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*ANTON CHEKHOV AS THE "OTHER":
AN ILL RUSSIAN WRITER IN FRANCE*

*You don't need any plots. In life there are no plots;
all is mixed up.— profound and shallow,
great and petty, tragic and comic . . .*

Anton Chekhov

I. Why do this?

"If Chekhov knew what we are doing here, he would turn over in his grave."

This is how Donald Rayfield jested about researchers, including himself, who examine the great writer's life in minute detail. They look at it from every angle imaginable, compare him to other writers, analyze his texts, peruse his letters, peer into the darkest corners of his life, and always find new ways to shed light on him. "Chekhov himself predicted that someday there would be articles like 'Turgenev and Tigers.' Considering recent zoological discoveries and the peculiarities of Chekhov's personal life, we can imagine an article called 'Chekhov and Cheetahs'."¹

Rayfield is right. Between Chekhov the great writer and Chekhov the ordinary man, between high literature and everyday life, between the miraculous and the mundane rummage many a researcher. They crawl, with shovels and brushes and magnifying glasses, where the tender artistic sprout pushes through the rough soil of daily life, looking for the exact moment and place where life ends and art begins. They hover above, charting the events of the writer's life and comparing them with what he wrote. They look for parallels and clues. They want to build bridges connecting art with life. They think they can anchor the divine in the earthly.

But why do this at all? When we read Chekhov's stories and for no reason tears well up in our eyes, is it really important that the author liked the city of Moscow but disliked the city of Yalta? What of it that he used his own experience of longing for Moscow in one of his plays? Does it affect our own longing as we watch the play in the theater? Do we enjoy his humor more if we know that he sometimes used it to take revenge on his enemies? Does it all really matter? If tomorrow all the books about Chekhov and all the

1. Donald Rayfield, "Chto eshche my smozhem skazat' o Chekhove?," in *Chekhoviana: Iz veka XX v XXI. Itogi i ozhidania* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), p. 41.

archives with his letters burn, will it change the way we read his stories or watch his plays?

It won't.

Then what is the purpose of such research? Before another attempt at rummaging through Chekhov's life, we must ask, Why are we doing this?

We are doing this because our research has little to do with Chekhov. It happens to be about Chekhov but it comes from a different place and aims at a different target. Doing research means asking questions about the world and our place in it. And we will do it on any material we happen to have an inclination for – Chekhov, biology, chess, lepidopterology. We want to know how the world works, but all we can do is search through literary images, molecules, mathematics of the brain, and the hues of butterfly wings. Standing on the surface of a sphere, we dig wells; each well is unique but they are all directed at the sphere's core. And Chekhov must forgive us, those standing by the well of Russian literature, for raking through his private life, for splitting hairs about the provenance of his characters, for touting his smallest personal blemishes – we mean no harm to him. We only use his life to better understand ours.

II. Chekhov in France: A forced vacation

Anton Chekhov arrived in France in September of 1897 and returned to Russia eight months later in May of 1898. This wasn't his first or last visit to France, but it was his longest. He went to France to escape bad Russian weather. Only 37, he was ill with tuberculosis and Russian medicine knew no remedy for it. The common practice was to recommend that the patient drink mare's milk and spend autumn, winter, and spring away from the cold and wet Russian air. But the understanding of what would be good air was fluid. Southern Russia, the Crimean Peninsula was considered good. So was the South of France and North Africa.

Chekhov, a physician himself, had no illusions about his condition. His mother had blood-spitting when she was young. She never developed tuberculosis but her brother and sister, Chekhov's uncle and aunt, both died from it.² His older brother, aged thirty-one, died from tuberculosis eight years earlier. Chekhov himself had suffered from coughing and blood-spitting since he was twenty-four. Only a few months before the trip he had been hospitalized for two weeks; the doctors couldn't stop the bleeding. That was a real scare. Chekhov's diary recorded "wheezing exhalation from the top of both lungs" and then "Leo Tolstoy visited on March 28; we talked about immortality." A couple of years later Chekhov confessed to a friend: "It's hard for me to plan for any long-term work. As a physician I know that

² Alevtina Kuzicheva, *Chekhov: Biografiia semyi* (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 2004), pp. 60, 61, and 66.

my life will be short."³ He had no illusions. He died six years later, in 1904, during a trip to Germany. The black forest near Badenweiler was thought to be salubrious to the lungs.

But in the early autumn of 1897 he left Russia for Paris with a plan to go further south – to Biarritz on the Atlantic or Nice on the Mediterranean, depending on the weather and the company.

Chekhov liked France. But the number of letters he wrote home, the multiple presents he sent to his mother, father, sister, brothers, and friends, the many errands he ran for other people while he was abroad, reveal that Chekhov's heart remained in Russia. Far from spending a nice vacation in the South of France, he'd rather have been in Moscow. The question which I will keep in mind looking at this period of Chekhov's life is, What did it mean for him to be the "other" – a Russian in France? And, by extension, what does this short period of his life tell us about how Chekhov treated "others" – others than his family, others than his friends, others than his gender, others than his nationality?

III. How do we know what we know?

To learn about those eight months in France we look at several sources. First, there were four stories published while Chekhov was abroad – "Pecheneg," "At Home," "On the Cart," and "At the Friends."⁴ We know that he worked on them while in Nice. Yet the stories have nothing to do with France; his muse was not that of a quick sketch artist. When one publisher asked him to send from Nice something "international," Chekhov explained: "I can write only from recollections and never directly from life. My observations and impressions have to percolate through memory; it will then act as a filter retaining only what's important and typical."⁵ Thus, his stories give us no information about Chekhov abroad.

