

## *The African Ancestry of Alexander Pushkin*

THE GREATEST POET OF RUSSIA was of part-African descent and proud of it. Two of his books though not his best bear on this subject.<sup>1</sup> General Avram Petrovitch Hannibal, Pushkin's maternal great grandfather was a pureblooded African and the poet was saying that his own amazing gifts of which he is fully aware were at least partially the heritage of "the fiery African blood" of his ancestors.

Pushkin during his life-time was a recognised national bard, but he was also one of the oddities of the high society of St. Petersburg during the early years of the reign of Nicholas I. Finally he was at the Imperial Court a living witness to one of Petrine legends, since Hannibal went down in history as a favourite of the great Emperor.

Pushkin's contemporaries found in his exotic antecedents a ready excuse for many of his outbursts and in particular for his intense jealousy of his beautiful wife and for the ultimate tragic consequences of this passion. African blood was certainly an essential element both of his literary genius and of his life.

It soon became synonymous with the mysterious and noble extraction of his unusual forebears. Already while Pushkin was alive it was generally believed that they were Ethiopian princes. This story is certainly accepted by his direct descendans who live today in Belgium. It became part and parcel of Russian literary tradition. It was recounted several times and its recent and comprehensive version is contained by M. Henri Troyat, a French Academician and an Armenian of Russian culture by birth in his biography of Alexander Sergeevitch Pushkin.<sup>2</sup>

And thus according to it, General Hannibal was a son of a "minor Abyssinian prince" whose capital stood on the banks of the Mareb. A few years after the child

was born his father led his armies against Turkish invaders. He was defeated and disappeared from the pages of history in an unrecorded fashion. Thereafter a conspiracy was hatched "in his palace"—though it is not clear by whom and against whom—and as a result of it the young princeling, the future Russian general and grandfather of the poet was sent to Constantinople as Ottoman Imperial *amanat*, or hostage. He was embarked "at a port on the Red Sea"—presumably at Massawa—and one of his sisters threw herself into the sea, and was drowned in a mad attempt to follow her brother into captivity. Her self-sacrifice failed to alter the fate of the noble Ethiopian youth. He was duly delivered in Constantinople and enrolled as a page in the Imperial household. He was attached to the lesser ladies of the Imperial *harem*.

At the time Peter the Great instructed Count S. V. Raguzinskiy, his envoy to the Sublime Porte to procure some Negro boys for the services at the Court of St. Petersburg; they were a rage of Roccoco Europe and an almost indispensable status symbols of royal and semi-royal establishments of the period.<sup>3</sup>

Raguzinskiy bribed "one of Sultan's viziers", and secured the Ethiopian, a paragon among the *amanats*, for his imperial master. The boy was eight at the time. Upon his arrival in St. Peterburg he was attached to the personal service of the Emperor of All the Russias. He accompanied him on his endless travels, and in the course of one of them was baptised in Wilno, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Grand Duchess, who was also Queen of Poland, stood as godmother as the *ex-amanat* was baptised into the Russian Orthodox Church under the name of Avram, or Abraham. Peter the Great was his godfather. In his honour the neophyte assumed later the patronymic *Petrovitch*—son of Peter—since the name of his real father was unknown. He still had no family name.



by *Czesław Jędrzejewski*

Thereafter, continues Troyat, Avram Petrovitch served for a number of years as personal valet and groom to the emperor.

His ability and intelligence were of high order, and, in time, he became one of the confidential secretaries of his master. In this capacity rather than as a servant and virtually a serf he followed Peter in later years, also on the state visit to France. When the Tsar returned home Avram was left behind to study military engineering. Later he reported for services with the French Army against Spain. He was wounded in the head in the course of fighting and taken prisoner. On his release from captivity the exotic volunteer returned to France and enrolled in the Military College at Metz. He was granted there a courtesy rank of captain. But he did not like the school and he did not like the French. He pestered the Emperor with constant requests for leave to return to Russia, his true and only motherland. In the end Peter relented and though Avram failed to graduate he was allowed to come back in 1723. In St. Petersburg he was commissioned in the Guards and served at the Court in some minor capacity. When Peter died his protégé was sent first to Kazan, and then on the Russian-Chinese border to supervise the construction of military fortifications along it. In 1730 he was recalled to the capital by the new Empress Anna Ivanovna. At this stage Avram Petrovitch assumed the name of Hannibal as his family name. Soon afterwards he was posted to Pernau, a port on the Baltic as engineer-in-chief of the local fortress. There he married Eudoxia Andreevna Dioper, daughter of a Greek sea-captain. The marriage was very unhappy. As the result of it Avram Petrovitch formed in 1732 a life-long attachment with Christine-Regina von Scheberg, daughter of Mathias von Scheberg and of his wife Maria von Albedil. His *de facto* in-laws were petty German nobility who proliferated on the shores of Eastern Baltic until the end of the World War II. Under the Tsars they were the backbone of the Russian state renovated by Peter the Great. At the same

time Avram Petrovitch instituted divorce proceedings before the Ecclesiastical Court of the Holy Synod. The case dragged on endlessly. Only in August 1753 Eudoxia Andreevna Dioper was found guilty of adultery and an attempt to poison her husband. She was locked up in a nunnery for the rest of her life, and on 9th September of the same year Captain Hannibal married in church Christine-Regina von Scheberg; the newly wed couple were attended by their five sons and two daughters.

