

What Kochubey is Famous For

THE HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS IS OPENING A CULTURAL-EDUCATIONAL CENTRE IN A HISTORIC ESTATE IN PUSHKIN

Photos: Timur Turgunov; Sergey Vdovin, the Higher School of Economics archive

As they step over the threshold of this mansion, many visitors doubtlessly recall Pushkin's 'Rich and famous Kochubey...' — the beginning of the poem *Poltava*. Rich and famous indeed was Vasily Leontevich Kochubey, Principal Judge of Little Russia, who was executed by the hetman Mazepa in 1708. When he discovered the hetman's treachery (of which Kochubey had warned the monarch, leading to his torture and execution), Peter I drafted Kochubey's sons and grandsons into state service.

One of the family's direct descendants — Vasily Petrovich Kochubey, Full Councillor of State and Principal Master of Ceremonies at the Court of His Imperial Majesty — built a stone mansion in Tsarskoye Selo in 1911–1913 with the permission of Emperor Nicholas II. It was a real palace in miniature with a neoclassical façade and well-planned sumptuous interiors.

According to the recollections of contemporaries, 'the mansion was full of music, the laughter of children (Vasily Petrovich and his wife Varvara had eight: four boys and four girls), the sonorous voices of guests and the extraordinary cordiality of the hosts'. The head of the family, like all the Kochubeys, was very well educated: he had graduated from St. Petersburg University 'in the category of natural sciences' and was fluent in seven foreign languages, five of them Oriental. He inherited — and added to — his father's collection of painting, graphic art, bronze, furniture and minerals, as well as his extensive library — books were his great passion.

After the revolution the People's Commissar for Education Anatoly Lunacharsky offered Kochubey a post in the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, to which Vasily Petrovich replied: 'I swore allegiance to the Emperor and will not work for any other government'. Obligated

to leave his home in Tsarskoye Selo before emigrating, he left a note: 'I received this from Russia — to Russia I return it'.

In 1927 the Home for Veterans of the 1905 Revolution was housed in the mansion. From 1941 to 1944, when the town of Pushkin was occupied, the mansion became the secret headquarters of the Gestapo (the decoration of those two rooms was lost and the Kochubey family coat-of-arms with the Latin inscription *Elevor ubi consumor* ('I rise when I perish') disappeared). In 1947–1948 the former 'noble nest' was refurbished and became a rest home for party workers.

In 1987 a Management Training Centre was opened in the mansion, becoming part of the Higher School of Economics in 2012. The rare items in the mansion have remained 'of limited access' — now only for participants in higher qualification courses. To the university's credit, it has taken vigorous steps to open the estate to colleagues, friends and guests and to make it a platform for various initiatives. The most obvious of these, but by no means the easiest, is to acquaint a wide circle of people interested in Russian history and culture with the mansion's unique furnishings. The first step, on the initiative of Sergey



The mansion's main entrance.

Vasily Petrovich and Varvara Vasilievna Kochubey. 1906.

Fireplace in the study. Photo by Vasily Petrovich Kochubey, 1914.



Kadochnikov, Director of the Higher School of Economics, was to propose a joint exhibition with the Tsarskoye Selo Museum Reserve. The museum's staff readily agreed: the life and times of the imperial family's inner circle had long been of interest to them. The exhibition — 'The Kochubey Mansion. A Noble Nest in Tsarskoye Selo' in the Zubov Wing of the Catherine Palace (2016–2017) enjoyed enviable popularity. The majority of visitors were residents of Pushkin who were consumed with curiosity, at long last having the opportunity to discover what was behind the gates which were normally shut.

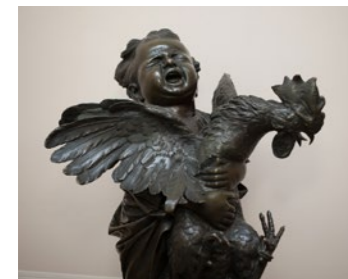
Exhibitions have a tendency to finish, though, so in May 2017 the 'Smart Weekends' project was launched — a series of guided tours and musical soirees in the mansion for groups and individual visitors. Occasionally the two are combined and visitors are offered a musical tour in the form of a promenade concert with an account of the

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Laughing Child. Jean-Antoine Injalbert.
Bronze, gilding. Early 20th century.

