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Taras Schevchenko's Cottage

It's difficult to have been in Kyiv more than 24 hours without coming across the name of Taras Schevchenko, although after many months you may still be unable to either spell or pronounce his name correctly. Further, even finding out about this iconic Ukrainian artist and writer can prove less than straightforward; in particular, you will learn nothing by going to the Metro station that bears his name. But while his statue stands indeed in Taras Schevchenko Square, he does not directly face his main museum there. And if you wanted to point out this museum to a newcomer, you might still find it difficult to distinguish from the neighbouring university buildings, no matter how long you have been in Kyiv, or how often you have walked, driven or bussed along the chronically frenzied Schevchenko Boulevard.

So arguably the best way to start your enquiry is to get away from the bustle and visit his Kyiv home in the calm of Taras Schevchenko Alley. This again you may find difficult to identify on the map, but you have probably used it in walking up from the Maidan N towards the Golden Gate. In this short cul-de-sac, barely a burger's throw from McDonald's, is the cottage which was Schevchenko's home during the brief period he was permitted to live in Kyiv. While this was barely a year, it was a significant episode in a sadly short life spent largely under Russian domination, firstly as a serf of a wealthy but philistine Moscow family, and later as a soldier conscripted by a Tsarist government in order to silence the revolutionary overtones of his writings. But his one-time home has miraculously survived the 200 turbulent years since it was built, even being spared by the Nazis in the Great Patriotic War,. It stands today like an enchanted fairy dwarfed but not intimidated by its giant 21st century neighbours.

Once you pass through the gate in its high wooden fence, it becomes easy to imagine you are back in a 19th-century ivillage cottage set in its little orchard. You hardly notice the corrugated-iron roof that is painted in a rust-brown to tone in with the fences and walls. For these, like the interior, are entirely in wood, a material which contributes as much to the inviting atmosphere of the museum as does the collection of Schevchenko memorabilia itself. If you are as lucky as I was, you will be taken in tow by one of the younger guides and she will surely inspire you to visit the larger if less cozy museum in Schevchenko Square.

Meanwhile, once you come out and return to the hurly-burly of the Maidan, redolent with its ambiguous mix of Western consumerism and de-natured political protest, you might ponder on the closing lines of one of Schevchenko's best known poems,

“

But it does touch me if knaves,

Evil rogues lull our Ukraine

Asleep, and only in the flames

Let her, all plundered, wake again...

That touches me with deepest pain.

“

That was written in St Petersburg some 160 years ago, but would his tortured lament be any different today?