

TARAS  
SHEVCHENKO  
UKRAINE'S  
POET  
OF  
FREEDOM

by Pauline Bentley

**A** hundred years ago a poet who was one of the world's great champions of freedom died in St. Petersburg. This year, his centenary is being celebrated not only in his own land, Ukraine, but throughout the Soviet Union, and in many great cities of the world including the American capital, Washington, where a statue is to be raised in his commemoration. This man's name is Taras Shevchenko, the Ukrainian poet and patriot who not only established his country's literature high among world letters, but who actually lived his poetry. A torchbearer of liberty, his whole life mirrored the sufferings of his oppressed country and the unconquerable, indomitable will of its people to freedom.

The vast territory of Ukraine with its population of 40 million stretches from Poland and Czechoslovakia to the Black and Azov Seas, and is the second largest nation within the U.S.S.R. Of it Voltaire wrote "L'Ukraine a toujours aspiré à être libre", for its history is one of endless invasion and national effort to throw off oppression. Its literature goes back to the tenth century but at that time it mostly made use of an artificial language based on the ceremonial Church Slavonic; only in 1789 (the year of the French Revolution) did the Ukrainian writer Kotlyarevsky introduce the spoken language in literature and so lay a foundation for Shevchenko to elaborate on.

Taras Shevchenko was born in a village near the banks of the Dnieper in 1814; he was born a serf, a scrap of humanity without rights or privileges, belonging entirely to the local landlords. It is perhaps difficult to imagine what harsh misery the enslaved poverty of serfdom meant to the Ukrainian peasant at this time, but the waves of change which had brought American Independence and the French Revolution, which had washed away the old autocratic orders in Europe and North America, had rippled to stagnation before reaching the East.

In 1814 Ukraine was still a feudal land under Tsarist tyranny. The fertile beauty of the countryside of Taras' childhood stood in cruel contrast to the living conditions of his people but both these aspects of the life around him affected him deeply; from one he learnt a passionate patriotism, a love of his country which was to remain undimmed by exile or absence, and from the other he learnt a hatred of tyranny, of oppression and injustice which inspires his poetry with the divine fire of liberty...

*O dear and quiet land  
O my Ukraine  
Why do they plunder thee?  
Why has death come to hut and lea?...*

*...Break your chains and live as brothers.  
In a foreign country  
Do not seek and do not search for  
What is non-existent...*

*In your home, you'll find your justice  
And your strength and freedom...  
The world has only one Ukraine  
Dniepro cannot be found elsewhere...*

As a boy Taras showed early a vivid imagination and a passion for drawing. When he was left an orphan at the age of twelve, he sought a teacher and from a brutal drunken clerk did learn to read and write though this man's harshness finally drove him elsewhere. He quickly exhausted the meagre local sources of learning open to him and after a disconsolate spell of village cattle-minding, he was summoned to work as scullion in the manorial kitchens. From there he attended the young master, Pavel Vasilyevitch Engelhardt, who took him as part of his retinue on his travels.

A new world opened up before Taras; he wonderingly absorbed all he could of this unaccustomed grandeur, and secretly studied the art treasures housed round him. One night in the Engelhardt establishment at Wilno, the master returned late to find Taras absorbed in copying a print by candlelight. He had the boy flogged next day for his temerity but was so impressed by the quality of the copy that he decided to allow Taras to study with the Wilno painter, Rustem, and later, on moving to St. Petersburg, apprenticed Taras to the painter Shirayev, a harsh and cruel master who turned his pupils into drudges.

Taras had little leisure, but in the white nights of the early summer he would go to the Summer Gardens of St. Petersburg to sketch the ancient statues there for his own pleasure. It is on such an occasion that he is said to have met a fellow Ukrainian, Ivan Soshenko, who was studying at the Imperial Academy of Arts.

# POET OF A PEOPLE'S SUFFERING

Soshenko introduced Taras to his friends, to the Imperial Academy circle and the famous painter Bryulov, who at once decided that Taras must study at the Academy too. As a serf, Taras was ineligible to do this. Engelhardt proved unwilling to part with his talented protégé and finally only agreed to sell him his freedom for the almost prohibitive price of 2,500 silver roubles.

