

# The New York Times

## The Lairs of Russian Literary Lions

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T. PETERSBURG, lovely and disturbing, with its dreamlike evocation of the past and its haunting, mournful beauty, may be the quintessential writer's city. In its broad rivers and quiet canals and noble palaces, in its narrow streets and cramped passages, elegance and squalor still coexist; the city echoes with possibility and despair. "I love thee, Peter's own creation,/ I love thy stern and comely face," declared Pushkin. He and other great Russian writers lived there; recently I visited four of their homes.

Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), for whom Russians feel a reverence we can barely imagine, is called the father of Russian literature, its first romantic: his blazing tales of love and passion ignited the Russian soul. Pushkin's best-known poem, "The Bronze Horseman," is named for the imposing equestrian statue of Peter the Great, founder of the city, which faces the Neva at Peter's Square. The poem is set during one of St. Petersburg's devastating floods. Pushkin's fervid, hallucinatory writing evokes a dreamscape suffused by ardor, despair and tyranny.

For all the wildness of his writing, his apartment - on the fashionable Moyka embankment, one entire floor of a grand house - is oddly bourgeois. The polished mahogany furniture, graceful draperies and patterned carpets evoke affluent domesticity. The mirrored dressing table of his wife, Natalya, hints that she was a famous beauty, a court favorite, but the apartment, though charming, is impersonal. The furnishings are mostly from the period, not from the family. Only in his study do you find the writer's possessions, a powerful sense of his presence.

Leather-bound books line the walls of the large, handsome room. The desk is neatly stacked with Pushkin's manuscripts, the margins decorated by his animated ink sketches. Why is it that they move us so, the objects a writer owned, touched, used? But they do: these things possess a mysterious poignancy, a charged vitality. Corporeal clues, they link us to the mind we've already met. Pushkin's study is full of such clues. On the desk is a gilded bronze inkwell: an African sailor in gold trousers, leaning jauntily on an anchor. This gift from a friend recalls Pushkin's great-grandfather, Abraham Hannibal, who was from Eritrea, Abyssinia or Cameroon, depending on your source, but was certainly a young African slave, a gift to Peter the Great. The populist czar freed him and became his godfather, raising and educating Hannibal, who became a distinguished engineer. "Thank you for the Moor," Pushkin wrote his friend, and gave it pride of place.

Here, too, are polished canes from Pushkin's dandyish collection, and a ceremonial sword. Pushkin's complicated career embraced both the military and the literary; the revolutionary (many of his Decembrist friends were executed) and Czar Nicholas himself (who paid Pushkin's debts after his death).

Here is the powerful sense of Pushkin's restless, passionate vitality, as well as the sudden, tragic shock of his death in a duel, after a young officer paid scandalous attentions to Pushkin's wife. And here is the plaster death mask, pallid and calm, the blank eyes tranquil, the features at last composed. Here, too, his elegant gold watch, stopped at the moment of his death.

The shabby stone building where Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-81) lived is in a blue-collar district, near Kuznechny Market, south of the Nevsky Prospekt. This area is still lively and bustling: on the sidewalk, babushkas offer paper-skinned onions and baskets of fresh eggs. Upstairs, an exhibition displays photographs: the writer, handsome, broad-browed, sloe-eyed, intense. Anna, his beloved second wife, composed, impeccable, her dark hair pulled tightly back, her deep-set eyes black and brooding. Here are evocations of the works - "The Gambler," for example, represented by a card table, the seductive, cabalistic paraphernalia of gaming: fanned cards, a scattering of money, poker chips, ivory markers and the hypnotic glitter of a roulette wheel.

The apartment is modest, intensely domestic and slightly claustrophobic, with densely patterned wallpaper, dark curtains and ponderous furniture. In the small parlor is a red plush sofa and chairs, a fringed hanging lamp, a low, oval table and a bowl of hand-rolled cigarettes. (Dostoyevsky, though he had emphysema and was forbidden to smoke, liked making these.) Here he received his many friends, often reading from his work in a high, thin, but mesmerizing, voice.