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Concert by Igor Smirnov, prize-winner of international competitions.

The Gold Drawing-Room.



Child Carrying a Cockerel. Bronze, patination. Second half of the 19th century.

Collection of toys in the elder sons' room.

festive receptions and ceremonies devised by the master of the house. The weekends blend perfectly into the large-scale 'Open City' project in St. Petersburg, designed to lift the cloak of secrecy from historical and cultural monuments where visitors have previously never trod.

An important marketing step was also taken: the Management Training Centre was given the second, catchier title of 'The Kochubey Centre'. Doctor of Psychology Oksana Pikuleva, who has been Director of the centre since October 2016, says that the main idea was to create a smart space in every dimension (inheriting the intellectual capital of the Kochubey family); to run intellectual guided tours with quizzes and quests revealing the purpose of the objects of a noble household; to develop a fundamental educational project which, by no coincidence, is entitled 'Best University Practice', since what is intended is not the missionary priority of the Higher School of Economics but a collaboration of higher educational establishments with equal rights, each of which can share its experience and achievements, the result being that twenty Russian universities have already been leading speakers in various thematic seminars; to attract intelligent



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businesspeople as allies by means of in-demand programmes in the field of digital economics — the educational project 'Must-have for Business' is helping in this; and, of course, to develop the most promising dimension — that of children and teenagers. The project 'Managing Talents — Generation Z' encompasses summer and winter schools in the whole spectrum of knowledge, educational forums and olympiads, master-classes and festivals (fortunately, the mansion also has fine musical instruments).

The main problem facing Oksana Pikuleva and her team is how to combine the functions of a museum and an educational institution in the Kochubey Centre. The problem has been solved very elegantly on account of the imperceptible but precise layout of the rooms: in some of them are displays (but no restrictive tapes), in some — seminars, in others — concerts and children's parties. The design of the new areas is impressive: for instance, a former office contains a collection of historical furniture, bookcases filled with old folios and modern literature, archive photographs — you can feel the aura of the mansion of the Kochubeys, who were bibliophiles, collectors and educators.



The mansion's historic collections have inevitably been eroded. Many of the valuable items can be traced to the Tsarskoye Selo transit in Olga Paley's palace, from where they were forwarded to Soviet museums or sold. The famous library vanished without trace. Just before the Great Patriotic War, the new party status of the mansion ensured that its property was evacuated to the Yaroslavl Region and was returned after the war... but not all of it: five items remained in the region's local history museum. In the Soviet period and the early post-Soviet years restoration was replaced by refurbishment and redecoration. As a result, some of the interiors have become poorer: it is sufficient to compare their current appearance with photographs from Vasily Petrovich's personal archive. However, quite a few 'native' items have survived, and they are, of course, essential for true museum use: the tapestry upholstery of an 18th century suite in the jewel of the palace — the Gold Drawing-Room; the water-seasoned oak tables for Russian billiards with a surface laid with granite slabs from Ravenna in the Grand Study; the bronze and malachite clock with an equestrian statuette of the future Emperor Alexander II; and Lady in a Veil, a marble masterpiece by Viktor Brodzsky. And the gaps have been filled by later acquisitions. For example, by two pianos: a 'lace' Becker of carved rosewood — a gift from the emperor and empress for the Kochubeys' house-warming, and an antique Bechstein from the house on the Petrograd Side which was destroyed during the siege — it initially went to the Leningrad Philharmonia, then to a colony for juvenile criminals in Metallostroy, and finally ended up in the mansion. The Becker is still played, as it once was by the Kochubeys, but the other is now just a beautiful art object.

The transformation of a noble nest, albeit deformed by time, requires a delicate approach. The current owners are endeavouring to revive the mansion's traditions — for instance, the balls that were held here in the early 20th century. Why not highlight the link between past and present by means of a dialogue between the Empire-style architecture and modern dance records in The Beat of Time project? The effect of the family's living presence is achieved in

Lyudmila Usacheva (Bantikova) by the Kochubey family tree.