To raise this sum, Taras' new friends rallied round; Bryulov interested the celebrated poet Zhukhovsky who commissioned a Bryulov portrait of himself and had it auctioned by private lottery. On April 22, 1838 (a year after the death of Pushkin) Engelhardt received his 2,500 roubles; Taras Shevchenko became a free man for the first time in his life.

From the grime of Shirayev's garret he was transported to the enchanted halls of the Academy where his work won him acclaim and whence he graduated honourably in 1845. He made many friends in the open-hearted Bryulov circle, including the actor Shchepkin, and he began thirstily to fill the gaps in his education, absorbing all he could of literature and the arts, but underneath all his sophisticated activities he could not forget Ukraine, the sufferings of his people or the family he had left there unable to share his freedom.

There arose in him a new passion, to express all his homesickness and love for his country in Ukrainian verse. Years later he wrote of this period spent in Bryulov's studio in these words, "And what did I do in that holy of holies? It is strange to think of it. I occupied myself with writing Ukrainian verses ... I cherished in my heart my blind Kobzar and my bloodthirsty Haydamaks as in the shadows of the wild steppes I saw pass before me the shades of our good hetmen.

"Before me stretched the steppe, studded with burial mounds. Before me lay my fair, my unhappy Ukraine in all its chaste loveliness. And I mused, lost in thought; I could not tear my inner eye from that enchanting beauty. It was a vocation, that was all."

It was a vocation. In 1840 an enthusiastic Ukrainian merchant found Shevchenko's verses while sitting for his portrait in the artist's studio and immediately

published them at his own expense. Shevchenko called the little book *Kobzar*, after the name of the old Ukrainian wandering folkbards. Keeping to the traditional folksong form and within the Romantic current of the day, he idealizes the stern and bitter conflicts which the Kozaks of old had waged for independence, glorifying the Kobzars who alone had kept alive the memory of Ukraine's heroic age.

*Kobzar* marks an epoch and the beginning of a new Ukrainian literature; it throws a bridge between its ancient treasures, the later work of Kotlyarevsky, and modern literature. For the first time a major poet emerges to pour out his heart in his native tongue and express the sufferings of his people and their past. And because he lived so deeply in their thoughts and feelings, they accepted his poems as their own songs and composed music to them: today his works are in almost every Ukrainian home and are sung throughout Russia.