In the tidy dining room the family gathered every evening: Fyodor and Anna were devoted parents. Beyond is Anna's room - a hallway, really - and in one corner her pretty carved desk. Originally hired as his stenographer, Anna became Dostoyevsky's secretary and assistant, running both household and literary affairs. He dictated, she wrote it down, he revised. This desk held his work in her handwriting, still fluid, in that malleable state before it has hardened. "The Brothers Karamazov" was completed here.

Beyond Anna's room is the pleasant nursery: bentwood chairs, dolls, a rocking horse and two framed children's shadow portraits. In the corner, a rocking chair; Dostoyevsky liked to read to his children.

Again, it's the study that brings the writer to life: here is his lair, his realm, the scene of his intensity. Dostoyevsky's is spare and neat, suggesting discipline and commitment. On the wall, a Raphael Madonna lithograph, a few photographs. A long sofa, glass-fronted bookcase, the big, blond wood desk covered in green baize. "Everything had to be in its place," wrote his daughter. "The least disorder would annoy Father." Dostoyevsky started work when the house quieted, around 11 p.m., immersing himself in the deep interior world of his writing until the outside world began to wake. Then he moved to the sofa, wrapped himself in sheets, blankets and his overcoat, and slept. Around midday, he woke, made tea, bought a pastry, then dictated the night's work to Anna.

In this flat, Dostoyevsky's life reached a pinnacle: he'd quit gambling, was out of debt and was happily married. Here he died when his pen rolled under a heavy bookcase, which he tried to move. His lungs began to hemorrhage; two days later he was dead. (Another stopped clock, telling when.)

The brooding, obsessive interior world of Dostoyevsky's writing is not evident here in the apartment - except that the worn, high-backed sofa suggests a portal, hinting at the nocturnal journey into a darker region. It suggests that his nights were solitary and silent, that he slept in a haphazard and transient manner, rejecting orderly domesticity for something more serious, more perilous.

The family of Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) owned the large and elegant town house near Palace Square, as well as country estates, all of which the author described with rhapsodic precision. This house was bought by Nabokov's grandfather; after Vladimir's birth the third floor was added, as well as the Art Nouveau facade. Nabokov was born here, spent his childhood in the country, and at the age of 11 moved back to attend school. His father, a liberal aristocrat, promoted political reform; in 1917 the family fled to Berlin (where the father was later shot and killed).

The museum is new, has few possessions and occupies only one floor. But the rooms are splendidly proportioned, and the carved wood paneling is intact, swirling, voluptuous and reminiscent of the palmy prerevolutionary days of fabulous wealth. On the ground floor is the front hall, once guarded by a faithful houseman, and the library, where Nabokov's father took fencing lessons and held meetings, and the green drawing room where, long after Christmas, the odor of fir tree and tangerines lingered. The upstairs is not part of the museum. On the second floor is Nabokov's mother's corner bedroom, where the writer was born. A secret compartment in the paneling held her jewels (not by Fabergé, whom the family thought vulgar), which she took out to amuse her small son. The governess and the children lived on the third floor

All this is long gone. The house is empty now; the traitorous houseman led the Soviets to the jewelry cache. Still, here are Nabokov oddments: family photographs, his pince-nez, his Scrabble board, terrifying in its implications - who would pit herself against this linguistic juggernaut? His butterflies, donated by the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, where Nabokov studied lepidopterology. Each tiny, brilliant specimen is microscopically labeled and expertly affixed, like treasures.

The house is empty, but still it holds something: echoes of wealth, privilege, the author's exquisitely vibrating sensibility, his deep and ardent appreciation of the world. Nabokov wrote that he never bought a house because he could never match the ones he had lost.

From 1924 until 1952 Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) lived in the servants' quarters of the large and elegant Sheremetyev Palace on the Fontanka River, north of Nevsky Prospekt. Akhmatova's melancholy beauty, her deep-set eyes and aquiline features, inspired Modigliani, among other artists, but it was her mind and heart that inspired her people. Her haunting poetry bore witness to the unrelenting grief of the revolution and the decades of terror that ensued.

