The Intriguing Life and Ignominious Death of Maurice Benyovszky

Andrew Drummond

ROUTLEDGE

Portrait of Maurice Benyovszky, taken from the frontispiece of the 1790 edition of his *Memoirs*.

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Published in 1790, Maurice Benyovszky's posthumous memoir was an instant sensation. A tale of exploration and adventure beginning with his daring escape from a Siberian prison and ending with his coronation as King of Madagascar, it was translated into several languages and adapted for the theatre and opera. This book explores the veracity of this memoir and, more broadly, the challenges faced by the explorers of the age and the brutality of colonisation.

The self-styled Hungarian Baron Maurice Auguste Aladar Benyovszky, Counsellor to the Duke of Saxony and Colonel in the service of the Queen of Hungary, was in fact only confirmed to have been an officer in a regiment of the Polish Confederation of Bar. While he did escape from Russian captors and subsequently travel to Japan, Formosa, China and Madagascar, many of his exploits were wildly exaggerated or simply invented. Andrew Drummond reveals an alternative picture of events by looking at statements from Benyovszky's travelling companions and sceptical officials as well as contemporary documents from the places he claimed to have visited, untangling the truth behind his stories and examining what these stories can nonetheless tell us about the era in which Benyovszky lived.

Witty and engagingly written, this book is fascinating reading for anyone interested in eighteenth-century colonial history and the story of early European and Russian explorers.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-4128-6510-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-4128-6543-2 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-11298-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Saxon Graphics Ltd, Derby

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Maps

PREFACE

Of Names and Dates and Places and Professors

A Researcher's Reliable Standby: Guesswork – Simply Add Eleven Days – Simply Add or Subtract 156 Degrees – the Author Now Apologises to Everyone

Before you embark on this tale of high adventure and low deception, there are things of which you should be aware.

First, *names*: the eighteenth-century journals, chronicles and reports used as sources for this book all display a wonderful and confusing variety in their rendering of personal and place names. The spelling is largely dependent on the nationality of each writer, but even then nothing was fixed. Personal names can be written in half-a-dozen different ways. Where possible and desirable we have standardised spellings around a few simple rules – hopefully rational, but ultimately subjective. In preference to many other perfectly good alternatives, we have been persuaded to anglicise our hero's forename 'Moric' to *Maurice* and rendered his family name as *Benyovszky* – excepting those occasions when his name has been written in an interesting manner by others. In that spirit, anomalous spellings of absolutely everything have been retained in quoted text, to give a flavour of the original orthography.

A list of the people involved in the great adventure is provided in Appendix I of this book.

Given the patchy geographical certainties of the period, the actual locations of some of the places named by the primary sources can only be guessed at. This is particularly true of places in Japan and China. And even more true, as we shall see, when some locations are entirely fictitious. Frequently, therefore, we have resorted to that reliable standby: guesswork.

Second, *dates*: in the Russia of the 1770s, the 'old style' Julian calendar was still in use – and remained so until 1918. Much of Catholic Europe had adopted the 'new style' Gregorian calendar from 1582 onwards, with Protestant countries

following in the early eighteenth century, and Britain, non-European as ever, in 1752; in those countries which had not adopted it by the late eighteenth century, the old style calendar was some eleven days behind the new style one. Hungary, birthplace of our main protagonist, was an early adopter of the Gregorian calendar. Since our chroniclers for the present book were largely Russian contemporaries of Benyovszky, old style dates are much in evidence. Mostly. But not consistently. To avoid utter confusion, we sometimes distinguish between old and new style dates using an abbreviation in brackets after the date (OS or NS, respectively); to convert from old style to new style simply add eleven days. Or not, according to taste.

Third, *latitude and longitude*: in the period described in this book, sailors and other travellers by sea were adept at establishing their latitude above or below the equator; but establishing longitude exercised them a great deal. We would refer readers to Dava Sobel's excellent book *Longitude* for further information.[1] Commonly, navigators would calculate their longitude as the number of degrees east or west of their last port of call; this calculation could be based on a number of different methods. Benyovszky used the Kamchatkan town of Bolsheretsk as his 'Greenwich', but readers will find that even the relative longitude from there was calculated with quite spectacular errors. We recommend that you ignore all longitude readings in this book. But those who wish to be pernickety are advised that Bolsheretsk lies at 156° 16′ East and 52° 49′ North; now away and do the maths.