While the divorce was leisurely progressing—continues Troyat—the military career of Avram Petrovitch went from strength to strength. In 1747 he was presented with Mikhailovskoe, a vast estate in the governorate of Pskov. It was given to him by Empress Elisaveta Petrovna, daughter of the late benefactor of Avram. She was very partial to the favourites of her father and as sovereign showered them with tokens of affection. The estate remained in the hands of the Pushkins until 1917, when it was taken over by the Soviet state as a communal farm. On 25 April 1752 Avram Petrovitch Hannibal was appointed Colonel-in-Chief of the Corps of Engineers of the Imperial Army with the rank of Major General. He was retired in 1762 as General “en Chef”, the second highest rank in 18th century Russia. The elevation was accompanied by a gift of Snida, another estate. There he died almost a quarter of a century later at the age of at least 84. Snida, too, went to the Pushkins who held it till the end of the old regime.

Under Troyat’s pen the life and achievements of the erstwhile little *Arap* of Peter the Great glowed with the fires of a full, rounded and satisfying existence. It was not devoid of a certain spaciousness if not exactly of grandeur. He conceded that Hannibal was not an altogether admirable character as a person: he was irascible, quarrelsome, insincere and forever whining. He was also very stubborn. But this could be an ad-

vantageous characteristic in a gifted, technically knowledgeable and forceful general of noble birth. The accepted version of his life had it that there could be some doubt about military talents of Hannibal, but none could be entertained on his princely origins.

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The Russian Biographical Dictionary was conspicuously less enthusiastic about him. On several points it differs from the family tradition and the literary legend. It is often a matter of emphasis but on the aggregate the discrepancies are glaring.

To begin with the Dictionary is very cautious about Hannibal's date of birth. On this point it quoted various authorities and did not opt explicitly for any of them. The poet maintained that Hannibal was born in 1688; other sources give later dates: 1691 [Bantish-Kamenskii] 1696 [Loginov]. On the balance the Dictionary was rather inclined to accept an even later date perhaps 1697 or 1698. The first authenticated news about his arrival in Russia with Count Raguzinskiy date from 1703. It was noted that the *ex-amanat* of the Padishah was Moslem, very black of countenance and that the Russian envoy first spotted him when he was serving at the Seraglio "together with other eminent youths". This remark is a *suggestio falsi* in spirit. The *amanats*, whether they were originally princes or paupers, were slaves at the Turkish Court, cogs of the "Slave Household", and Raguzinskiy must have had little difficulty in purchasing little Ibrahim. He hardly had to "bribe one of the Viziers" as the Pushkin legend has it; the black pages swarmed in the imperial *harem* and as they grew up and could not be all processed as eunuchs they were an expendable commodity.

The Dictionary does not stress the alleged uniqueness of his live gift for his sovereign, which, it was assumed, warranted the trouble of bringing a court official in order to secure a coveted prize. But the specifically Ethiopian origin of Hannibal was accepted unquestioningly. He was born according to the Dictionary, at "Lagon in Northern Abyssinia". Other versions had it as "Lagon, a capital of a minor Abyssinian Prince, on the Mareb".

So far no complete Gazetteer of Ethiopia has been published but no Ethiopian or Western sources know any locality which could however remotely fit this description.<sup>4</sup>

The identity of Hannibal's putative father is glossed over by the Dictionary except for vague generalities about his princely status. In fact no such person could have existed. Assuming that such an "Abyssinian prince" did exist he must have been a Moslem since the future General Hannibal was called Ibrahim when he arrived in Russia. It is the Arabic equivalent of Abraham, and could not have been given to a Christian child either in the Middle East or in North East Africa. But if the "Abyssinian prince", father of Ibrahim were a Moslem a further difficulty arises.

Ethiopia has been for centuries a "frontier" area between Christians and Moslems, just like the Caucasus. For a Moslem to fight another Moslem setting aside

tribal and family feuds, while there was a common Christian enemy at hand who would profit from their dissensions was unthinkable. The same frame of mind existed among Christians; it has survived to this day in the Horn of Africa.