Akhmatova moved here to join her lover, the art historian Nikolai Punin, as well as his wife, daughter and stepmother. This unconventional household endured for decades; it was a time when people clung together. Akhmatova's ex-husband was arrested and shot; her son was imprisoned twice. Many friends were imprisoned or executed. Punin, arrested twice, died finally in 1953, in Siberia. Akhmatova's work was banned. Many of her poems were written down, memorized, then burned.

The museum opened in 1989. The small, spare rooms of the second-floor apartment hold the original furniture and a powerful sense of the life. An exhibit contains photographs, publications and a cigarette packet with a fragment of an Akhmatova poem, written by Boris Pasternak. The stifling Soviet presence is palpable here, the sense of claustrophobia, isolation and fear: in the small kitchen, with its dreary line of washing; in the dining room, where you can hear a recording of the poet, reading her devastating "Requiem"; in Punin's narrow study, where Akhmatova lived with him for years; in her own room, where she moved in 1938, when she and Punin "parted."

Here is the most potent sense of the poet, in this spare, dignified space: the pale blue-green walls, the small, upright desk, the carved chest for her papers, a low, shabby couch; and a white fringed shawl. On the wall, a Modigliani drawing traces the pure calligraphy of her body. Outside the window, the trees in the garden are bare and black, and the ground is littered with leaves.

These vanished writers: do we find them here, in the places where they lived? Do the fixed, hushed interiors of any museum ever deliver a sense of life, with its noise and clutter and impermanence? Still, they give visitors something. Here are the views, the books, the weather that they knew; the things that framed their lives. Walking through these rooms, for a moment we've found them.

## **Visitor Information**

### **Getting There**

**We made all our travel arrangements through the excellent Altour International; (212) 897-5000, [www.altour.com](http://www.altour.com).** They coordinated with Exeter International, (800) 633-1008, [www.exeterinternational.com](http://www.exeterinternational.com), which provided us with drivers and guides. Luda Yablonskaya was our guide.

### **The Museums**

In Russia it's considered rude to wear your coat indoors, so be prepared to surrender yours the moment you step over a threshold. Many museums require you to check your coat and to put huge cloth slippers over your shoes, to protect the floors. The entrance fees are for foreign tourists; Russians often pay much less.

**Pushkin Apartment Museum**, Moika River Naberezhnaya, 12; telephone (7-812) 117-3531, [www.museumpushkin.ru](http://www.museumpushkin.ru). Closed Tuesday and the last Friday of each month. Admission \$6.70 (prices at 30 rubles to the dollar). On arrival we were told brusquely that the museum was full and then were, reluctantly, admitted an hour later. We were then told to rent audiophones (60 cents). Despite the animosity we encountered, it was worth the visit. The place is beautifully maintained, and the English audio text is informative and interesting.

**Fyodor Dostoyevsky Memorial Museum**, Kuznechny Pereulok, 5/2; (7-812) 117-4031, [www.md.spb.ru](http://www.md.spb.ru). Closed on Monday. Admission \$2. This place was welcoming and friendly. I arrived short of cash for the entrance fee, and was charged less without comment. The museum has informative sheets in English.

**Nabokov Museum**, Ultsa Bolshaya Morskaya, 47; (7-812) 315-4713. Closed Monday. Admission 70 cents. This museum has very friendly staff, though no information sheets and no audio. The curator offered a talk in Russian, which our guide translated for us.

**Anna Akhmatova Memorial Museum**, Sheremetyev Palace, Liteiny Prospekt, 53; (7-812) 272-2211, [www.akhmatova.spb.ru](http://www.akhmatova.spb.ru). Closed on Monday and the last Wednesday of each month. Admission \$4. This is the servants' quarters, in the courtyard behind the Sheremetyev Palace, reached by its front entrance. Upstairs there are kindly attendants with information sheets in English that must be returned.

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