The second potential source of information is Chekhov's notebooks and diaries of the period. But they are meager: Chekhov didn't seem to like keeping journals. Very often what he had written in a journal he later repeated in a letter. The third source of information is the memoirs of those who knew Chekhov during that time. The memoirs by Maksim Kovalevsky, Aleksandra Khotiaintseva, Ignatii Potapenko, and Vasilii Nemirovich-Danchenko were written after Chekhov's death and they are full of

3. See Kovalevsky's memoir. Maksim Kovalevskii, "Ob A. P. Chekhove," in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1986). Accessed at <http://lib.ru/LITRA/CHEHOW/vosp.txt>

4. Chekhov also worked on "Chelovek v futliare" (Man in a Case) mentioned in his February 25, 1898 letter to Vukol Lavrov: "I won't send you the story, I'll bring it to you myself." As he returned to Moscow, he gave "Man in a Case" to the *Russkaia mysl'* where it was published in 1898. The dates of the letters are "the old style" as they are dated in A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (hereafter PSSP) (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-83).

5. December 15, 1897 letter to Fiodor Batiushkov. All letters and notes to them are in PSSP, vol. 7.

anecdotes, although inevitably hagiographical. The final and richest source of information is some 240 known letters that Chekhov wrote to his friends and family from France during the period. It is from reading Chekhov's letters that we know most of what we know.⁶

IV. A Russian abroad: Maintaining sanity

Vladimir Kataev, a renowned Chekhovian scholar, noted that for a Russian a trip to France is always a promise of adventure. Other Russians can attest to that and to even more: the very crossing of the border going west is akin to a shot of morphine. The feeling of inexplicable elation, the palpable sense of freedom, the previously unknown respect you feel towards yourself – all these weave into a dreamy sense. As if you were in the theater, watching a beautiful movie, when suddenly the people on the screen turned towards you, looked right at you, waved gently, and invited you to come in and be with them. You get up, tentatively, treading towards the screen, leaving behind the torn seats, the graffiti, the trash on the floor, and suddenly walk into another life, beautiful and magical. You are not in Kansas anymore.

This is how Chekhov felt when he first traveled to Europe in 1891. He wrote in his letters, "I am in Venice. Going mad. The gondolas, Saint Mark's Square, the water, the stars, the Italian women, the evening serenades, mandolins, Falerno wine – oh, take me to the mad house!" And again: "I met Merezhkovsky here: he's gone ecstatic and plain crazy. It's hard for a Russian, always feeling belittled and humiliated, not to go crazy here in the world of beauty, wealth, and freedom. One wants to stay here forever . . ."⁷

A Russian abroad must not let himself go crazy; he must maintain sanity. Instead of gawking, he narrows his eyes and invokes skepticism. It cannot be all good, he thinks, there must be a seamy side to this. He looks around and sees rudeness where there is none and suspects foul play where there is none. He surmises that Frenchmen must be thieves just like Russians are. A November 15, 1897 entry in Chekhov's diary says, "Monte Carlo. I saw a croupier pilfer a gold coin." Either the croupier wasn't a good thief or Chekhov was trying to maintain sanity.

A Russian abroad is ready to punch back, out of habit, even when no one attacks. Growing up in Russia, he has developed a rough voice, strong muscles, and a thick skin. He acquired a hard shell to defend his tender soul against cruelty prevailing around him. Then he goes abroad and after some time notices that the shell begins to soften – no one pokes at it any more, no one tests its strength – and slowly, for lack of use, the shell dissolves, as the voice softens and the muscles atrophy.

6. Needless to say, all these sources mentioned have been carefully examined by many a Chekhov biographer. The following relies on and is indebted to their work – especially to the latest and most detailed studies in Donald Rayfield's *Chekhov: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2000) and Rosamund Bartlett's *Chekhov: Scenes From a Life* (London: Free Press, 2004).

7. March 21, 1891 letter to Maria Kiseliova and March 24, 1891 letter to Ivan Chekhov.

But he must not let himself get weak, that Russian abroad, for he will eventually return home. He must remain strong to be prepared for what awaits him. "Crossing the Russian frontier after a quiet life abroad is the return of a patient who has been discharged from fresh air into his unventilated room smelling of sickness and medicines. Starting with our governess detained on the border for a passport irregularity and ending with the revolting stench and filth of Moscow in autumn, crowded with cursing drunks, etc., all this put me into a state you could call demoralization. . . ."⁸

Like Hamlet traveling to Wittenberg and then returning home, a Russian visiting a foreign country learns a lesson in philosophy – that time is out of joint. In Russia it is felt much more acutely.

V. Chekhov's circle: French or Russian?

We may wish to think that in France Chekhov was out of his habitat and be tempted to look at how he acted in this unfamiliar environment. However, that wasn't the case. Chekhov spent eight months in France, but his circle there was almost exclusively Russian.

When he arrived in Paris on September 4, 1897, he was met at the station by two old friends from his hometown in Russia, journalist Ivan Pavlovskii and engineer Nikolai Beleliubskii. They took him to the Hôtel de Vendôme because this was where his friend Aleksei Suvorin's family stayed. Suvorin himself was already in Biarritz, 415 miles southwest of Paris, and three days later Chekhov tried to catch up with him. He boarded the train and, through Bordeaux, arrived at the Atlantic Ocean resort. There he was met by his friends from Moscow, editor Vasilii Sobolevskii and his partner Varvara Morozova (Suvorin had already left for St. Petersburg). In Biarritz Chekhov spent two weeks. His letters of the time say, "There are many, many Russians here," and his notebook records, "Every Russian in Biarritz complains of too many Russians." Two weeks later because of bad weather in Biarritz, and Chekhov boarded the train to Nice on the Mediterranean Cote d'Azur. Again, he was accompanied by his Russian friends: Sobolevskii, Morozova, and their children.