And last, *sources and acknowledgements*: many of the sources used for this book date from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These were generally written in Russian, Japanese, French or German. Some of the source material is readily available in digital format (OpenLibrary.org, Archive.org, Google Books, Hathi Trust, etc.), other material has been consulted in the National Library of Scotland. But I must specifically thank John Massey Stewart for his help in accessing material printed in Russian; Maria Bogomolova for her work in transcribing 'old Russian' documents into 'new Russian' text; and my sister Izzi Hazelwood for her translations from the Russian. I should also mention John Dundas Cochrane, the pedestrian traveller to Kamchatka, without whom I would probably never have heard of Benyovszky. And my gratitude to a whole galliot full of professors and doctors, in strict alphabetical order: Dr Ian Astley, for his explanations of Hungarian renditions of Japanese; Professor Hajo Eicken, for his timely guidance on ice conditions in the Bering Sea; Professor Ian Inkster, for his kind permission to reference his article on Benyovszky's visit to Formosa; Professor Roger Keys, for his translation work from poorly-written Russian; Dr Carol Padgham-Albrecht of Idaho University, for permission to cite from her dissertation on Austrian operas; Professor Luke Roberts, for his invaluable advice on giants, officialdom, diaries and dates in Japan, and permission to cite; and Professor Vilmos Voigt, for permission to quote from his detailed history of Benyovszkiana. My apologies here and now to all of these generous people: it is entirely possible that I have completely misunderstood any guidance they gave me.

A full bibliography has been provided at the end of this book, in Appendix III. The first section of the bibliography provides the details of all books cited in the

notes at the end of each chapter; the reference to 'Benyovszky' is always to the two-volume edition of Benyovszky's *Memoirs*, published in London in 1790.

A sumptuous selection of digitised source materials – texts, maps, images – can be found on the author's website at www.andydrummond.net/benyovszky.

And now let us begin.

Note

1 Sobel, 1996.

I

MACAO

"A Vessel of Uncommon Appearance"

A Vessel Arrives at Macao – Great Excitement Amongst the European Merchants – Strange Secrets – A Best-Seller

On the 23rd September 1771, Nathaniel Barlow, going about his daily business in the merchant community of Macao, was much animated by the arrival in the port of a small and bedraggled ship. It was, he reported later, "a vessel of uncommon appearance." It had

> sixty five persons on board, most of them military. The Commanding Officer bore the rank of Colonel and the title of Baron de Benyorsky, which he held under the Queen of Hungary. There were in the vessel five persons in womens apparel.[1]

So great was the excitement created by the arrival of this ship and its curious crew that Mr Barlow despatched a letter to London, where it was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* for 1772. In a journalistic act of caution worthy of marvel and respect today, the editor headlined it with the words: "*The following extraordinary account, in a Letter from Canton, dated Nov 19, 1771, is said to be authentic.*" His caution, although unjustified for the letter in question, could nevertheless be applied to several of the later accounts which emerged on the same subject.

Barlow's letter contained a very brief statement from the uncommon vessel's commanding officer, Baron Benyovszky, on the circumstances of the voyage that had just been completed. Benyovszky said he had been sent into exile to Kazan in Russia almost two years previously. Determining to escape, he and several companions had overpowered their jailers, and "directed their rout to Kamschatka, on the sea coast of Tartary, where the Colonel knew a friend, on whose assistance their hopes

depended." His most convenient friend most conveniently came up with the goods – a vessel on which the Baron could embark with eighty-five of his fellow-prisoners. They then set out on a lengthy sea-voyage which took them first down the coast towards China, then eastwards until he saw part of America, and then westwards again, towards Manila in the Philippine Islands, and finally, defeated by contrary winds, he arrived in Macao, "being five months on his passage from Kamschatka."

Barlow was also able to include in his report a later variant of this account, as supplied by Benyovszky "to a Gentleman in Canton." This second account was in fact an affidavit provided to the authorities in Macao; it stated that the Baron had sailed from Kamchatka on board the ship, with the intention of reaching the Mariana Islands. "A great tempest and very strong wind" drove them towards Japan, along which country they coasted until they reached Formosa and then crossed to China to reach Macao. The human cost of this voyage? "Went out with 85 men, came back with 62."

The factual basis of this voyage, the observant reader will note, was a little shaky from the very start. It was evident that Benyovszky was not telling the full story. There were perhaps many reasons for that – not the least of which was the danger of being extradited back to Russia as escaped prisoners, either by the Portuguese authorities in Macao, or the Chinese ones in neighbouring Canton. As the days went by, it became obvious that much of what went on in this lengthy voyage was not being divulged. What was the fate of the twenty-three members of the crew who never arrived? What was their actual route from Kamchatka? How on earth did such a large band of escaped prisoners cross four thousand miles of unforgiving land and sea, from Kazan to Kamchatka, without being apprehended? And, last but not least, what of the "five persons in womens apparel" – were they women or were they not?

Our man in Macao, Nathaniel Barlow, in a private letter that was published at a much later date,[2] offered a supplementary glimpse of Benyovszky's dealings there. Far from shedding further light on the route of the voyage, the Baron had become extremely secretive. He had been, he now said,

> as far north as 63 degrees; had with him Lord Anson's *Voyages*, translated into the Sclavonian language, which he repeatedly said was of greatest use to him, being guided in a great measure by them. In his apartment were several mathematical instruments, especially a quadrant, and a cross-staff. On requesting for a sight of his drafts [*of the log-books*], he with great reluctance produced one, but, unluckily, a gentleman in company telling him that one of us was a sea-captain, he immediately withdrew, and carried with him the draft, by which we lost the opportunity of knowing more particulars of this very extraordinary voyage. The vessel is fifty feet long, and sixteen broad, built entirely of fir.

