

From the Distant Past: The Four Lives of Maria Chekhova

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Widely considered to be Russia's finest writer of short fiction, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov always had a liberal view of marriage: "Give me a wife who, like the moon, will not appear in my sky every day," wrote the author, playwright, and physician. While it may seem rather limited today, Chekhov could perhaps afford to have this perspective since most of his domestic needs were met through the tireless efforts of his sister and true caretaker Maria Chekhova.

Throughout her brother's life and long after his death, "Ma Pa" as she was affectionately called by Anton, was the unofficial manager of the famous author's household and eventually became the custodian of his legacy. Now, at the Chekhov House Museum on the Garden Ring in Moscow, there is a unique opportunity to see an exhibit devoted entirely to the woman who herself devoted so much to the preservation of her brother's memory.

Located on the second floor in the northeast corner of the museum, this new exhibit entitled,

"The Four Lives of Ma Pa" brings together objects from the collections of the State Literary Museum, the Chekhov House-Museum in Yalta — which Chekhova herself founded — and the Russian State Library.

Upon entering the upstairs, visitors will see delicate landscapes painted by Maria Chekhova, a product of the "many lives" of this woman who, like her brother Nikolai, was a talented artist as well as a teacher. On display along the walls are photos of Chekhova and handwritten letters from her days in the gymnasium in the city of Taganrog, where she was born.

These letters in particular offer a rare look into Chekhova's early, personal life. The brief details of her lessons, classmates, and family relations bring to light the image of a curious, talented young woman who, for much of her later life, stood behind the shadow of her brother's enormous personage.

However, all but the most enthusiastic admirers of Anton Pavlovich's personal history may find the exhibit rather sparse in terms of the number of materials on display. A trip through the other rooms of the home will certainly fill in the gaps, though. Chekhov's former quarters contain portraits of the author with writers Tolstoy and Gorky, paintings from Levitan, and all of the original furnishings and household items, most notably the writer's work desk and personal library.

"The Four Lives of Ma Pa" will be open until Nov. 25th at the Chekhov House Museum, 6 Sadovaya-Kudrinskaya Ulitsa, Metro Barrikadnaya.

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