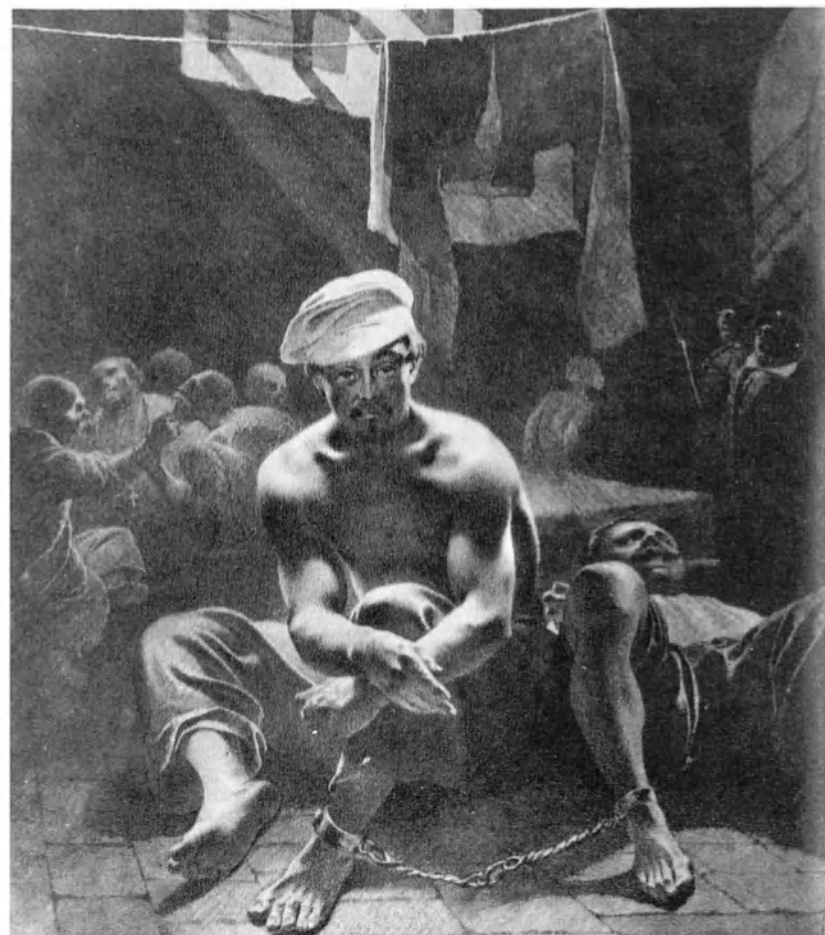
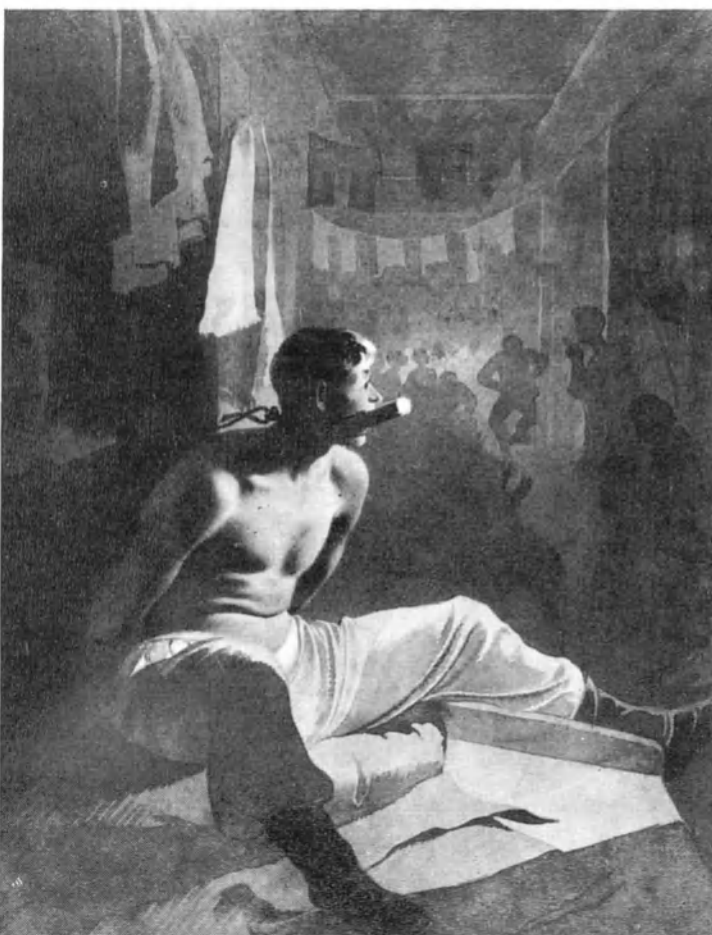
But his poetry is more than just folksong; it has the magic simplicity and melody of pure verse. "Owls are calling/ sleeps the forest/ stars are shining brightly ..." "Like the sea the field whitened/ by the driving snowflakes ..." Countless country images reflect the poet's mastery of his art. Together with this evocative lyricism, his poems are permeated with his innate humanism.

No one knew better than he the harshness of the peasant way of life. In the theme for instance of the village girl transgressing the moral code, he poignantly and repeatedly makes a plea for compassion and tolerance. In his long epic poem *The Haydamak*, which came out in 1841 and recalled the 1768 revolt of the Ukrainians against their Polish overlords, he writes "Why should people destroy each other? ... Only see, they are the same kind of people, they could live, they could be friends."

In 1843 he gave way to his intolerable longing and returned home to Ukraine; he was welcomed everywhere as a national poet, portrait commissions flowed in, all doors were open before him, but the terrible sufferings he saw among the peasants on his travels throughout the country brought about a sharp change in his work. His idealization of the Kozak epoch gave place to stinging

Shevchenko knew from his own personal experience the kind of harsh treatment meted out to political prisoners by authorities determined to crush the spirit of freedom. He wrote of it in his poems and depicted it in paintings like

those below taken from his series entitled "The Prodigal Son", showing (left) punishment by the insertion of a heavy stick into the mouth to prevent speaking, and (right) the despair of prisoners chained together in a cell.



castigation of the enslavement, despotism and tyranny he saw everywhere exercised on behalf of the Tsar Nicholas I. He became openly rebellious to every institution, whether religious or civil, which seemed to tolerate such terror, cruelty and injustice as were suffered by the Ukrainian serf. He began a series of poems which from a literary standpoint are considered his most perfect. Politically they were dynamite; they could not possibly be published in the Russia of that time and their circulation even in a private album which Shevchenko called *Three Years* figured greatly in his arrest in 1847.