He arrived in Nice on September 22, 1897 and spent the next seven months there, until April 13, 1898. He wanted to go to Algiers, Malta, and Corsica, but having found no companions, made only day trips to Monte Carlo, Menton, Villefranche, and a friend's villa in Beaulieu. Did he blend in with French life on the Cote d'Azur? Not exactly. At the end of the nineteenth century, Nice teemed with Russians. They came there regularly on vacation and for work, bought property, died, and were buried in Nice. The city had two Russian churches, two libraries,⁹ a local Russian newspaper, a Russian consulate, and Russian spies. As his friend Vasilii Nemirovich-

8. From Vasilii Sobolevskii's November 12, 1897 letter to Chekhov. Quoted in Rayfield, *Chekhov: A life*, p. 445.

9. Ludmila Nalegatskaia, "Tshekhov à Nice," *Revue des deux mondes* (1973), p. 346.

Danchenko wrote, "Nice was at the time an almost Russian city. You could hear Russian more often than French."¹⁰ Chekhov stayed in the hotel, appropriately named *La Pension Russe*, surrounded by Russians, speaking Russian, reading Russian papers, and eating food prepared by a Russian cook.¹¹

The final leg of his trip was Paris, from April 14 to May 5, 1898. There he caught up with his friend Suvorin and, according to his diary, spent the three weeks merrily. He moved into the same hotel where Suvorin was, one floor below. As before, he communicated mostly with his compatriots, touring and dining with Suvorin, philologist Ivan Shchukin, philosopher Evgenii de Roberti, diplomat Sergei Tatishchev, Aleksandr Onegin, Ivan Pavlovskii, E. Semionov, and meeting sculptors Mark Antokolskii and Leopold Bernshtam.

Did he have any contacts with the French? Several. We know about one from his September 18, 1897 letter: "To exercise my French I have made the acquaintance of a 19-year-old girl. Her name is Margot. Please forgive me for this." Considering that the letter was addressed to Lika Mizinova, who was in love with Chekhov, the message seems quite ruthless. Could it be that "Margot" had been invented just to tease Lika? No, Margot was probably real as she re-appeared in Chekhov's letter to Anna Suvorina: "You asked me about my little affair. In Biarritz I met a 19-year-old Margot, to practice French. When I was leaving, she promised to follow me to Nice. Perhaps she is here now but I can't find her and, as result, don't speak French."¹² Another similar contact was reported in Chekhov's letter to Aleksei Suvorin: "I do nothing, only sleep, eat and make offerings to the goddess of love. My present French girl is a sweet 22-year-old creature with a wonderful figure, but all this is already boring and I want to go home. Besides I am tired of traipsing foreign stairways."¹³ He had other contacts among the French too. From his diary we know that in Paris Chekhov met Professor of Russian Paul Boyer, writers Art Roš and Bernard Lazare, journalist André Beaunier, and Mathieu Dreyfus, a brother of the French Army officer accused of spying.

10. See Vasili Nemirovich-Danchenko, "O Chekhove," in *Na kladbishchakh: vospominia* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 2001).

11. From Chekhov's letters, notebooks, and others' memoirs, we can compile an approximate list of those who made his circle in Nice: editor Vasili Sobolevskii and his partner Varvara Morozova, professor Maksim Kovalevsky, writer Vasili Nemirovich-Danchenko, writer and director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Russian vice-consul Nikolai Iurasov, artist Valerian Iakoby, artist Aleksandra Khotiaintseva, actor Aleksandr Iuzhin-Sumbatov, writer Piotr Boborykin, writer Ignatii Potapenko, artist Iosif Braz, publisher I. Rozanov, physician Nikolai Korobov, physician Aleksei Liubimov, reporter Mikhail Ashkinazi, physician Vladimir Valter, General Shaniavskii and his wife, ophthalmologist Leonard Girshman, zoologist Aleksei Korotnev, and Chekhov's young admirer Olga Vasilieva, who attempted to translate his stories into English. In addition he had daily contacts with the inhabitants of the *Pension Russe* where he stayed: its owner Vera Kruglopoleva, Natalia Iankovskaia, Baroness Dershau and her daughter, Maria Zhitkova, Evgenii Novitskii, Nikolai Kulakov, Nikolai Maksheev, Lamzaki, and Besser.

12. November 10, 1897.

13. January 27, 1898.

If we compare the number of the French Chekhov met with the number of the Russians surrounding him (a list is in Note 11), we have to conclude that Chekhov's circle was overwhelmingly Russian.

VI. Chekhov's French

Chekhov did not study French in school. But living in Nice, he seemed to take the language seriously. The letters to his sister Maria are peppered with his instructions on French grammar and learning techniques. They sound like discoveries an excited student makes about the language and betray Chekhov's enthusiasm in learning it.¹⁴ He read French newspapers and even the stenography of the Dreyfus court proceedings. He also read Voltaire in French—no small feat, considering that the philosopher's language had already been obsolete.¹⁵ According to Suvorin's diary, "Chekhov said he would be translating Maupassant. [. . .] He knows enough French."¹⁶ But Chekhov wasn't comfortable enough to write or speak. He wrote to Suvorin, "In French I am hardly progressing. I can speak a little but barely understand when others speak to me." And to his French translator Denis Roche, "Forgive me for writing to you in Russian. You know it so well while I don't write or speak French well enough to express my thoughts freely."¹⁷ It appears that Chekhov had an opportunity to meet Emile Zola, a famous French writer. Chekhov admired his position on the Dreyfus case and actually wanted to see him. However, he declined visiting him presumably because of the language barrier. "I would very much like to visit Zola. I would set aside everything else and go, but the language! I would feel like a fool."¹⁸

In connection with Chekhov's lack of spoken French, I would like to offer a conjecture about an important interview he gave but later refused to have published.

One of the most interesting moments of Chekhov's stay in France was his response to the concurrent Dreyfus affair. To remind the reader: In 1894, French Army Captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused of espionage, convicted, and sentenced for life. Two years later new evidence suggested that another officer was the culprit and that Dreyfus had been framed. In January 1898, right in the middle of Chekhov's stay in Nice, Emile Zola published an open letter to the French President accusing the Army establishment of making Dreyfus a scapegoat. A number of public figures in France and Europe demanded his retrial. Zola himself was prosecuted for insulting the French military and found guilty of libel. To avoid imprisonment, Zola spent a year abroad.

14. See his letters to Masha on October 27, November 12, and December 17, 1897.

15. March 9, 1898 letter to Pavel Iordanov.

16. Aleksei Suvorin, *Dnevnik* (Moscow: Novosti, 1992), the July 23, 1897 entry.

17. Letters of December 16, 1897 and November 26, 1897 respectively.

18. A memoir by E. Semionov (S. M. Kogan) published in the *Petersburg Courier* on July 2, 1914. Quoted in PSSP. See the notes to Chekhov's April 28, 1898 letter to Ivan Pavlovskii.