Supposing even, for argument's sake, that such unlikely event did take place a further and fairly unsurmountable difficulty had to be explained away before the high drama of legendary origins of Avram Petrovitch Hannibal could be accepted as substantially correct.

If he were born in Ethiopia his birth must have coincided with the reign of Emperor Iyasu I (1682-1706). It was the Indian Summer of the Gondarine period of Ethiopian monarchys. No major external wars disturbed the peace. The internal strife of Monophysite Counter-Reformation was a thing of the past. Trade boomed and the barons were quiescent. The imperial armies defeated decisively the Wollo Galla tribes invading the kingdoms of Shoa and Gojam, and brought to heel Enarea, a fractious border principality in the south. Leisurely expeditions were sent out traditionally against the

1 ARAP PETRA VELIKOVO—*The Arab of Peter the Great*—a short, unfinished novel. MOIEI RODOSLOVNOI—*To My Ancestry*—a poem.

2 Henri Troyat, *Pushkin, A Biography*, Trans. Randolph T. Weaver, London, 1951 pp. 22-25.

3 At the Russian Imperial Court the Negro servants survived till the bitter end in 1917. Ever since the reign of Anna Ivanovna (1730-1740) there always were six enormous black valets in attendance. They were called indiscriminately "Arabs", "Ethiopians" or "Negroes". These terms—*Arap*, *Negr*, *Ifyop*—were interchangeable and fluid. They described all dark skinned Africans. The Court *Araps* were not Ethiopians in the correct sense of this word. They were West Africans mostly, and chosen for their black skin and enormous height: they had to be at least 6 ft. 2 in. tall. While slavery existed they were purchased by Russian consuls at Tripoli, baptised on the spot into Russian Orthodox Church, and sent to Russia where, as Christian neophytes they were freed before enrolment in the imperial service. When slavery was abolished they were engaged for life also by the Russian Consuls in Tripoli. The *Araps* served from no disabilities in Russia. There has been no colour bar in the Russian Empire even though religious and racial prejudice against the Moslems and the Jews has been always rather strong, and still is in the Soviet Union. The "Court Ethiopians" were unarmed servants who mounted guard outside imperial working room. They were dressed traditionally in 18th century costumes, red frock coats, green breeches and white stockings. Powdered wigs were discarded in the middle of the last century. The standard pre-war works on the Russian Imperial Court, such as Count P. Vassili's — *La Sainte Russie* Paris, 1890 or Victor Tissot's *La Russie et Les Russes*/Paris, 1884/ have not preserved the effigies of the *Araps*. Only Faberge immortalised them in one of his statuettes/A. Kenneth Snowman, *The Art of Carl Faberge*, London, 1962, Plate 286./ (The duties of the *Araps* were not onerous. While on roster they lived in billets on Siergieievskaya Street between Nevski Prospect and Liteinyi Pereulok. But otherwise they had their homes and lived in town. They intermarried freely with the Russian girls, and their children enjoyed the same advantages in life as children of other court *raznochinsty*—courtiers of non-armigerous extraction. A son of one *Arap* became a naval major-general, a rank peculiar to the Imperial Russian Navy to the indignant wonder of American naval attache in St. Petersburg in the nineties of the last century).—Information of N.S. Pushkin, Esq. the grandson of A. S. Pushkin, Brussels, 1962.

4 Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from Early times To 1800*, London, 1961, p. 423.

5 *Annales Iohannis I, Iyasu I et Bakafa*, Ed. I. Guidi, Rome, 1905. *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia 1769—1840*, ed. H. W. Blundell, London, 1922.

*Shangalla*—the negroid tribes in the South West. Only one serious upheaval broke the placid reign of Iyasu I. In 1684 *dedjasmatch* Wolie, probably an imperial, collateral prince rebelled against the emperor, with the support of *Abba* Tabdan, the abbot of Ganj monastery and proclaimed himself Emperor Yeshak III at Gallabat. But the usurper was quickly defeated, and was generously pardoned. His following was so small that it did not warrant any display of stern measures of repression: they scattered after a brief skirmish.

None of these barons could possibly fit the description of the alleged father of Hannibal.