Among these poems, *The Great Grave* recounts in mystical terms the immortal freedom-loving spirit; *The Dream*, written in a form of fantastic satire, contains an acid attack upon the Imperial family in which the poet ridicules the Court and likens the Empress to a dried mushroom; the whole poem is one of his bitterest attacks against tyranny.

*"The people's loud cries and their laughs are not  
[heard...]*

*They strip the patched clothing from off of the beggars  
They strip with the hides—for the poor must find shoes  
For youthful young princes. They pummel the widow  
To pay her poll taxes; they fetter her son  
Her son, her one son, the only child that she has;  
Her hope—and they send him away to the army  
But for a while—yet in filth and in mud  
The boy is soon bloated—from hunger he dies,  
His mother is reaping the wheat at forced labour..."*

In another poem, *The Caucasus*, Shevchenko celebrates the struggle of the mountain people for their freedom. He sent this poem to Paris to the Polish revolutionary and poet Adam Mickiewicz, a follower of Mazzini, and it shows his widening interest in the cause of freedom not only in Ukraine but everywhere.

*"And our human spirit dies not  
And our freedom dies not ...  
It is for us to keep on weeping  
With bloody sweat and bitter tear ...  
And mix each day with our daily bread  
Truth will rise and so will freedom ...  
And meanwhile the streams are flowing  
Streams of blood are flowing."*

At about this time appears the poem *The Feeble Minded* (Joridyvyl) in which Shevchenko, a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, wrote  
*"When shall we receive our Washington,*

*With a new and righteous law  
And receive we will some day ..."*

In Kiev during this period he found sympathetic friends among a group of young Pan-Slavic revolutionaries called the Society of Saints Cyril and Methodius; their revolutionary ideals for peasant enlightenment and emancipation encouraged him to write *The Heretic*, a poem honouring the Czech reformer Jan Huss and glorifying him not so much as a great scholar but as a representative of the common people.

*"Seer you caught the glimpse of freedom,  
Freedom and of truth,  
And the Slav wide-scattered family,  
Sunk in dark and slavery,  
You collected all together ..."*

The existence of this Society was betrayed to the authorities in February 1847 and they acted swiftly and savagely suppressed it. By April Shevchenko and his friends were arrested and sent to St. Petersburg. In prison there the poet produced a number of verses in which he expressed his concern for the future of his country and the fate of his people. His main indictments were the "outrageous and to the highest degree insolent" poems and the *Three Years* album confiscated at his arrest.

On May 30 he was sentenced to serve as an ordinary soldier in the bare Orenburg steppe, "a broad, unlocked prison." On his sentence file papers Tsar Nicholas I wrote in his own hand, "under the strictest supervision with a prohibition of writing and sketching."

Shevchenko had been free for only nine years; now he was back in a bondage more terrible than before, torn away from Ukraine and condemned to live among rough and brutalizing soldiery in the remotest area of Eastern Russia. At first sympathetic officers allowed him clandestinely to draw and write,

*"Am I to live in this sad plight,  
Still many years, forever wasting ...  
But I am looking, while my heart's flying,  
To a dark garden in Ukraine..."*

When the St. Petersburg authorities got to know of this, the Tsar's instructions were carried out to the letter. Shevchenko was sent to a still wilder place, the fortress of Novopetrovsk on the Caspian Sea. Of this place he wrote, "Sand and stones; if only there were one blade of grass, only a tree, but nothing." The endless drill, the

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From childhood Shevchenko showed a vivid imagination and a passion for drawing. As a serf he was ineligible to enter the Imperial Academy of Arts and was only able to do so after friends had bought his freedom for 2,500 silver

roubles. Then the painter also began to fill in other gaps in his education and became a poet and writer too. Below, two of Shevchenko's works: left, an illustration for his poem "The Prisoner"; right, the village girl, Katherine.