This was indeed a very extraordinary voyage. The facts which later became evident were these: in May of 1771, just as the ice was beginning to recede from the shores

of Kamchatka, in the far east of Russia's Far East, around seventy exiles, sailors, clerks and trappers had overpowered the military garrison, stolen a small ship, the *St Peter*, and set off for a better life. Over the course of the following five months, with almost no navigational guidance at all, ship and crew sailed in what could best be described as The Sea of Uncertainty, before edging their way south-westwards across the rim of the North Pacific. They endured violent storms, they suffered from hunger and thirst and scurvy, and they despaired of ever knowing where they were. Coming across the coast of Japan more by accident than by design, they attempted to trade peacefully for the bare necessities of life with the residents of small coastal towns. Their coin of exchange was a large smelly cargo of Siberian furs which, with some foresight, they had earlier liberated from the storehouses of Kamchatka. Eventually they reached Formosa and then the coast of China and were guided into the busy port of Macao. After a delay of three months, the majority of those who had survived took passage on ships heading for Mauritius and France. And, in a surprise move, a handful of those who reached France chose to return to Siberia.

It was a very extraordinary man who led them. In September 1771, Maurice Benyovszky was only 25 years old. He was the recognised leader of a motley band of seventy or more desperate men and women, possibly also a dog. The leaky ship in which they sailed was a galliot, a flat-bottomed boat of about eighty tons and with scarcely room to swing a cat. It was more suited to coastal trading than criss-crossing the North Pacific. To have sailed for almost five months in such a vessel, with so many people on board, with a bare minimum of navigational instruments, and a book of adventurer's tales in lieu of a chart, under the command of a young man with no obvious experience of the high seas – and yet to have arrived more or less unscathed is very extraordinary.

Extraordinary, finally, is the fact that, within days of the ship's arrival in Macao, some fifteen of the passengers and crew died a sudden death. Of those adventurers who remained alive after the voyage, several wrote their own accounts of their journey from Kamchatka. But their voices went largely unheard in the decades which followed. Those scraps, documents and reports which have come down the years tell only a rather brief tale of adventure.

A fuller and much more enthralling story of the voyage did not become public until almost twenty years later. Baron Benyovszky's *Memoirs and Travels*, which were also said to be authentic, were published posthumously in London in 1790. It became an overnight best-seller in Britain, France, Germany and beyond.

This, too, was very extraordinary because much of what was described in this book was simply untrue.

Notes

1 *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1772, p.272 (punctuation as in original).
2 Benyovszky, 1790, p.xx–xxii.

II

CHRONICLERS

"Short and Incomplete, it is Written with a Bias"

A Meagre Inheritance – A Life of Adventure – Ippolit Stepanov's Misfortunes – Ivan Ryumin's Observations – Everyone Entitled to an Opinion

Before we join the extraordinary voyage of the *St Peter*, it is our duty to familiarise ourselves with the main players in the two extraordinary stories. For there are two intertwined stories here: the one of the escape from Kamchatka and subsequent adventures of the participants; the other of the outrageous confidence-trick played on the reading public of Europe and America by our Baron and his editor.

We shall delineate Benyovszky in more detail later. A short biography suffices here: he was a Hungarian, born in 1746; because of straitened circumstances in his family, the young Maurice found himself fighting as a mercenary in Poland during one of its many disputes with Imperial Russia, something he quite enjoyed; he found himself taken prisoner, something that was less enjoyable; least enjoyable of all, he was shipped off to Siberia in 1770 as a prisoner-of-war. However, he rose above this adversity and, on a stolen ship and in the company of a few dozen others, sailed down the Kuril Islands, made two landfalls in Japan before reaching Macao, from where he managed to find a way back to Europe. After he arrived in France in 1772, he persuaded the French government to fund an expedition to Madagascar, which, he promised, would result in a rich and vibrant colony for exploitation. According to Benyovszky, his three-year residence resulted in him being crowned King of Madagascar (the natives of that island might have begged to differ, had they been asked). In 1774, he returned to Europe and spent some years engaged in excellent money-making schemes in France and Croatia, but always with an eye to returning to Madagascar. The French were having nothing more to do with him; the British remained unmoved; finally he persuaded two starry-eyed Americans of Baltimore to fund a second expedition. His arrival on Madagascar in 1785 was inauspicious: he was believed to have been killed by the

native islanders almost as soon as his feet touched dry land; happily, he was not; less happily, he was killed a few months later by a troop of French soldiers sent from the neighbouring island of Mauritius. Murdered at the age of thirty-nine, he left behind in the fledgling United States a grieving widow and a child or two.