Above all else, however, under Iyasu I the relations between the Ethiopian Empire and the Moslems surrounding and penetrating it were, for once almost idyllic. Massawa, a Moslem port in Northern Ethiopia, served as the main entry into the Christian Highlands of the Ethiopian interior. Since 1558 it was under the sovereignty of the Sublime Porte but the Turkish control was only nominal. The local governors were practically independent. By 1683 they extended their rule over Suakin and Arkiko. But they did not encroach on the national territory of Ethiopia, and their relations with the court at Gondar were excellent. On one occasion only Musa, the *naib* of Massawa detained at the Customs some Indian, Syrian and Egyptian goods destined for the Emperor, and insisted that dues ought to be collected on them. Iyasu did not bother to send an expedition against Massawa to avenge this affront. He merely had the *naib* informed that unless he behaved himself the Ethiopians would cut off the supplies of fresh meat and vegetables. The mere threat of this comparatively mild sanction was entirely sufficient. The goods in question proceeded inland undisturbed.<sup>6</sup> It was the only serious misunderstanding between Ethiopia and the Turks during the reign of Iyasu I. No hostages were demanded, given or shipped overseas, no "capitals of minor Abyssinian princes" were incommoedated and no Turkish hosts invaded Ethiopia. In fact Iyasu I could be considered properly as a protector of at least some Moslems, and not their hereditary enemy. He protected the Sultanate of Aussa against the Galla inroads. Ever since the rulers of this desert principality used to send each year to the Ethiopian court a black stallion as a token of gratitude. The emperors accepted symbolically the gift and returned the steed together with tokens of imperial benevolence towards "our good friends, the Aussas."

There is a yet another fatal incongruity in the story of alleged noble and Ethiopian origins of Avram Petrovitch Hannibal. The only Moslem potentate who was at the same time member of the feudal aristocracy of Ethiopia in his own right, by virtue of land tenure, was the *naib* of Arkiko<sup>7</sup>. He also held an Ottoman *firman* of authority, and never opposed the Turks and had no "capital on the Mareb". He could not possibly correspond to the mythical father of Avram Petrovitch, a figment of imagination of his alleged son, first and foremost.

It is fairly obvious why and when he was invented.

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Unless some unexpected, and most unlikely, documentary evidence on the subject could clear the riddle beyond reasonable doubt, the story of the "minor Abyssinian prince on the Mareb" is bound to remain partly a piece of historical mythology rather than of history, properly speaking. Yet the life of Avram Petrovitch in Russia, well known and amply documented provides enough clues for a circumstantial and convincing answer to the secret of his alleged "Ethiopian" antecedents.

The true story of Hannibal differs considerably both from the bowdlerised version of the literary legend, and of the much more circumspect entry in the Biographical Dictionary. Hannibal contradicted himself on various details of his life. For example in later years he insisted that he arrived in Russia as a fairly grown up youth and a Christian. Yet his baptismal certificate existed at the *Piatnitskaia* Orthodox Church in Wilno until 1914. The church was one of the very few Russian Orthodox places of worship antedating the partitions of the Polish Commonwealth and the Russian occupation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which followed, and the certificate of admission of the *Arap* of Peter the Great into the bosom of Orthodoxy was one of its few proud possessions. It was signed by the illustrious godparents of Ibrahim, by that time a huge and decorative young man in white periwig, doublet and hose, who renounced on his behalf "the abominable heresy of Islam".

It is of course, true that until 1717 Avram Petrovitch was a personal servant to the Emperor and accompanied him everywhere. He also went to Paris with Peter. Pushkin recorded a version of these journeys which differed materially from the Dictionary. The poet wrote: "Among the young men sent abroad by Peter the Great for the acquisition of knowledge was his godson, the Negro Ibrahim. After being educated at the Military School at Paris, which he left with the rank of Captain of Artillery he distinguished himself in the Spanish War and, severely wounded, returned to Paris<sup>8</sup>".

Pushkin omitted from his story the baptism at Wilno, the change of the name, and the fact that Peter did not send Avram to Paris but took him along there. The Emperor was very keen to train as many technicians in Western arts and crafts as possible. He was also known for his snap decisions. In Paris Avram must have suddenly appeared to his master as a potential military mechanic, and he was left behind, very much against his will and inclinations. The life of a doubly exotic cadet much older than most of his companions at school, could not have been very gay. Avram Petrovitch complained constantly about his penury and begged the Tsar for additional subsidies. His illustrious grandson left a different image of these days: "In Paris *le Nègre du Czar* was a huge success socially. The Regent had him more than once to his merry parties." The Metz interlude was skipped by the poet who wrote that Avram Petrovitch returned to Russia "wither Peter and a vague sense of duty had been calling him for a long time" drawn by homesickness. Furthermore Hannibal was said to be suffering from a broken heart: "Countess D. . . received Ibrahim courteously but

6 L. J. Morie, *Histoire de l'Ethiopie*, Paris, 1905, vol. 2, p. 306.

7 Guillaume Lejean, *Theodore II, Le Nouvel Empire d'Abyssinie*, Paris, 1865.

8 "The Negro of Peter the Great" trans. by T. Keane in *The Works of Alexander Pushkin*, Selected and Edited with an Introduction by Avram Yarmolonsky, The Nonesuch Press—Random House, New York, p. 745.

without any particular attention" upon his return from Spain. Therefore "he resolved to break off the unhappy connection, leave Paris, and return to Russia". Upon his arrival there—it must have been either December of 1722 or January 1723—Peter the Great, already a sick man, went out several miles from St. Petersburg in midwinter to greet his godson. They met in a dimly lit post hostelry: "Ah, Ibrahim—he cried—rising from the bench—how do you do godson?" A touching scene. But had it really happened?