Reading French newspapers, Chekhov followed the events closely and was leaning towards the idea that Dreyfus was innocent. More importantly, he developed a high regard for Zola throwing his influence into the fight to protect a wrongly accused man. In Russia, Chekhov had shied away from expressing strong political views, but here, in a rare gesture, he was prepared to make his views public. During his final days in Paris he met with Bernard Lazare, a journalist who had written about the Dreyfus affair, and gave him an interview.

The interview was not published. Chekhov did not approve the draft sent to him a week later; then he left France. We don't know what happened to the manuscript; we only know about it from Chekhov's letters. But we do know that when Chekhov spoke to Lazare, he was not alone. He was accompanied by Ivan Pavlovskii, a childhood friend and a Parisian reporter.¹⁹ Given Chekhov's lack of confidence in speaking French, it is reasonable to think that during the interview with Lazare, Pavlovskii was not simply present – he interpreted for Chekhov.

This is what Chekhov wrote to Pavlovskii a week after the interview, sending him back the rejected text: "Attached is the manuscript. Lazare apparently decided not to use our conversation and passed the material onto someone else. That someone has written such things that I cannot attach my name to it. The beginning is still acceptable, but the middle and the end are all wrong. We did not speak either of [Jules] Méline or of anti-semitism. I didn't say that people were prone to make mistakes (on page 4), and the plan and goal of our conversation were quite different. You remember, for example, that I avoided answering the question about the public opinion in Russia, explaining that I didn't know anything about it because I had spent the winter in Nice. I expressed only my personal opinion that it was unlikely that our society had formed a correct opinion about the Zola case as it couldn't understand it properly. Such a case is not typical for our society."²⁰

If Pavlovskii interpreted for Chekhov, one wonders whether the written version of the interview, which Chekhov refused to put his name to, was

19. We know that Pavlovskii went to Bernard Lazare with Chekhov from their exchange of notes discussing the time (Chekhov's letter #2294 and the Note to it) and by Chekhov's saying "you remember" to Pavlovskii in his May 10, 1898 letter to him.

There appears to be a discrepancy as to when the interview took place – May 2 or 3, 1898. On May 2 at 4:30 in the afternoon Chekhov answered Pavlovskii's note discussing the time of the day *tomorrow* when they would go to Bernard Lazare (See Letter #2294). Tomorrow was going to be Tuesday May 3. However, on May 3 (according to Chekhov's own date on the letter) he wrote to Pavel Iordanov, saying "*Yesterday* I met with Bernard Lazare." This was probably Chekhov's mistake; he wrote the letter to Iordanov on May 4, which is confirmed by the postmark on the envelope. An explanation of the mistake may simply be that Chekhov had been mostly using the old style of dating, especially when he wrote to his correspondents in Russia, but on this occasion he used the new European style and was off by one day. It is strange, however, that PSSP in its Notes offered no comment on the discrepancy.

20. May 10 (April 28), 1898 letter to Ivan Pavlovskii.

distorted not only after the interview by the scribe to whom Lazare had given his notes, but also during the interview by Pavlovskii's interpretation of it.

VII. Trying to please others: Chekhov's letters from Nice

From the period between early September, 1897 and early May, 1898, 237 letters, postcards, and notes written by Chekhov have survived. They make a fascinating read. Being in France, Chekhov was equally remote from all his usual contacts, so maintained an active correspondence not only with his publishers but also with his immediate family. If the French period could be used as a sample, the very frequency with which he wrote to some people and not the others is instructive. Out of the 237 letters, Chekhov wrote to his sister Maria, 52; friend Suvorin, 14; brother Aleksandr, 13; brother Ivan, 7; mother, 7; brother Mikhail, 2; father 1.²¹

Among Chekhov's correspondents were also women friends who were significant to him to one extent or another. Letters he wrote to Aleksandra Khotiaintseva, 12; Elena Shavrova, 5; Lika Mizinova, 4; Lidia Avilova, 2; Anna Suvorina, 2.

Reading Chekhov's letters we notice how extremely polite, obliging, and attentive he was to others. In a typical letter from Nice, as he briefly mentioned his own condition and news, he never failed to ask about what was of interest to the person he was writing to. He always said hello to their spouses, children, servants, and pets, remembering them by name. He was detail-oriented. He wrote to his mother, "When you see Father Nikolai Filipovich, please bow to him on my behalf," anticipating people she might meet. He also added, "Give the stamps from the envelope to Maria Timofeevna."²² He not only collected post stamps for a family friend in Russia, he asked others not to throw away their stamps and keep them for her.²³ He was generous and sent multiple presents to his family – French soap, playing cards, socks, bonds of the World Expo, perfume, gloves, pins, umbrellas, Japanese teacups, pencils, scissors, ties, purses, little notebooks, canes, a corkscrew, and a magnifying glass.²⁴ He was caring: knowing that

21. The only postcard that was addressed to his father (it had the name Pavel Chekhov in the "To" box) was sent on September 2, 1897 when Chekhov was on his way to Paris and was all business. Without addressing his father in any way, the card reads: "There will be a box delivered from Moscow with letters E. B. E. on it. Without opening it, accept it and give it to Contractor Egoryshev or his messenger. If necessary, pay for shipping. All's good. I am writing this on Tuesday morning, having just passed the Slaviy station. Bow to everyone and best wishes. Yours A. Chekhov." At the time Chekhov's father and mother lived in his country estate 40 miles south of Moscow. His sister Maria shuttled between the estate and Moscow running both the household and her brother's business affairs. In his letters to Maria he often said to say hello to his father, mother, servants, workers, "and all."

