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Tsarist Letters Revealing Bedroom Secrets Draw Bidders

By The Moscow Times

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GENEVA — A trove of letters from Russian royals revealing secrets of state and bedchamber and voicing scorn for the "hypocrisy" of Victorian court life in Britain drew big money, including some from Moscow, at a Geneva auction.

Written in Russian and French by two 19th-century tsars, an empress and a pride of princesses, the 230 letters were found in a Massachusetts attic in the 1990s, and experts say they open a window into hidden corners of a long-vanished world.

In one, Tsar Alexander II tells his sister Olga, wife of the crown prince of the German Kingdom of WЯrttemberg, that despite pressure he would not bring Russia into a short war setting Austria against France and Sardinia in 1859.

He adds: "Keep it to yourself."

In another, he recounts the problems caused for the straightlaced royal family in St. Petersburg by a wild affair and subsequent secret marriage between their sister Maria and a low-ranking Russian count.

Almost the entire package of letters, sold Monday at Geneva's Hotel des Ventes auction rooms in 12 lots, are addressed to Olga — who married her German prince in 1846 and later became queen when he succeeded to the throne of the small Rhineland state.

The whole batch fetched more than 743,000 Swiss francs ($830,000) — a large sum for documents of this type — amid heavy bidding at the crowded auction room, with unidentified Russians bidding on the spot and by telephone.

Several letters from Olga's niece, another Maria, reveal antagonism between the Russian grand duchess — as daughters of the tsar were known — and her mother-in-law after she married Alfred, son of Britain's Queen Victoria.

Maria, who held the title of Duchess of Edinburgh and lived until 1920, writes in 1878 of the "hateful slander" spread around the British court about her often-absent husband and of the queen's own "authoritarianism" and coldness.

She also reveals her anger when she discovered that morals around the tsarist court were not so different from those in the hated entourage of Victoria. She tells her aunt of her bitterness at discovering, after her mother died, that her much-loved father had had a series of mistresses and a number of illegitimate children.

Hotel des Ventes director Bernard Piguet says the letters were sent for Monday's sale, which included jewelry, paintings and vases from tsarist times, by the widow of a U.S. army captain who brought them home from Germany in 1947.

He said there was no indication of how the officer, who also worked as a journalist for the U.S. forces "Star and Stripes" newspaper, came by them. But they had been authenticated by specialists.

"I think they are a real treasure for anyone interested in Russia's cultural heritage," he told reporters. The American widow and her family did not want their names revealed.

Piguet's auction house has earned a name for Russian sales since he took over what was a declining business in 2005. Last December, it sold four letters written during World War I by Tsar Nikolai II for a Swiss record of nearly $125,000.

And in 2010, it sold a huge batch of letters written by the doomed Nikolai's brothers and sisters over several decades to a Swiss tutor of the imperial children in the last 15 years of the 19th century.

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