The Tsar in a fit of his surrealist imagination could, conceivably, travel across the snowy landscape to greet a favourite, somebody, anybody, who filled a place in his grandiose schemes. This was hardly the case of Avram Petrovitch. Most probably he never finished his studies at Metz. On his return to Russia he was posted to one of the technical branches of the army a safe avenue of quick promotion under the dispensation of the gadget-obsessed Emperor. Instead Avram Petrovitch, in spite of his professional studies and his Spanish experience, was posted, as an ensign, to the artillery-support company of the Preobrajenski Regiment of Imperial Foot Guards. They were a crack unit, but they were steeped in court intrigue, ready to elevate and demote their sovereigns at a drop of a hat. They were eyed suspiciously as potential mutineers by each incumbent of the throne and showered with tokens of imperial favour at the same time; the Tsars liked to have the greatest possible number of faithful henchmen among the *Preobrajentsy*. Avram Petrovitch got this commission in the regiment because he had been a faithful servant of Peter the Great and, presumably of his lawful heirs, and not because he was a budding technological genius which he was not. In fact his career was in doldrums the moment he joined his regiment; he was sufficiently ambitious and restless to make himself noticed, but he was neither intelligent nor ruthless enough to leave an indelible mark and create a following among his fellow officers.

In 1727 Avram published a book on civil, not military, engineering. This hardly helped him to find preferment in St. Petersburg. Prince Menshikov, all powerful at that moment used it as a pretext to get rid of him from the capital and sent the unconventional officer in semi-disgrace first to Tobolsk and then to several obscure posts along the Russo-Chinese border. There Avram got himself deeply involved in all kinds of plots. His commanding officers had a very poor opinion of him. In 1729 while still in Siberia, Avram Petrovitch was arrested together with the Princes Volkonskia and sent under guard to Tomsk. He was facing a courtmartial for high treason. The accession of Empress Anna Ivnovna saved his neck and brought a reversal of his fortunes. In 1730 Avram returned to St. Petersburg almost in triumph. According to Pushkin "Young Raguzinskiy", the son of the old count who purchased the black *amanat* in Constantinople, was as a great friend of his at that time as his "former companion".

Avram was promptly promoted major and posted to Pernau. It is true that he was put in charge of fortifications there. At that moment he was already using a family name. While in Siberia he read voraciously—and this habit stayed with him all his life—and on his return to favour he assumed the name of Hannibal for

himself and his descendants: it seemed to him very suitable both on professional and racial grounds. Contrary to the family legend on his meritorious life on the shores of the Baltic Sea, marred only by his romantic involvements, he very nearly wrecked his career there. The scandal of his amorous incontinence was such that he had to send in his papers. In 1733 he tried to settle and make a living at Reval. But it was a difficult proposition for an officer on half pension and almost in disgrace. Major Hannibal dabbled in shipping and in trade;



Pushkin's mother, grand-daughter of Avram Petrovich

he tried to become a ship's chandler. To bolster his situation he asserted that he was an Ethiopian and a nobleman of ancient lineage. Between 1733 and 1737 he fought several duels on this point. But he was getting hopelessly in debt and his fortunes were slumping.

It took yet another change on the imperial throne to improve them decisively. It was high time: his creditors at Reval were baying for his blood.

Elizaveta Petrovna, the new empress was a woman writ large in many respects. She was generous, and she was devoted to the memory of his father. Most of the surviving favourites of Peter the Great became automatically her own favourites. From the day of her accession to the throne Avram Petrovich basked in the sunshine of imperial favours as during the closing years of Peter the Great.

In 1740 Hannibal was recalled to active service in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Two years later he was promoted Major General and appointed military governor of Reval, the scene of his earlier humiliations.

He could get his own back at his detractors: he returned to the Baltic port as *pomespzhik*—landowner and an authentic, Russian nobleman, owner of 569 “souls” of White Ruthenian and Russian peasants. From that moment onwards Avram Petrovitch continued to climb up the ladder of dignities without interruption. He was made Lieutenant General in 1755 and transferred to Viborg as military commandant of this northern Russian outpost against Sweden. In 1759 he rose to the rank of General “en Chef”, a fine distinction for a military who seldom, if ever, fired a shot in anger apart from the early Spanish episode.