His *Memoirs*, which he had been touting around the publishers of Paris and London in the early 1780s, were finally published in 1790, four years after the author's death. While critics were sceptical of the veracity of the adventures laid before them, the reading public was far more appreciative, and several years of Benyovszky-mania followed. Translations of his *Memoirs*, extracts thereof, plays and operas all followed thick and fast; but the widow and her mites got not a penny in royalties.

So much for Benyovszky. We shall return to him in good time.

Amongst those who fled from Kamchatka were two others who kept a log of what they saw and did. The first was Ippolit Stepanov, a Russian army officer who had the misfortune – some would describe it as ill-judgement – to express his views about Catherine the Great at precisely the wrong moment: he found himself exiled to Kamchatka at the same time as Benyovszky. For a while, it is clear, Benyovszky and Stepanov were bosom-buddies, brothers in misfortune. It is probable that Stepanov played a leading role in the great escape from exile. Alas, by the time the ship had reached Macao, neither man trusted the other, and a bitter falling-out took place, very much to Stepanov's disadvantage: when all the surviving voyagers left Macao for Mauritius and France, Stepanov alone was left behind to fend for himself. He tried his luck by boarding a Dutch ship to Indonesia, but expired there in poverty. Before dying, he wrote down his own account of the escape; almost certainly, he expressed here an evaluation of Benyovszky which would have been less than complimentary. After dying, his account was acquired by a Dutchman, translated from Russian into Dutch, from Dutch into French and from French into German, and then was edited such that all trace of his original voice has been lost. All we have left is a short extract offered at third hand. But even these slops of an account contain some tasty chunks of information.

It should be observed here that Benyovszky in his account of events had nothing good to say of Stepanov; the best he could say of him was that Stepanov was "an unhappy man, who was rushing hastily to his destruction". So those who favoured the Benyovszkian world-outlook were also dead-set against anything Stepanov could come up with. It is a little unfortunate that Stepanov's account reaches us today through the editorial medium of one of Benyovszky's greatest admirers: Stepanov's account, we are assured, "is short and incomplete, it is written with a bias"; which is precisely why we will examine it closely.

Also on board the *St Peter* was a clerk from the chancellery in Kamchatka, Ivan Ryumin. Ryumin was always off Benyovszky's radar, and makes almost no appearance at all in the *Memoirs*; for later generations, this invisibility was providential. Ryumin kept his own journal of events, and Benyovszky knew

nothing of it. It is raw and rough, it bursts with enthusiasm and vitality. He is daily captivated by flying fish, by fruits of every conceivable shape and colour, by the mysterious Japanese people, by wild beasts and enormous cannon. Where Benyovszky's style is flowery and decidedly pompous and self-aggrandising, Ryumin has no style at all: he rushes in, he counts and describes and he rushes onwards. Sadly, his journal did not see the light of day until 1822, and even now it is not readily accessible to anyone who might be interested. But his account of the voyage and its aftermath acts as a healthy counterpoint to Benyovszky's tales. Ryumin was hounded by good luck – with his wife in tow, he managed to survive the voyage, survive the heat and misery of Macao, survive the voyage back to France and survive an utterly dispiriting eight-month quarantine in a French port, before returning in 1773 under Imperial dispensation to Siberia, where he and his wife settled down to a very quiet life in Tobolsk.

The events of 1770–1772 did not go unnoticed by other travellers, either: we have corroborative evidence from Japanese officials; also from members of Captain James Cook's third voyage; and anyone who stepped ashore on Kamchatka in the 50 years that followed the Great Escape was sure to be button-holed by some tottering ancient who had much to say about 'the celebrated Benyovszky' – nothing so exciting had happened for years in that far outpost of the Russian Empire. If you happened to be French (in Kamchatka, by a twist of logic, Benyovszky was later regarded as French), then you were looked upon with considerable misgiving.

In the matter of Benyovszky's further adventures on Madagascar, we possess plenty of contemporary accounts of his actions – largely from Frenchmen of reputation and learning such as the polymath Abbé Rochon, the explorer Kerguelen and a swift succession of governors and administrators on the neighbouring island of Mauritius. All of whom could wield a critical pen dripping with Gallic scorn. "I do not draw back from telling you," wrote one of Benyovszky, "that, not only will this officer do nothing useful for the service, but that he will do it at the cost of many men and the King's gold. He has set no limits on his ambitions except those of his desires – and his desires have no limits."[1]

Everyone was entitled to their opinion. But it is our duty to examine Benyovszky's adequately intriguing life and his ignominious death by delving into all of these sources. Then we may sidle up to the truth and tap it on the shoulder.

But first: garlic.

Note

1 Cultru, 1906, p.64.

III

POLAND AND SIBERIA

"Iron and Garlick"

A Hungarian Baron in Poland – Laxity Amongst Russian Guards – Betrayal and Exile – Interesting Travelling Companions – The Number of Furs in Okhotsk – More Furs – A Dangerous Crossing – Nasty and Stupid Natives

An interested observer to the events in Macao was Simon Le Bon, the French 'Bishop of Mettelopolis' – a diocese which stretched from Turkey to Siam, challenging for even the best-travelled of bishops. On 23rd September 1771, the Bishop was introduced to

> the Hungarian Baron Maurice Auguste Aladar Benyofsky, Counsellor to Prince Albert, Duke of Saxony, Colonel (in the service) of her Apostolic Royal Imperial Majesty, the Queen of Hungary, and officer of a regiment of the confederation of the republic of Poland.