22. October 4, 1897 letter to mother.

23. November 26, 1897 letter to Aleksandra Khotiaintseva.

24. Bartlett, p. 250; September 29, 1897 letter to Ivan Chekhov; January 6, 1898 letter to Maria Chekhova.

his brother Aleksandr's play was to have its premier, he secretly arranged with an editor friend to have it reviewed.²⁵

The kinder Chekhov was to the people he wrote to, the less kind he seemed to be to those he wrote about. In his letters to sister Maria he poked fun at artist Aleksandra Khotiaintseva, who was their friend and a frequent guest of their house. "[Here in Nice] she wears the same dress she wore in Melikhovo." "A. Khotiaintseva is still here, leaving for Paris soon. She's still in the same dress." "The artist woman bought some headscarves for you. Since she's cheap and tried to find something inexpensive, the scarves are so so."²⁶ Aleksandra was same woman, it must be noted, that Chekhov wrote twelve letters to, more than to any other of his women friends at the time. Moreover, she came from Paris to Nice, by Chekhov's invitation, to celebrate New Year's with him. She was the one who spent a lot of time in his room even though it was considered indecent.²⁷ She made drawings of him, as he said in letter, 10-15 times a day. It was she whom Chekhov saw again in Paris in April. When she came to visit him in the Paris hotel, she found this note "I have to leave on important business but I'll be back by 10:30 or at most 11:15. Please wait for me; I beg you not to return [home . . .] After 11:15 and until 7 I will be at your disposal." Chekhov was notably kinder to her in person than he was behind her back.

It's possible that in his letters to Maria, Chekhov was not so much making fun of Aleksandra as he was trying to minimize the role she played in his life in his sister's eyes. Perhaps he felt he needed to show his sister that he was not serious about Aleksandra. It may have been so because Aleksandra had not exercised enough caution about their situation. For example, on the first day of her arrival in Nice, she wrote to Maria Chekhov: "I will probably shock the other women living in the hotel by my behavior and the lack of change of clothes. It's considered improper to go into a man's room; I sat in Anton Pavlovich's room all the time."²⁸ In addition, one of Chekhov's letters to his sister was in fact a letter that he and Aleksandra wrote together. It has a section added by her, which shows that she had read Chekhov's part and hints at rumors about them that Maria may soon hear.²⁹ She also doodled on

25. January 19, 1898 letter to Efim Konovitser. Chekhov's request was honored and on January 24, 1898 the newspaper *Courier* mentioned the "funny comedy by Aleksandr Chekhov" in its theater section.

26. January 1, January 9, and April 23, 1898 letters to sister Maria.

27. See Aleksandra Khotiaintseva's December 26, 1896 letter to Maria Chekhova (*Literaturnoe nasledie*, vol. 68, pp. 611-12) and her memoir *Vstrechi s Chekhovym* [Encounters with Chekhov] in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*.

28. Aleksandra Khotiaintseva's December 26, 1896 letter to Maria Chekhova. Quoted in *Literaturnoe nasledie*, pp. 611-12.

29. See Chekhov's January 6, 1898 letter to sister Maria. Chekhov wrote her that one Maria Zhitkova, a resident of the Pension Russe returning home to Moscow, would deliver her some presents from him. The addition written by Aleksandra says, in part, "She will give you many details about us, but probably from a very peculiar point of view."

Chekhov's letters; Kovalevsky and his other correspondents could see it clearly.³⁰

After Aleksandra left Nice (between January 6 and 15, which is a bit strange considering that Chekhov's birthday was coming up in a few days), Chekhov felt he needed to address the question of marriage and to dispel it. In his letter to Maksim Kovalevsky two weeks later, he wrote: "You asked N. I. Yurasov if it was true that I was getting married. Alas, I am not capable of such a complex and confusing affair as marriage. Besides, the role of a husband scares me: there is something stern about it, like the role of a military commander. I am lazy, I prefer the role of a lighter character."³¹ It may be that Chekhov needed to address the marriage issue because other people – in Nice and at home – considered Aleksandra a serious aspirant.³²

Whatever the reason, Chekhov showed his loyalty to his sister by making fun of Aleksandra. Understandable, perhaps, although one can be loyal to one's family without betraying his lovers. But to take a step further and to look down the line – how did he show loyalty to Aleksandra? It turns out that he showed loyalty to her by making fun of other women, less important to him. When Aleksandra was still in Nice, living in the same Pension Russe, they both made fun of female residents of the hotel, to whom they gave mocking nicknames. Later, when she went back to Paris, Chekhov wrote her letters, continuing their game of commenting on the women. "Vera Dmitrievna is curling her hair; the woman who thinks she can still be attractive." "Murzaki loses [in Monte Carlo]." "Baroness and her daughter are in bliss." "Dear Doll went for a carriage trip. Yesterday her little bows were pink."³³ The latter, Dear Doll, was a nickname of Natalia Iankovskaia, the widow of a Governor from Ukraine. When Chekhov arranged for an artist to paint Iankovskaia's portrait, he didn't fail to offer Aleksandra a caustic comment on her: "The Governess sits for the portrait melodramatically holding her lorgnette glasses as if she were in the Governor's box in the theater. She has her cat's fur over her shoulders, overindulgence in luxury."³⁴

There is probably little harm in making fun of someone, almost a stranger, behind her back. Thanks to a recent publication, however, it turns out Iankovskaia wasn't a stranger, and that however mocking Chekhov was about her, he was a perfect gentleman to her and even gave her medical

30. See the Notes to Chekhov's January 8, 1898 letter to Maksim Kovalevskii and January 19, 1898 letter to Elena Shavrova.

31. January 29, 1898 letter to Maksim Kovalevskii.

32. For another confirmation that Khotiaintseva was considered a candidate, see brother Mikhail's letter to Chekhov: "May your future wife – for some reason I would like her to be Natasha Lintvariova or Aleksandra Khotiaintseva – arrange your life so that it makes you happy and once more happy." Quoted in the Notes to the October 26, 1898 letter to Mikhail Chekhov.