Ancestral fireplace and plate with the date 1547 in the study.





Oksana Pikuleva by the dressing table in the chambers of the mistress of the house.

Irina Matvienko by the 'At Tea' display.

Varvara Kochubey's chambers and the rooms of her elder children: a quaint selection of elegant ladies' knickknacks on a pier-glass, appliances on the tea table by the window and slightly disordered children's toys.

'We imagined that it was December 1913, a Saturday morning. The children ran to their mother and asked if they could play in her bedroom,' says Doctor of History Irina Matvienko, a member of the Kochubey Centre's staff. 'All the toys are authentic, historical, antique. Many of them were taken by their owners when they emigrated and have returned to Russia through the efforts of our Director.'

'I am now a regular at flea markets, auctions and antique shops,' smiles Oksana Pikuleva. 'When I buy a toy, I am always interested in its history, and sometimes there are stunning finds linked to the names of Russian aristocrats whose children took what was most dear to them — their favourite toys — with them to a foreign land. Of course, I realize I am not a collector, just an obsessive accumulator.'



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The collection is supplemented by donations from Russia and abroad. They include items made by noble Russian ladies in emigration — handbags embroidered with beads, for example. These ladies, who were superb embroiderers, earned money in the foreign country by working in fashion houses and ateliers. A study of the history of the imperial children's toys revealed that Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna helped her children to make doll costumes of all the peoples of Russia. The owners began looking for similar dolls. Next to this installation, quite logically, are portraits of the children of the last Russian emperor. What is more, pieces of furniture from Tsarevich Alexey's room were kept in the mansion's basement for the whole of the 20th century — last year they were transferred to Tsarskoye Selo Museum-Reserve.

In the Grand Study the eye is drawn like a magnet to the family fireplace, its facades decorated with mysterious relief ornamentation. At its foot is a granite slab which Vasily Petrovich brought back from a family funeral, after which he covered up the fireplace and never used

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it again, as though he had sealed the heart of the family in it. The slab bears the date 1547 (the date of Andrey Kochubey's death) and the family's symbols. Nobody has yet been able to interpret these symbols — it is a subject for a dissertation.

The Kochubey family tree in the owner's study is the work of art historian Lyudmila Usacheva (Bantikova), a specialist at the centre. Since 1992 she has been occupied in the artistic design of the mansion's interiors, but as early as 1997 she became interested in genealogical research, in particular the genealogy of European families. According to her, the Russian Kochubeys are just a page in the family's history; dotted lines show the dynastic links of the Kochubeys with the wealthy Crimean Tatar family Kuchuk-Bey, and there is a desire to dig back to the most distant ancestors, to the roots...

Those who took part in the first international Kochubey readings, highlighting the role and significance of private collections for the preservation of cultural heritage, were able to appreciate the results of



the renewal of the noble nest. The readings took place in the mansion last October and were timed to coincide with the 150th anniversary of Vasily Petrovich's birth. Those attending included representatives of the ancient family — Andrey, Vasily, Peter and his wife Elena Spechinskaya, authoritative experts — Countess Alberta Cavazza, co-owner of the Villa Borghese on Isola del Garda (Italy), Bruno Henri-Rousseau, Director of the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild (France), Joost Schokkenbroek, Director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum (Canada), Aleksandra Murre, Director of the Kadriorg Art Museum (Estonia), Natalia Avtonomova, Head of the Private Collections Department at the Pushkin Fine Arts Museum (Moscow), Arkady Izvekoy, General Director of the House of Cartier in St. Petersburg...

One of Oksana Pikuleva's most cherished memories is the emotional response of Elena Spechinskaya: 'When she saw our collection of toys, she was in raptures: 'Now I know to whom to give my father's doll which he took with him when he left Petrograd with his parents.'

Photo by Alexander Plotnikov, The Beat of Time project with the support of Nova Fundaziun Origen, 2018.

The girls in the Kochubey family may well have had a doll like this.

Fragment of the fireplace in the study.