This Hungarian Baron was not a colonel. But his father had been one. Neither was he connected with the Duke of Saxony in any way. He was not a baron, except by virtue of his father's marriage to the daughter of a baron. In this period of his life, he also liked to be known as Count Benyovszky. He was not a count. At least, not at that time; he only became one in 1778 by order of the Empress Maria Theresa of Bohemia and Hungary. But his list of titles is not entirely misleading: he had probably been an officer of a regiment.

Maurice Benyovszky was born on 20th September 1746, the son of Samuel Benyovszky, a colonel of hussars who resided in the small country town of Vrbové, about 45 miles north-east of Bratislava. Samuel had married the daughter of a minor Hungarian baron, herself a widow with three daughters, all of whom subsequently married.[1] Maurice had three younger siblings – two brothers and a sister. His parents both died in 1760; resultant disputes with his brothers-in-law

concerning the inheritance of the property escalated after a number of years into hot-headed actions by the young Maurice. He was brought before a judge in 1768 and handed a two-month jail-sentence for various imprudent acts; for reasons ill-defined but doubtless perfectly reasonable, upon his release the young man felt obliged to flee the country. Shortly before these troubles, he had married a lady named Anna Hönsch from the Szepes region of Upper Hungary, who bore him a son in December 1768; Benyovszky later claimed that Anna was of noble extraction; it appears she was not. Both wife and child were left behind in Hungary when he took himself off to Poland as a mercenary.

For a few months in 1768 and 1769, Benyovszky at the age of twenty-two fought with the aristocracy of Poland against the Russians. The huge Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a splendidly colourful and disorganised aristocratic republic, which for some time had been in the decadent habit of electing its own 'King'. When the royal incumbent died in 1764, Catherine II of Russia managed to get her ex-lover Poniatowski installed as the new King Stanislaw II. Understandably, a fair number of the Polish nobility were not best pleased at this development, and, when Russia began to dictate domestic policy (including the granting of political rights for Protestant and Orthodox dissenters), the Poles clubbed together in 1768 in the 'Confederation of Bar' to organise an armed revolt.

After a distracted start, during which the rebels of the Confederation gained some military successes, Empress Catherine formally declared war on the Confederation in December 1768, and the Imperial Russian army moved into gear, slowly but surely regaining all lost towns and territory. The army of the Confederation was jam-packed with adventurers from all over Europe – Sweden, Hungary, France, Italy; young Maurice was only one amongst many. Just what his role was in the army of the Confederation is quite unknown; other than his own testimony, there is little contemporary confirmation. None of the official or unofficial histories mention the young Hungarian adventurer. He seems to have been captured near Ternopil in the Ukraine in May 1769 and hauled off to the town of Polonne, where he festered in a dungeon for several weeks, in the close company of around eighty other prisoners-of-war. In July, a large batch of prisoners was marched off to the city of Kiev. According to Benyovszky's account, 782 prisoners left Polonne, but only 148 arrived in Kiev, the majority having died under the cruel treatment of the commander of their guard. For the next two months, the prisoners were held in Kiev, before being sent a thousand miles further east to the city of Kazan – then, as now, a gateway to Siberia. During this period of captivity, Benyovszky became intimate friends with a Swede, like himself a mercenary fighting for the Confederation: Major August Winbladh, who remained Benyovszky's constant companion for the following three years.

Reader, be always circumspect! There is no independent verification of these events as they affected Benyovszky. There was plenty of scope for the Baron to invent episodes and characters, as we shall see. There is plenty of scope for us to

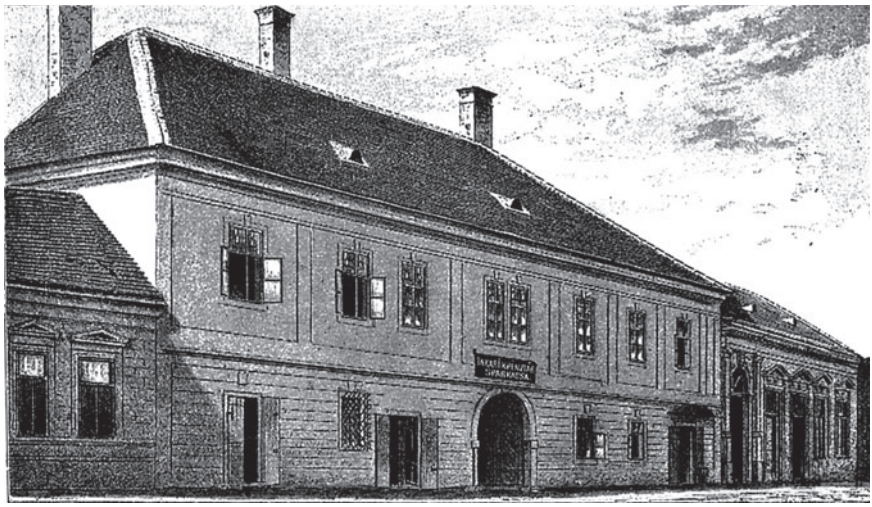

FIGURE 3.1 Benyovszky's parental home in Vrbové – functioning as a savings bank in 1891.