33. January 21, 1898 letter to Aleksandra Khotiaintseva.

34. March 23, 1898 letter to Aleksandra Khotiaintseva.

advice.³⁵ He reported to Aleksandra in Paris that he had been spending every evening in Iankovskaia's room drinking tea and eating sweet rolls (he never missed a chance to make his women friends jealous).³⁶ After he returned to Russia and Iankovskaia to Ukraine, he took the effort to find her address through a common friend, wrote her several letters, some quite long, inquired about her recent surgery, advised her on where to educate her son, shared with her his news of purchasing property in Yalta, and suggested that she too buy property there. Just as it was with Aleksandra, writing to Iankovskaia, Chekhov was much kinder than writing *about* her.

He displayed the same double standard towards another friend and former love interest, Lika Mizinova. On December 27, 1897 he wrote her what seemed to be a sincere letter of encouragement: "Sweet Lika, your idea to open a millinery shop I can only support. Not only because I can visit and, in your usual absence, flirt with your young and pretty milliners, but mainly because the idea itself is great. I won't give you lectures; I will only say that work, however modest it may seem to others, be it a small shop or store, will give you independence and confidence in the future." Only two weeks later he opined to his sister Maria: "How is Lika and her shop? She will scold her workers; she has such a terrible temper. Besides, she likes green and yellow ribbons and giant hats too much. With such lack of taste, how can she be a fashion consultant?"³⁷

Again looking down the line, Could it be that with Lika he made fun of someone else behind their back? Yes, he did. "Write and tell me what's new," he asked Lika. "How is Volodia with his sideburns and shrilly giggling spouse?"³⁸ Chekhov was asking about Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a close friend from the time they had worked together in comic magazines and a director of Chekhov's plays in the Moscow Arts Theater. As for his "shrilly giggling spouse," it turns out that Chekhov was on friendly terms with her too. At least Lika thought so. Answering Chekhov's question, Lika wrote sarcastically: "Your friend Katichka, with whom you like to chat in hallways about your other friends so much, has returned to Moscow and is awaiting you and your fresh news."³⁹ She apparently knew that Chekhov liked gossiping with "Volodia's shrilly giggling spouse."

We have seen, then, that to his sister Maria, Chekhov made fun of Aleksandra and Lika. Apparently, Maria and Chekhov were "family" and, therefore, their friends were "others." But with the friends, Aleksandra and Lika, he made fun of Iankovskaia and Katichka Nemirovich, other friends

35. See G. Shcheboleva's *Neizvestny Chekhov: Novye pisma A. P. Chekhova* [Unknown Chekhov: New letters of A. P. Chekhov] in *Chekhoviana: iz veka XX v XXI* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007).

36. February 9, 1898 letter to Aleksandra Khotiaintseva.

37. January 9, 1898 letter to sister Maria.

38. September 18, 1897 letter to Lika Mizinova.

39. Lika Mizinova's October 4, 1897 letter to Chekhov. Quoted in the Notes to Chekhov's September 18, 1898 letter to her.

because at that moment they happened to be outside of the immediate circle and were, therefore, "others." At the same time, he was invariably polite to all of them face to face. Was Chekhov hypocritical?

Donald Rayfield noted that Chekhov had a special talent to open up his correspondents and provoke frankness in them.⁴⁰ If we look at his letters with this idea in mind, we will notice that Chekhov may have opened up others by writing to them what *they* wanted to hear, by changing the register and speaking what he considered *their* language. Chekhov always found someone else, outside of the present circle, who was the "other" and therefore worthy of mocking. Thus, his lack of loyalty to some was simply an overabundance of loyalty to others. And so with men, he disparaged other men, women, and Jews. With women, he disparaged other women and Jews. With Jews, he didn't disparage anyone, there was no one left.

VIII. Chekhov and Jews

To the modern, reasonably sensitive reader, some of Chekhov's letters can be offensive. I think they would have been offensive to a sensitive nineteenth-century reader too. Chekhov had a choice – just as we do today – he could call Jews Jews and Hebrews or he could call them kikes and yids. Often he chose the latter. Again, he did it behind their backs while remaining perfectly respectful to each of them in person.

However short the eight-month period in France was, we see that even there Chekhov had frequent, friendly, and productive contacts with Jews. Dr. Vladimir Valter monitored Chekhov's health while he was in Nice; he, Khotiaintseva, and Dr. Valter celebrated New Year's together. Later Dr. Valter wrote to him "Your caring about [my daughter] Ninochka touches me deeply."⁴¹ Chekhov made acquaintance with another Jewish doctor, the famous ophthalmologist Leonard Girshman, of whom he wrote "a saint of a man." In Chekhov's archive there are letters from Dr. Girshman and his wife, demonstrating that Chekhov often visited them in Nice and, after his return to Russia, wrote to the Girshmans' tubercular son asking about his health. In one of the letters to Chekhov Mrs. Girshman wrote: "Yesterday we received your books. Thank you from the bottom of my heart – for the books and for the sweet inscription. I am proud of it. . . ."⁴² Another Jew, who had been a boarder in the Chekhov household, Ivan (Isaak) Pavlovskii, picked him up at the station in Paris, helped him find hotels, saw him on his way back through Paris, arranged for and accompanied him to the interview with Bernard Lazare. In Nice, I. Rozanov helped him with daily errands; in return, Chekhov treated his sick wife. One Mikhail Ashkinazi was a reporter

40. *Chto eshche my smozhem skazat o Chekhove?*, p. 37.

41. Vladimir Valter's August 19, 1898 letter to Chekhov. Quoted in the Notes to Chekhov's *Adresnaia knizhka* (1893-1904) [Address book] in PSSP, p. 407.

42. Iulia Girshman's May 29, 1898 letter to Chekhov. Quoted in the Note to Chekhov's February 6, 1898 letter to Aleksei Suvorin.

working for Rozanov's paper – Chekhov maintained contacts with him too. Iosif Braz, a Jewish artist commissioned by a Moscow gallery to paint Chekhov's portrait, worked on it in Nice. In Paris, Chekhov met Iakov Merpert, an employee of the Dreyfus family business, with whom he exchanged favors and letters. Also in Paris, he met two famous Jewish sculptors, Mark Antokolskii and Leopold Bernshtam; he discussed with them creating a statue of Peter the Great for his hometown.