In 1760 Elizaveta Petrovna bestowed on the ex-servant of her late father the grand cross with riband of the Order of St. Alexander Nevski. It was the third highest decoration of the Russian Empire, and some courtiers demurred at the idea, but the Empress, already a very sick woman, insisted that it should be given to Avram who was, spiritually her kinsman since he loved Peter the Great. After the Empress died Hannibal was promptly retired though not stripped of his honours and estates, and went to live at Mikhailovskoe, a dangerously irascible man. As a Russian magnate Avram Petrovitch never alluded to his alleged Ethiopian connections, and never expressed the slightest wish to leave his northern stamping grounds. He never saw himself at any time as a Russian proconsul of his putative motherland. He knew that if some incredible Russian expedition were to be sent to Africa in general and to Ethiopia in particular his exposure would follow: there is not a shred of evidence that he either spoke or wrote any of the Ethiopian languages, knew the customs of the land or was even quite clear about its exact geographical position.

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It is very significant that Hannibal deliberately fostered the story of his Ethiopian ancestry while his fortunes hung fire. Undoubtedly a clever and pushing man he saw an enormous asset in it for himself. He laid his claims to nobility with great circumspection. He realised that it would have been fatal to be challenged as a fraud. And thus in his petition for a coat of arms which he addressed to the Senate of the Russian Empire in 1742 he merely said in support of his request that he was born on his fathers' estate in Africa, that his ancestors were “eminent local nobles”, and that his birthplace was a town called Lagon; apart from it his father owned two other towns. Avram Petrovitch was equally reticent on the exact circumstances of his arrival in Russia: “Out of my own free will, when still in tender years I left for Russia from Constantinople with Count Sava Vladislavovitch (that is Raguzinskiy) and I was brought to Moscow.”

There were a number of other versions of the early years of the imperial favourite, devised most likely by himself. After Pushkin's death a biography of his exotic great-grand-father was found in the miscellaneous papers of the poet. It had never been published. It was written in German by an unidentified writer—possibly a copyist hired by Hannibal during his semi-exile in Reval—and it included a wealth of details which otherwise never percolated in any official or semi-official stories of Avram Petrovitch's life. Thus his family was wont to be so proud and important that it

was quite natural for them to trace their lineage to the famous Carthaginian general. Avram's father, furthermore, was one of the principal vassals of the Ottoman Empire in Africa at the end of the 17th century, and rose against it in a protest against oppressive taxation. The powerful rebel was defeated eventually and was forced to surrender to the Sublime Porte three of his sons as hostage. Avram was among them, still bearing his original name of Ibrahim the offspring of the thirtieth wife of his father.

The little hostage and his two half-brothers arrived duly in Russia, but the narrative glossed over the details of the passage. It merely mentioned that Father E. I. Ukrainesev, the Russian Resident at the Ottoman Court, and Shepelov, and not Raguzinskiy, arranged the transaction.

Meanwhile the fortunes of Avram's father improved. He returned to Sultan's favours, and was allowed to withdraw the hostages. When it transpired that they were in Russia, the noble African vassal of the Padishah sent there an emissary to bring the boys home. In St. Petersburg he pined for the opulence and luxury of the paternal court in faraway Africa, and for companionship of his 19 brothers, but Peter the Great refused him permission to rejoin them, and Avram remained in St. Petersburg. The narrative did not say what supposedly happened to Avram's brothers.

In this variant of the tale Lagon was the name of the mythical, heroic sister of the little hostage, and not the name of the “north Ethiopian principality”, which found its way into the canon of the legend finally established by Prof. Anuchin.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever tales Avram invented about himself, however, there can be little doubt that all the while he considered himself—at that time, at any rate at the beginning of his glittering wordly career, as an *arap*—a negro, and not an Ethiopian. Even his Christian name, given to him on command of his imperial patron appeared to confirm this assumption. In Russia ever since the first *arap* appeared in the household of *boyar*—Lord—A S. Matveyev at the end of the 17th century, the young Africans baptised into the Russian Orthodox Church were invariably given the name of Avram—of Patriarch Abraham.<sup>10</sup>

The official portrait of Avram Petrovich Hannibal painted by an unknown artist in 1790, and preserved today in the Central Archives of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs played down his African traits. But a hitherto unknown likeness of him has been discovered recently. It shows a dark-skinned man, with thick lips, round eyes with yellowish eyeballs, kinky hair and a face which would have been almost as outlandish among the sharp-featured highlanders of Northern Ethiopia as it was among the flat-faced Russian peasantry.

It must remain an open question whether Avram Petrovitch ever saw a live Ethiopian; most probably not.