FIGURE 3.2 Benyovszky's parental home in Vrbové, as it is now – a museum and café.

disbelieve some of the detail. However, we should allow that the general flavour of events here is reflective of the truth.

A French mercenary, François de Belcour, had very similar adventures to those related by Benyovszky and he also passed through Polonne, Kiev and Kazan just a few months later, as part of another large group of prisoners-of-war.[2] He wrote an

account of his adventures, which appeared in 1776. Benyovszky would almost certainly have read this book in Paris. Belcour proudly documented all the demands he placed on his Polish employers in respect of pay, number of horses "and all those things which are necessary to equip an officer of my rank for war". When all the *i*'s of his contract were dotted and all *t*'s crossed to his entire satisfaction, he arrived in Poland at the end of July 1769. Less than four months later, having done little but negotiate further terms and conditions from the Confederation, he became a prisoner-of-war. Just like Benyovszky, Belcour recounts appalling tales of brutality by the Russian officers – after his capture, ninety-seven of his comrades died on the journey from Prague to Kiev, and a further sixty-four died in Kiev; the survivors were then moved to Kazan – ten more died en route – and ultimately to Tobolsk, where they arrived in November 1770 and remained for several months until the Empress Catherine offered them release, dependent on signing abject confessions. With no honour or patriotism to engender second thoughts, they all signed immediately, and were then permitted to travel westwards under the close eye of Russian guards, before being shoved over the nearest convenient border out of harm's way.

In Benyovszky's account, further events during his captivity unfolded in rather an exciting and melodramatic manner; it seems ungenerous not to relate them here. In Kiev, the prisoners conspired to organise an escape, a plan based on the rather delusional supposition that the entire nobility of that part of Russia was about to take up arms against the Imperial power. Fortunately, an easier opportunity arose as a result of mistaken identity. Hearing a rumour that Benyovszky and other prisoners were about to make a bid for freedom, the Governor of Kiev sent a detachment of soldiers to Benyovszky's rooms to secure him; the Hungarian himself answered the door in his nightshirt. Supposing Benyovszky to be his own bleary-eyed man-servant, the soldiers rushed past him to make their arrest, leaving the door wide open. Benyovszky immediately repaired to the quarters of Major Winbladh. The pair hot-footed it out of Kazan, heading for St Petersburg, with a view to "passing by sea into another country."

All went well. They reached St Petersburg on post horses, travelling by night to discourage identification and arrest. In the port, they came to an arrangement with a Dutch sea-captain to take passage for Holland. Liberty was in sight. Alas! The pair were betrayed to the authorities by this same perfidious sea-captain. They were arrested and interrogated. Confessions were signed by the escapees, stating that neither would ever again bear arms against Russia and undertaking never to darken the doors of the Empire again, "under pain of death." Despite this commitment, which held out the promise of a slapped wrist and extradition, on 4th December 1769 the pair were promptly packed off to Siberia, under guard of an officer and seven soldiers. Passing through Moscow, they reached the town of Volodimir. Here they were joined by another sorry group of prisoners, who were under the guard of forty-six soldiers. Benyovszky names these fellow-prisoners: Vasilii Panov, Lieutenant of the Guards; Ippolit Stepanov, Captain of Infantry; Asaf Baturin, Colonel of Artillery; and Ivan Sofronov (or Solmonov), Secretary of the Senate of

Moscow. Like Winbladh, all four were Benyovszky's constant companions in the following months of exile. At Nizhney Novgorod, their guard was temporarily supplemented by no fewer than 150 horsemen, who gave them safe-passage as far as the town of Vyatka (present-day Kirov) before leaving them to make their way to Tobolsk, some distance towards Kamchatka, their ultimate destination.

This co-mingling of prisoners-of-war and standard Russian exiles should not surprise us. There was a constant and endless stream of exiles heading into Siberia from the cities of the Russian Empire. Given the travelling conditions of the time – appalling roads, barely-navigable rivers, independently-minded natives – there were good reasons not to have to organise separate transports for foreigners.

Benyovszky's group arrived at Tobolsk on 20th January 1770, where they rested for two weeks. Thence to Tomsk, arriving in April, then ever eastwards, scheming and plotting all the way, but unable to take advantage of any further opportunities for escape. Realising at length that it would be easier to escape eastwards from Kamchatka, than westwards from whichever bleak spot in which they might be stuck at the time, the prisoners made the best of their situation and travelled another 1,500 miles by horse, foot and dog-sledge, arriving in the port of Okhotsk in August (Benyovszky insists it was the 16th October, but we have good reason to doubt that). They had been travelling for a good eight months. Surprisingly, they arrived more or less intact.