Concurrently with all these relationships, he wrote to others: "From morning till night I sit on the beach reading newspapers, and filing by me is the motley crowd of government officials, rich kikes, Adelaides, Hispanics, and poodles. . . ."⁴³ "Jews come to me every day. For convenience I want to convert to Judaism. . . ."⁴⁴ In a letter to his friend Suvorin, he first wrote *Hebrews*, then scratched the word out and wrote *kikes* instead.⁴⁵ In a letter to his sister, he played with Jewish names: "Dear Masha, tell Khina *Markovna* [the family dog] that today I had breakfast with *Mark* Antokolskii [the great sculptor]."⁴⁶ He never forgot that a Jew was the "other," and when he got upset with someone's indiscretion, it mattered to Chekhov that the man was Jewish: "The newspaper *Courier* has done me wrong. They've published a letter by that mountebank Michel Deline. It is a foul letter where he tries to prove that Suvorin is a scoundrel and lowlife and quotes me in support! This is awfully tactless. And who! A puffed up nobody – a Jew, named Ashkinazi, writing as Michel Deline!"⁴⁷

Why would it be important for us to know Chekhov's attitude to a tiny segment of the population? Why dedicate a section to "Chekhov and Jews"? It is because Chekhov was a great writer, very influential in Western literature, and we want to know how human he was. Whether we like it or not, his attitude towards this tiny segment of the population may serve as a test.

In any recent society, the Jew has been the ultimate "other." While attempting to integrate himself into the mainstream – and doing it successfully, when allowed – he has stubbornly maintained his "otherness." As if he were a reluctant harbinger of some utopian society, he has wanted to be judged by his personal qualities rather than by his belonging to a nationality. From his standpoint, in an ideal world, the best attitude towards Jews as a group would be a complete indifference. Just like a complete indifference would be the best attitude towards groups of Americans,

43. September 17, 1897 letter to Aleksandra Khotiaintseva.

44. January 21, 1898 letter to Aleksandra Khotiaintseva.

45. February 6, 1898 letter to Aleksei Suvorin. See the Notes to it in PSSP. Context is important here as always. It is the same letter where he explains anti-Semitism as a channel for one's frustration and where he praises and defends Zola and, indirectly, Dreyfus.

46. April 16, 1898 letter to sister Maria. About Chekhov giving the family dogs Jewish names, Khina Markovna and Brom Isaevich, see Mikhail Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov: A Brother's Memoir* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 183-84.

47. March 2, 1899 letter to sister Maria.

Bushmen, French, or Kyrgyzstani. You don't need to love them; just leave them alone. Yet, in this world, people are judged by their nationality and, for reasons we may never know, the Jews have not been left alone but instead made a chosen people on whom the tolerance and humanity of others are tested. As we look into the observable history, we see that the greatest evil has often been anti-Jewish and perhaps this is why we want to know which side Chekhov was on, the evil or the good?

It would be oversimplifying to try to render a verdict on Chekhov's attitude to Jews – even less on his goodness – from the few letters from France where he happened to mention them. Still, why did he call them kikes? I suspect that he used derogatory terms about Jews in his letters to be on the same page with his correspondents. Just like in the letters to his sister and women friends, he thought he was using the women's gossipy language, he called Jews kikes in letters to those who he knew called them kikes. See, for example, Aleksandra's letter to Maria Chekhov about their New Year's celebration: "It's 10 PM now; we said happy new year to each other (it's already midnight in Russia) and went to our own rooms to sleep. We drank tea in Anton's room – I and Dr. Valter, a very sweet kike."⁴⁸

Does it mean that Chekhov was anti-Semitic? It depends on what we mean by that. If being anti-Semitic means never forgetting that Jews were "others," then he was. But once we juxtapose the disparaging nicknames with the numerous acts of kindness and care he showed to Jews (just as he did to many others), we can only shrug our shoulders. Could it be that his kindness to Jews over his disdain for them was a result of some hard internal work? Could be that this is the kind of inner dichotomy that Chekhov had in mind when he coined his famous *squeezing the slave out of yourself, drop by drop*?

IX. Chekhov's attitude to the Dreyfus Affair

Chekhov's letters of the period show an active interest in the reports of the Dreyfus affair. Here's a selection from them:

"The newspapers here are filled with reflections and gossip about Dreyfus. I read them very carefully and get the impression that there are no traitors here; it's all but someone's bad joke" (November 1897).⁴⁹

"I read newspapers all day long studying the Dreyfus case. In my opinion, he's not guilty" (December 1897).⁵⁰

"The Dreyfus case has bubbled, overflowed, and is spilling over – it's not yet clear in which direction. Zola has a noble heart and I [. . .] am delighted

48. Aleksandra Khotiaintseva's December 31, 1897 letter to Maria Chekhova. Quoted in the Notes to Chekhov's January 1, 1898 letter to Maria. Donald Rayfield thinks that there was a similarity in Chekhov's attitude towards Jews and women. "Chekhov's fondness for Jews was rather like his fondness for women: even though, to his mind, no Jew could ever fully enter into Russian life, and no woman ever equal a male genius, he vigorously defended their rights to equal opportunities" (*Chekhov: A Life*, p. 448).