<sup>9</sup> M. Vegner—*Predki Pushkina* (Pushkin's Ancestors), Moscow, 1937 pp. 15-16

<sup>10</sup> I. Y. Kratchkovskiy—*Vvedeniye v Efiopskuyu Filologiyu* (An Introduction into Ethiopian Philology) Leningrad, 1955, p. 81.

## TRANSITION

But it could be safely assumed that he heard about Ethiopia. Peter the Great toyed for a time with an idea of forming an alliance with it against the Turks, and thus gaining the Mastery of Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup> Until 1717 Avram was in constant attendance on the Emperor, and it was precisely at that time that at least one direct report from and on Ethiopia arrived in St. Petersburg. Later on he could have heard some scraps of information on the mysterious Christian kingdom in Africa during his years in France. The journey of Poncet to Gondar at the turn of the 17th century caused quite a stir in Paris for a long time. Job Ludolph's book the first modern study of Ethiopia appeared only at the end of the 17th century, and Hannibal could have read it since he read enormously and indiscriminately.

One way or another he knew that the fareway Christian land was inhabited by dark-skinned people and that their constitution was both ancient and feudal.

The Russian Court under Peter and his immediate successors was not a gentle place. Avram knew that his livelihood and successes depended on Peter and on his whims. Whether the Emperor's fondness of his African servant stemmed from genuine affection or from insatiable, and notorious, craving for novelties and gadgetry is a moot question. In any case Avram Petrovitch was determined to carve a *niche* for himself independently, as far as possible, of the imperial favours. Peter could well humiliate the hereditary nobles and advance their favourites over their heads, but if one had to live among them after the formidable ruler died it was much safer to associate with them somehow. Ethiopian ancestry and noble if distant and imprecise origins came in very handy indeed for this purpose. The *ex-Arap* of Peter the Great was also well aware that the terms concerning Africa were fluid and ambivalent in Russia. As long as one sported a very dark face and was born there it did not really matter in St. Petersburg what one called oneself.

The Ethiopian ancestry had a further advantage to Avram Petrovitch: it could not be easily checked and denounced as spurious by his numerous enemies, and it corresponded well with the spirit of the times. Europe was acrawl with spurious aristocrats at that time who made good living out of snobbery and gullibility of the Age of Enlightenment.

Hannibal was about fifty when he could sit back and enjoy himself secure in his dignities and wealth under Empress Elizaveta Petrovna. He ceased to bother then about his spurious gentle birth. To him it mattered no longer that once upon a time he has been unknown negro slave purchased at one of the numerous slave markets of Istanbul. He ceased to bother about his spurious Ethiopian gentle birth. It is curious to note that practically no details about it survive in the "Arab of Peter the Great", and yet the tales about the formidable, black grandfather impressed profoundly Alexander Pushkin as a lonely and sensitive child and his memory stayed with him all his life.

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The imposture was forced on Avram Petrovitch Hannibal by the conditions of time and place in which he lived and which were not of his choosing; it was part of his armour in an alien and at first hostile environment.

It was discarded when it was no longer useful. His sons never stressed it. They were well established in Russia by rights of their birth and of their merits. Avram's eldest son, Ivan Avramovitch was a naval officer, and as an admiral fought at the battle of Navarino in 1829 against the Turks. Later he built a fortress at Kherson, and eventually a monument was erected there to his memory. He left no descendants and never pretended to be an "Abyssinian prince". This somewhat embarrassing tale cropped up once more in connection with the marriage of his younger brother Ossip Avramovitch. He married twice: to Countess Justina Tolstoy and to Maria Alekseevna Pushkin. Nadejna Hannibal, his only daughter by his second wife, was a ravishing beauty. She married her cousin Sergei Lvovich Pushkin, a dissolute gentleman of leisure and of very ancient pedigree. They had a son. He was baptised Alexander. He looked outlandish. Dusky and with a big dolicocephalic head of curly hair, he had bushy eyebrows, flaring nostrils and thick lips over a strong square chin. His eyes were incongruously very light, of elusive changing colouring and they added an uncanny touch to the arresting features of the poet. Ilya Repin, the grand old man of Russian painting at the turn of the 19th century stressed all these characteristic features of Alexander Pushkin in one of his nationally famous pictures. It showed the poet as a young man during the graduation ceremony at the *Alexandre Lycée*, when he thrilled the examining board with the recitation of one of his early works. The incident did happen in actual fact, but the influential circles of the Russian capital deplored Repin's pictorial accuracy.<sup>11</sup> This was hardly surprising. The Pushkins were one of the oldest and best-connected families of old Russia. They were the descendants of the founders of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy. The earliest documents on them date back to 1146 A.D. They were probably of Norman or Varangian descent since one of the earliest Pushkins known to history bore the name of Ghakun—Haakon. They intermarried exclusively with other *boyar* families like the Tolstoys, the Dolgorukis and the Narishkins. For all these members of the "basic" ascendancy of Russia the Romanovs were the upstarts and even the House of Riurik which preceded them on the imperial throne were only the first among their equals. The old Muscovite aristocracy seldom and with ill-grace accepted titles and court appointments during the first two centuries of the Russian Empire.