It is a curious fact that many of the inhabitants of Siberia at that time were exiles of one degree or another. It was clearly not a place to which anyone went gracefully. It was also not a place anyone could leave with ease. A significant proportion of the exiles were foreigners – Germans, Swedes, Poles, French. Those who were not foreign were not at all happy. Those who were neither foreign nor exiles were usually the unhappiest of all. Many of the Cossacks under the command of the Governor of Okhotsk were perpetually on the verge of mutiny. However, despite the grim conditions, and weather always permitting, Okhotsk was flourishing. It was a trading-post at the very edge of the Empire, a rather dismal collection of wooden houses and warehouses, but vast quantities of furs were collected here from outlying areas – via Kamchatka – for forward export to European Russia or China. There are official figures of 310,000 animal skins being imported through Okhotsk in any given year. The Russian Far East was still for pioneers; the Russians had only gained a toehold on Kamchatka itself in 1700, with a proper colony established as late as 1740. A fine place, therefore, to which to send troublesome exiles: keep them out of the way and build up a lucrative fur-trade at the same time.

On 12th September 1770 our prisoners embarked on the supply-ship *St Peter and St Paul* (Benyovszky preferred to name the ship with both its saints rather than one, but since all other accounts kept simply to *St Peter,* we shall do the same hereinafter). En route, according to Benyovszky, the captain and crew got themselves drunk, became incapable or were otherwise inattentive. Benyovszky sensibly took command of the vessel and tried to bring it to the "coast of Korea"

– geographical knowledge was understandably vague; the island of Sakhalin, then under Japanese control, was the actual destination of choice. Winds and storms prevented them from landing here, and, in a final attempt to persuade the crew (now sober, capable and fully focussed again), to land on Sakhalin, he used an interesting stratagem. But "it was in vain that I made use of iron and garlick to falsify the compass."[3] The proverbial influence of garlic upon compasses had been disproved almost two centuries earlier,[4] but Benyovszky was clearly a desperate man. And alliaceous vegetables were all he had to hand.

The ship survived both storms and garlic. The prisoners were disembarked at the tip of Kamchatka, after a voyage of 800 miles, which had lasted twelve days. For a crossing of the Sea of Okhotsk this was really fast. The great "pedestrian traveller" John Dundas Cochrane made the same trip in 1821–1822 – the outward voyage took fourteen days, while the return took almost five weeks. Members of Captain Cook's expedition, who visited Kamchatka for three weeks in 1779, witnessed the arrival of the boat from Okhotsk, which had been thirty-five days in passage, of which a full fortnight was spent in sight of the coast, trying to enter a sheltered bay while passengers and crew rapidly ran out of fresh water.[5]

Kamchatka, wild frontier of the Russian Empire, was a land of active volcanoes, forests, fish, fog and lots of animals with fur. It is no different today – perhaps the number of furry animals is smaller. The peninsula is 800 miles in length and covers an area of around 100,000 square miles. There were a few tiny settlements scattered up and down its coastline. At this time, the principal administrative settlement was at Bolsheretsk, lying on the Bolshaya River 20 miles inland from the coast at the south-western tip of the peninsula; it contained thirty small buildings of various sorts, with a population of between 90 and 600 (depending on whom you believe), garrisoned by around forty-five to fifty soldiers. The civilian population of this pocket fortress comprised sailors, hunters, civil servants, boat-builders, priests, merchants and exiles. A very detailed official report of 1773 put the number of buildings at around fifty, with a garrison of 117, excluding officers. That the number of soldiers had increased was almost certainly due to the mass-escape led by Benyovszky in 1771.

In addition to the main settlement at Bolsheretsk, there were four smaller settlements on Kamchatka – one at Tigil Fort (Tigilskaya Krepost), further up the west coast; at the same latitude but on the east coast were Upper (Verkhne) Kamchatka and Lower (Nizhney) Kamchatka, and on a level with Bolsheretsk, and to the east, was the then tiny village of Petropavlovsk (now the capital of the peninsula). Together with a number of 'taxable' persons on the Kuril Islands, there were perhaps 400 individuals of interest to the government. "They send tribute annually of 279 sable, 464 red foxes, 50 Kamchatkan sea-otters, 1 female sea-otter, 38 young sea-otters; all of which yields 1530 roubles," explained an official report, with praiseworthy precision, in 1773.[6]