49. November 12, 1897 letter to Nikolai Korobov.

50. December 4, 1897 letter to Vasilii Sobolevskii.

by his passionate stance. France is a wonderful country and its writers are wonderful" (January 1898).⁵¹

"Everyone here talks about Zola and Dreyfus. A great majority of the intelligentsia side with Zola and believe that Dreyfus is innocent. Zola has grown tremendously in everyone's opinion; his letters of protest have created a fresh and powerful ocean breeze, and everyone in France feels that, thank God, there is still justice in the world; and that if an innocent man gets accused, there will be someone to come to his defense. The French papers are very interesting, but the Russian ones are useless. The *New Times* is just disgusting" (January 1898).⁵²

"Even if Dreyfus is guilty, Zola is still right! Writers' responsibility is not to accuse, not to persecute, but to come to defense – yes, even of those who are guilty, even when they are convicted and serve their sentence" (February 1898).⁵³

"You are asking me if I still think that Zola is right. I am asking you: do you really think so poorly of me that you can doubt for a moment that I won't be on Zola's side?" (February 1898).⁵⁴

"You asked my opinion about Zola and the case against him. I look and see the obvious: all European intelligentsia sides with Zola. Against him is all that is repugnant or suspicious" (February 1898).⁵⁵

"The Dreyfus case, as is becoming clearer and clearer, has been a big fraud. The real traitor is Esterhazy. The evidence against Dreyfus was fabricated in Brussels and the government knew about it, including Casimir-Perier who did not believe in Dreyfus's guilt from the beginning and still doesn't believe in it. He resigned because of that" (April 1898).⁵⁶

Chekhov's biographers often point out that while he was in France in 1897-1898, the usually apolitical Chekhov expressed some strong political views. It happened, they say, in connection with the Dreyfus affair. Chekhov took the side of the "persecuted Jew" (Dreyfus was Jewish) against the French military machine. I think this view originated in the Soviet school of literary criticism whose members had to find something that could depict Chekhov as opposing the French bourgeois establishment and thus align him with the Soviet ideology. They also needed to distance him from his long-time friend, confidant, and patron Aleksei Suvorin whose newspaper *New Times* was distinctly anti-Dreyfus, anti-Zola, and anti-Semitic.

I think when we read Chekhov's letters today, we hear him not so much defending Dreyfus as admiring Zola. True, Chekhov expressed doubts in Dreyfus's guilt but he also acknowledged that he might be guilty – that was not the point. The point was that the writer's job was to defend the weak and

51. January 4, 1898 letter to Aleksei Suvorin.

52. January 23, 1898 letter to Fiodor Batiushkov.

53. February 6, 1898 letter to Suvorin.

54. February 9, 1898 letter to Khotiaintseva.

55. February 22, 1898 letter to Mikhail Chekhov.

56. April 21, 1898 letter to Pavel Iordanov.

the fallen – even if they are guilty.⁵⁷ And this is exactly what Zola did putting his own reputation on the line. For Chekhov, this was more the Zola affair.

I also find it difficult to accept the idea that thanks to the Dreyfus affair Chekhov took a political position. In reality, he restated his unwillingness to take such a position: "Some will say: what about politics? What about national interest? But true writers and artists should get involved in politics only as much as necessary to stay away from it."⁵⁸

We know from his own diary that while Chekhov was in Paris in late April 1898 he met Alfred Dreyfus's brother Mathieu, who (Rayfield reports) studied Russian. This seems to be the extent of what we know about that meeting. It was probably organized by Iakov Merpert, a lecturer in Russian literature who was also employed by the Dreyfus family business in Paris.⁵⁹

X. Conclusion

At the very beginning of the article, there was a quote from Chekhov as it had been recorded by his fellow writer Ignatii Potapenko: "You don't need any plots. In life there are no plots; all is mixed up – profound and shallow, great and petty, tragic and comic."⁶⁰ What followed after the quote should only prove its relevance: Chekhov's stay in France was a mixture of lofty and earthly. Chekhov the writer created several short stories, which became classics in Russian literature; Chekhov the man dealt with the mundane.

He had blood-spitting, a toothache, was unable to get comfortable at a new writing desk, looked for remedies against mosquitoes, worried about money, allayed his sister's fears about an upcoming marriage, sent home souvenirs, patiently sat for his own portrait, played the roulette and schemed to beat the casino, sent hundreds of French books to his hometown library, and stubbornly kept the Russian "old style" calendar – 12 days behind the European calendar by which everyone around him lived in France. The time he spent in Nice was lengthy enough to blend in and explore a new environment, but that wasn't his choice. Chekhov maintained dynamic contacts with Moscow, St. Petersburg, Melikhovo, and his hometown Taganrog, exchanging news, making plans for the future, running errands, and anxiously waiting for the return home in spring. His eight-month stay abroad was more like being on a tour bus: yes, nominally you are in a foreign country, but you are surrounded by your compatriots – the driver, the tour guide, the fellow tourists. And what you see out of the window may or may

57. Chekhov's brother Mikhail recalled in his memoir that their mother "believed that criminals were worthy of compassion and oppressed by the powerful, and she brought us up with this attitude. In general, a feeling of compassion towards criminals was very strong in our family." *Anton Chekhov: A Brother's Memoir*, p. 19.

58. February 6, 1898 letter to Aleksei Suvorin.

59. See the *Adresnaia knizhka* Notes on Iakov Semionovich Merpert (Jacques Merpert) in PSSP.

60. Ignatii Potapenko, *Neskolko let s A. P. Chekhovym* in *A. P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, p. 351.

not be real. Real life was in Russia, but here – could be just a theater set, nothing more.

Donald Rayfield wrote that “from the mid-1890s, when he realized that his fame meant that his letters would become, even in his lifetime, public property, he began to be extremely careful in what he said and how he said it.”⁶¹ Indeed, Chekhov was aware of his growing popularity: just during the time in France he learned about his stories being translated into French, Czech, Swedish, and German. Yet he didn’t know then what we know now: that he would become one of the most influential writers and playwrights of the twentieth century and that we would be examining him more and more and therefore seeing more and more, and holding him to a standard that none of us would be willing to subject oneself to. Chekhov thought, incorrectly, that he would be read for maximum seven years after his death. Had he known what we know now, he might have been more circumspect writing his letters.

Research often implies that we seek to establish a connection between the events in the author’s life and his writings. We want to understand how he created his masterpiece; we want to crack the nut and look inside. We may not notice how, trying to reduce a great writer’s work to an amalgamation of life experiences, we may underestimate the mysterious and inexplicable – his talent, a gift from God. As we read Donald Rayfield’s biography of Chekhov, marveling at the breathtaking scope of its research, or do our own investigation and arrive at the conclusion that Chekhov was only human, and quickly get busy judging him by human standards, we should never forget to take off our hats. We are in the presence of a miracle.

Independent Scholar

61. “Chto eshche my smozhem skazat’ o Chekhove?” p. 36.