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Moscow's Culture Codes

By John Freedman

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A QR code on a fence on Tverskoi Bulvar provides access to a website full of information about the Moscow home in which Russian revolutionary Alexander Herzen was born in 1825.

If you have walked anywhere in Moscow you have seen them, the blue squares with the qr codes in the middle and the white writing on them. If you have a smart phone you may have even tried accessing the information those codes provide access to.

But there is also a way to tap into at least some of that information even if you're sitting at home in Moscow or vacationing across the seas. And there is a lot of information to be had.

I, for example, came home from a walk a few days ago and typed in the code (qr.mos.ru/100038) that I saw on a fence in front of the monument to the revolutionary writer Alexander Herzen in a courtyard on Tverskoi Bulvar. It turned out that the information was not about the monument itself, but about the two-story yellow building right next to it. Herzen was born there in the corner room on the second floor in 1825.

As the webpage on the Know Moscow site tells the story, Herzen lived here until September

of the same year, "the illegitimate child of the Moscow nobleman Ivan Alexeyevich Yakovlev and Henriette Wilhelmina Luisa Haag from Stuttgart. Subsequently, as an adult, Herzen would come here to visit his cousin Alexei Alexandrovich Yakovlev."

From there the story expands to tell of other famous people who lived or visited here, as well as of the building's role in Russian literature. For those who didn't know, this is the place that Mikhail Bulgakov described satirically as the writer's club in his novel "The Master and Margarita."

In addition to the informative text, there is a photo gallery of the building and its environs, an interactive map that allows you to pinpoint the location, and an audio feature that allows you to listen to the text about the building if you prefer that to reading. All of the texts, printed and spoken, are in Russian.

But having navigated this single page about the Herzen home, you have only scratched the surface of the website.

A bar menu along the top of the page provides several other entry points to information about Moscow's cultural history. The choices include Homes, Routes, Museums, Territories, Personalities and Authors. The latter link provides information about some of the people who have written for the site, or who have conducted walking tours in the Routes section. They include the musician Alexei Kortnev, the film director Alexander Mitta, and the actress Yulia Rutberg.

The page devoted to the famed Taganka Theater, located in the Homes section, is especially rewarding for its small photo gallery. There is one shot of the building as it looked in 1912 when it was a movie theater, and two street snapshots taken during the height of the theater's popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. Featuring a wooden facade and very few posters advertising shows in repertory, it looks very different from the playhouse we know today.

The richest section on the site is probably the one titled Personalities. It does not offer exhaustive information about all famous Muscovites by any stretch of the imagination, but it still is a treasure trove of information and photos. Here we can learn about the poet Marina Tsvetayeva, the architect Giacomo Quarenghi, the Nikitin brothers circus artists, the novelist Boris Pilnyak, and dozens of others.

The page devoted to writer, journalist, publisher, shoe repairman, entrepreneur, penniless wanderer, soldier and circus actor Vladimir Gilyarovsky is a great place to learn some of the basic facts about one of Moscow's most beloved writers. Gilyarovsky is widely agreed to be the best chronicler of life in Moscow that the city has ever seen. His stories, sketches and essays, written in the late 19th century were wildly popular with the public, though not so appreciated by the authorities.

The Know Moscow site tells about an incident in 1887 when the writer's book "Slum People" was burned publicly.

"Gilyarovsky attended the auto-da-fe of his book and was able to pull a few pages from the fire. The writer later recalled, 'They burned my book and I lost all interest in writing belles lettres. I gave myself over entirely to journalism, rarely, however, writing poetry and stories,

but never again with the same passion as before. I was famous, but I didn't have a kopek to my name.'"

Gilyarovsky learned the hard way that Moscow does not believe in tears. Fortunately, others have made it their business to tell his and other prominent Muscovites' tales in innovative and entertaining ways. With a smart phone, a tablet or a plain old-fashioned computer, you can have some of Moscow's greatest stories at your fingertips.

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