The progeny of Avram Petrovitch Hannibal married into these rarefied summits of the social pyramid of Imperial Russia, more, in fact, it was absorbed into the the highest circles since the name of Hannibal became extinct within the next two generations after the founder of the family. It acquired posthumous lustre—both literary and social—thanks to Alexander Pushkin, and a kind of retroactive elevation of Avram Petrovitch was set in motion. His genealogical fables were given a tacit credence. His legend trailed in the wake of the literary glory of his grandson; it was never properly investigated, and it was never officially denied.

But snobbery and family pride were not the only motives for its perpetuation. In the eighties and nineties of the last century the ruling classes of Tsarist Russia endeavoured to gain a foothold in Ethiopia. Their efforts were diffuse and ineffectual.<sup>12</sup> They ranged from semi-official efforts to found a colony on the shores of

the Red Sea to vain attempts to secure solid influence at the court of Menelik II. A "reunion" was mooted between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Monophysite Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. The significance of the office of the *Oberprokurator* of the Holy Synod which turned the Russian Church into a branch of imperial administration was glossed over by the Russian travellers and diplomats in Ethiopia, acting on instruction of the Missionary Headquarters in Kiev and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg. And so were the basic doctrinal differences. The Russians pretended to believe that "Orthodoxy"—the True Faith—meant one and the same thing in Russia and in Ethiopia. The Ethiopians were less Erastian. *Abuna* Matheuos, head of the Ethiopian Church visited Russia and in St. Petersburg he was celebrating masses in Russian churches

as if he were a visiting Russian Orthodox bishop of foreign nationality;<sup>13</sup> but on his return to Addis Ababa he flatly refused to have anything to do with the proposed establishment of closer links with the Russian Church, both on dogmatic and administrative grounds. Theologically he found the Russian exposition of the dogma of the Holy Trinity heretical: and he did not want to become an agent of a foreign government by implication.<sup>14</sup>

Against this background Prof. D. N. Anukhin, published in 1899, in St. Petersburg, a work entitled "A. S. Pushkin—An Anthropological Essay". It was also serialised in the *Russkie Vedomosti*.<sup>\*</sup> He claimed that he proved empirically that the poet was indeed of an Ethiopian and of a noble descent. Anukhin has never been to Ethiopia and knew no Gheez or Amharic. Two years before an imposing Russian Imperial Legation was opened in Addis Ababa under Imperial Court Counsellor Vlassov.

After the Russo-Japanese War the interest in Ethiopian affairs petered out in Russia. Times there were too serious and too much laden with doom to bother seriously about exotic lands and unrealistic designs on them.

The few copies of Anukhin's book gathered dust on the shelves, forgotten pieces of colonial psychological warfare. The alleged Ethiopian antecedents of Alexander Pushkin were relegated to the category of oratorical devices at infrequent Ethiopian-Russian public occasions. They still are.

With the freshening of the "winds of change" in Africa the Ethiopian legend of Pushkin revived once more.

11 Prof. I. A. Sikorskij—*Antropologičeskaya i Psichologičeskaya Gieniealoga Pushkina*. (Antropological and Psychological Genealogy of Pushkin), Kiev, 1912, p. 6.

12 M. V. Rait—*Russkie ekspedtsii v Efiopii v seredine XIX—nachale XXv. v. i ikh etnograficheskie materialy*—Russian expeditions in Ethiopia from the middle of the 19th cent to the beginnings of the 20th cent. and the ethnographical materials collected by them. In "*Afrikanski Etnograficheski Sbornik*", Moscow, 1956.

13 Robert P. Skinner, *Abyssinia of Today*, London, 1906, p. 90.

14 Ferdinando Martini—*Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. 4, pp. 451-452, Rome, 1946.

\*NOTE: There are surprisingly few studies on Pushkin's ancestry in the vast *corpus* of literature on him. Apart from the works noted in the text of the present essay, the following should be noted: L. B. Modzalevskij—*Rod Puškina*—(The Family of Pushkin) in the introduction to the 1st volume of Vengerovski's edition of Pushkin's Complete Works, St. Petersburg, 1907 and L. B. Modzalevskij & M. V. Muraviev—*Rodoslovnaia Rospis*—Ancestral Lineage—in *Pushkinskio Sbornik*—Pushkin's Miscellany, Moscow, 1932.