskovia, Nicholas wrote in a letter to their son, "Tradition is not law. One mustn't submit one's mind and will to it, especially in those instances when one can free oneself from our age-old errors." These errors insisted on human inequality, what Nicholas had come to recognize as nothing more than "the transitory prejudices of this world."<sup>14</sup> Nicholas instructed his son to ignore society's prejudices and to listen only to his heart and the voice of his conscience. His advice is just as sound today as it was two centuries ago, and the story of Praskovia and Nicholas just as moving.