The total population of Kamchatka was around 4,000 at that time. A Russian geographer who stayed on Kamchatka in the 1730s, despite being moved to

describe the natives as "nasty and stupid," documented their lives and works in tremendous detail. It was evident from his report that there was little commonality between natives and Russians, either in terms of religion, culture, social organisation or physical appearance. Trade was the only unifying factor. The clash of cultures bears uncanny resemblance to that between Native American peoples and Europeans in nineteenth-century America. The arrival of smallpox in 1768, brought from the mainland by soldiers and spreading like wildfire in native villages with little or no immunity, seems to have decimated the population – over the wider area of the Koriak lands to the north, Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands to the south, the death-toll was calculated at 20,000. In Kamchatka itself, official figures suggest that 5,767 natives and 315 Russians died (another contemporary account indicated 5,368 deaths in total, of whom 1,706 – crucially – were taxable). As a result of the epidemic, trading almost ceased and food supplies ran very low. Those who had been spared the smallpox began to succumb to starvation and despair. Many smaller settlements were ultimately abandoned in the face of depopulation. Captain Cook's expedition reported that

> no less than eight *ostrogs* [*were*] scattered about the bay of Awatska, all which […] had been fully inhabited, but are now entirely desolate […] At Paratounca *ostrog* there were but thirty-six native inhabitants, men, women, and children, which, before it was visited by the small-pox, we were told, contained three hundred and sixty.[7]

John Cochrane, who visited the peninsula some fifty years later, put the native Kamchadale population at 2,760 (plus, with a meticulousness over and above the call of duty, 2,808 dogs) and the Russian population at 1,200; he supposed – not without cause – that the native population had been, and still was, declining rapidly under assault from the triple evils of disease, alcohol and "the spirit of persecution."[8]

Animal life on Kamchatka largely comprised bears, other handsome furry creatures, salmon, lemmings and cows. An official report of 1773 advised that

> there are 587 cattle on the whole of Kamchatka. A cow costs [...] 25 to 50 roubles, a large ox 60 to 100, a pood [*ca. 36 pounds*] of fresh meat 4 to 6 roubles. These cattle eat tree-bark, the twigs of birch, aspen and willow, and will also happily eat fresh fish. Often they run to the river, place themselves in shallow water and catch exhausted fish from the raging torrent, without even bothering with the excellent meadow-grass on the bank.[9]

Fresh meat sold in Kamchatka at four times the price than was usual in St Petersburg or Moscow. Then, as now, the rivers of Kamchatka abounded in salmon, and it would have been more than possible for lumbering cattle to snap up fish as they ascended to their spawning grounds. All they had to do was avoid the bears. Other wildlife caused sporadic problems:

> the whole of Kamchatka was plagued by mice in 1772. There were so many that some meadows were stripped bare of grass [...] In some places they stripped the trees of their bark and attacked the provisions [...] In Lower Kamchatka they caused a great deal of damage in the merchants' store-rooms.

"But," continues the 1773 report complacently, "this year there is no such plague."[10] Commerce was centred on the fur-trade in the Aleutian and Kuril Islands. Anything furnished with fur, tusks or blubber – ideally all three – was hunted down and killed, and the component parts shipped back to Russia. Many furs were transported laboriously to Khiakta on the Siberian-Chinese border, and there traded profitably with the Chinese: sale prices here were commonly twice those in Kamchatka. The native peoples of Kamchatka and of the outlying Kuril and Aleutian Islands contributed their share to the vast industry of slaughter, in exchange for tobacco, flour, trinkets and spirits. Captain Cook, in 1778, met some furriers who had come out from Okhotsk to the Aleutian Islands in 1776, and were not due to return home with their harvest until 1781; this was a serious and long-term business. Once a year, a ship would arrive in Kamchatka from Okhotsk in the autumn, over-winter near Bolsheretsk, and depart the following summer laden with furs. Frequently, other ships would take furs from the other Kamchatkan settlements.

The 1773 memorandum cited above makes especial note of the contribution to this economy of the merchant Ivan Popov: his ship

> returned from the American shores to Lower Kamchatka on 2 July 1772. Its main cargo was beaver and black foxes, and was divided into 55 shares. After the tax was paid, each share amounted to 18 beaver, 18 black foxes, 24 foxes with black bellies, 8 red foxes and 3 beaver-tails. A share could be sold on the spot for between 800 and 1000 roubles; the entire value of the cargo was probably around 55,000 roubles, but would probably fetch far more.[11]

If you consider that your best cow might be worth 50 roubles, and that this was only one ship out of several, the scale of the enterprise can be understood. The tax which Popov paid on this occasion was surrendered in furs to the value of 1,354 roubles and 48 kopeks.

But in 1770 all was not well in the fur-trade. There was a heavy cloud of discontent and open rebellion hanging over Kamchatka: one immediate side-effect of the catastrophic smallpox epidemic was a huge slump in the fur-trade, which in turn led to unemployment and dissatisfaction amongst the sailors and trappers of Kamchatka. Even amongst those who could still pursue their professions, morale was not high. One of the resident merchants of Bolsheretsk had sent out a small trading ship with a couple of dozen hunters aboard to harvest beaver on the Aleutian Islands in August of that year. But when the ship ran into trouble, barely having left the shore, the hunters and crew – although quite habituated to setbacks and hardship – simply refused to contemplate another attempt. The trip had to be abandoned.