## POWER AND PROTEST

absolute deprivation of any creative work or interests wore him away. "There is nothing more bitter than to recall freedom in captivity", he wrote at this time, but even though his health was affected, his spirit remained unbroken and he was able to note in his diary, "all this unspeakable grief, every kind of degradation and harshness passed as if without touching me ... Not a single aspect of the inner me was changed."

He was to languish nearly seven years in Novopetrovsk since, even after the death of Nicholas I, Imperial feelings were still tender from the "dried mushroom" episode. The new Tsar Alexander did not include Shevchenko in his general amnesty, and not until two years more had passed did friends finally secure his release, when he returned to St. Petersburg to enjoy great moral and political prestige.

One of his first compositions after being freed was *The Neophytes*, a daring comparison of the Tsar with Nero, for Shevchenko had returned from exile with his hatred of Tsarism equalled only by his hatred of slavery



Taras Shevchenko's first fame came as a painter, especially for his portraits (see self portrait at left). But his fame today rests with the poetry in which he captured the heart, soul and image of his native Ukraine. As early as 1860, translations of his poems

appeared in Poland, and only a little later Czech and Bulgarian translations also appeared. In 1870, Georg Obrist translated his poems into German and six years later they were published in French. By 1903 his works were translated into English. In the past fifty years, Shevchenko's poems have been translated 400 times into 41 languages, numbering 12,000,000 copies. In the poet's native language, for Ukrainians around the world, his works have been published 245 times in almost seven million copies.

—for him these two evils were related and he never counted the cost in fighting them.

No other European literature has a comparable protest against serfdom and there is no other poet of genius sprung from the serfs who has shown up the ugliness of serfdom with such powerful effect as Shevchenko. He contributed much to the abolition of serfdom by influencing liberal public opinion which played a large part in inducing Alexander to initiate liberal reforms.

He interested himself in etching at the Academy, becoming an Academician in 1860, and achieving work which caused other artists to call him the "Russian Rembrandt." A Negro actor, Aldridge, came to the city and played Othello there: Shevchenko had always been deeply influenced by Shakespeare; he was much moved by Aldridge's performance and the two men became friends. And he continued to write, raising the flaming banner of his verse in the same causes of justice and liberty as before. Although he risked immediate retaliation, he did not hesitate to sign a statement defending the civil rights of the Jews which were in question, and he consorted openly with the leading radicals of the day,



King Lear and his Fool. Illustration by Shevchenko for a Russian edition of Shakespeare's tragedy.

including Chernyshevsky who spoke up for a new edition of *Kobzar*, which was allowed to be published in 1860 provided none of the post-exile poems were included in it.

But despite his valiant spirit, Shevchenko returned broken in body and weary from his exile. Personal unhappiness and loneliness weighed heavily upon him and his last poems, including *Mary* in which he deliberately changes the sacred story to that of an ordinary peasant woman, have more austere, often Biblical, sources; they carry a message emphasizing mankind's need for truth and love and brotherhood.

Against the day of peasant emancipation he wrote a primer for use in schools, but his very last poem is a swansong and a testament of faith that he will in another world.... "on Phlegethon, or on the Styx in heaven, or on Dniepro, that mighty river ..." find a happiness which this life denied him and which, towards the end, he most pathetically sought.

He died on March 10, 1861, and was buried as he had asked

*"in a lofty tomb  
out upon the steppes unbounded  
in my own dear Ukraine;  
so that I can see before me  
the wide stretching meadows  
and Dniepro, its banks so lofty,  
and can hear it roaring ..."*

His grave lies near the small town of Kanev where in 1939 a memorial was raised to him which has been called "an object of special reverence among his countrymen, the Mecca of all Ukrainian patriots." So it is, but this poet of Ukraine, who took his language as it had been developed, and by the power of his genius enconced it in modern literature, this apostle of liberty, enemy of all oppression, Taras Shevchenko, goes beyond the narrow limits of one country. He is a poet of humanity; his message of brotherhood and love, truth and justice, and above all, of freedom, is worldwide in scope, universal in significance. Other poets have sung his song, other poets are perhaps better known, but none by the pure identification of his life with his inspiration deserves greater homage or recognition.