M.V. Lomonosov’s Private Destiny

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Over five thousand publications examine the life and work of Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov; abstracts, articles, dissertations and books. However, as my analysis indicates the question about his family, his mother and wife’s influence on his personality and activity as the first Russian academic is not investigated in sufficient detail. In my opinion, in this influence we can distinguish the traditions of Pomor folk pedagogy, on the one hand, and the traditions of German folk pedagogy, on the other.

What do I mean? Lomonosov lived nineteen years in the Archangelsk North, where he absorbed the Pomors’ attitude towards the family, the woman, the mother. Studying five years in Germany, he also had an opportunity to evaluate the folk upbringing of German girls as future mothers and wives. Afterwards, his point of view on women’s upbringing found its reflection in his own family, in the practice of communication with his daughter Elena.

Mikhailo Lomonosov became a bright and typical representative of a Russian sub-ethnos that lived in Pomorye and was historically a mediator between the West and the centre of Russia.

One can find the Lomonosovs’ family name in documents dated from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Mikhail Vasilyevich’s great-grandfather Leontiy and his sons Luka and Dorofey were peasants. Luka moved forward among his town’s people, and at the beginning of the eighteenth century he was elected to be a district headman but he did not leave his cattle-farm. Mikhail Vasilyevich’s father, Vasilii Dorofeyevich, also proved himself as an active person. In the village of Denisovka he had a house with a yard, a pond and a well. In the pond fish were bred. At that time it was the only example of an artificial fish farm in the North. Vasilii Dorofeyevich was characterized as an energetic, observant and progressive person. According to his contemporaries’ memories he was simple-conscientious, well-manned towards his neighbours, kind and religious.

Vasilii Lomonosov was an extraordinary person. His gifted son inherited many of his features. Here both the genetic data and elder Lomonosov’s personal example were of great importance. The fact that Mikhail Lomonosov did not have to experience poverty— that was typical for the majority of Russian peasants – influenced the formation of the future academic’s personality.

By his character Lomonosov’s father was a typical Pomor: persistent, hard-working, brave, enterprising, fair, helpful and hospitable. He thought that a man ought to provide his home with prosperity, food and warmth. That is why Vasilii Dorofeyevich

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1 A patronymic/father’s name
2 Pomors/Pomory are people that have been living for centuries on the White Sea coasts
was simultaneously engaged in peasant labour, fishing, hunting and cargo transportation. His home where he could get warm, take a rest and make tools or crafts for further work, as well as his wife, a woman with good housekeeping skills, were of great importance. Vasily Dorofeyevich married three times. His first wife – Elena Ivanovna Sivkova – gave birth to his only son Mishen’ka\(^3\). Very scant information is available about M.V.Lomonosov’s mother. Elena Ivanovna was Deacon Ivan Sivkov’s daughter. M.V. Lomonosov’s biographers consider that in 1709 or 1710 she married Vasily Lomonosov who was 27-28 years old. She was brought up in the folk Pomor traditions the main focus of which was instilling the ethic of enjoying hard work in children. So when a girl was born, she received a small spinning-wheel as a present, then – a bigger one. By the age of ten she was given a task from the elders to spin some wool and to weave some matting floor-coverings. Girls learned to respect others’ labour and appreciate beautifully made work. The labour principle runs through the whole upbringing and is realized in a person’s moral characteristics.

Elena Ivanovna Sivkova experiences support the Pomors’ opinion about the great value of the family was right. The family was considered to be the basis of life, being a production and upbringing collective. Mutual respect in the family helped to keep good relations with close and distant relatives. Kind actions towards them, a desire to help them and an ability to forgive were encouraged. The head of the family was a father, an elder. He had a great power. Order and silence were kept in his presence. Respectful relations between a father and a mother formed a special atmosphere of the family. The husband knew that he had a home thanks to his wife and that without the wife his home was empty. The public opinion censured a man that had no family: “without a family a man has not life but only spoiling”.

In the Pomor family there was a type of double leadership: in a family there were two heads – a father and a mother. The family was not only a bearer of spiritual values but also their transmitter to new generations. The community’s stability and future depended on the stability of the family.

Elena Ivanovna was a woman with good house-keeping skills and a good wife. In 1711 she gave birth to her son Mikhail, the parents’ dearly loved child. Being left by her husband during his long and dangerous journeys in the White Sea, Elena Ivanovna gave all her love to her little son. Under the loving mother’s care the child grew healthy, bright and thoughtful. Mikhail was deeply attached to his mother. The mother gave him all her warmth and care as if she felt that she would die soon. Mikhail’s carefree childhood ended in 1720 when Elena Ivanovna died. Mikhail Lomonosov kept his childhood memories about his mother deep inside. Most likely, the search for his future wife was based on his mother’s image.

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\(^3\) A pet name from Mikhail
His mother’s death was a strong blow to Mikhail. The appearance of a stepmother made his home strange and cold. Quite often he came to his mother’s grave asking for her support. Going to Moscow with a string of sledges in December 1730, Lomonosov said good bye to the dear grave as if he felt he did it for the last time. In the first Russian academic’s remained letters and works there is no word about his mother. It is understandable and explainable: he wrote about other issues – scientific, public – and the academician’s private life was kept inside him. It is a pity that Lomonosov left neither autobiography nor memoirs that would have helped to restore his childhood, youth and other life periods. But his mother’s image followed him all his life. It is not by chance that he gave the dear name Elena to his daughter born in 1749.

Many years passed after his mother’s death. Mikhail Lomonosov tried to understand the world that surrounded him as much and as deeply as possible. To do this he went to Germany, to Marburg and Freiberg. At that time Marburg was the biggest university city in Europe. Here Lomonosov spent four years living in Germany. In Marburg Lomonosov’s talent and uniqueness were noticed by his favourite teacher, the most famous philosopher-enlightener of Europe, a gifted physicist Christian Wolff. Here Lomonosov met his future wife Elizabeth Zilch who, by the way, was born on June 22, 1720, the year of Lomonosov’s mother’s death. Elizabeth Zilch was a daughter of the owner of the house in which he lived in Marburg. Her father Genrich Zilch was a brewer and was considered to be a person of medium income. By the time of Lomonosov’s arrival he had passed away. Elizabeth’s mother Elizabeth-Christine Zilch tried to maintain the life of her children – son Johann and daughter Elizabeth. Lomonosov spent the majority of his scholarship on books and payment to Frau Zilch for food and flat.

In one of his works Lomonosov wrote that he “was trying to escape love”. Being of a marriageable age, Mikhailo suddenly opened his eyes to the modest and nice daughter of his hostess. Having seen what she is made of, he felt the warmth that he earlier felt from his mother. He saw that Elizabeth Zilch was brought up in kind family traditions. The wisdom of the German folk upbringing was in cherishing a person’s moral features. The basis of morality was formed in a child from his/her childhood in his/her family. The German considered the family to be the basis of the state that, in its turn, controlled the family: the registration of a marriage was an obligatory condition of the functioning of a family.

They had known each other for about two years when in 1738 a declaration of love happened between them. Lomonosov understood well the responsibility he took choosing a German girl to be his wife. There were two problems: Lomonosov did not have enough money to maintain his family, and his future wife belonged to a different faith. Mikhailo Vasilyevich considered that the material state for supporting the family would be better facilitated in Russia. In February 1739 they got married without a church ceremony. On November 19, 1739 their daughter Catharina-Elizabeth was born. On May 26, 1740 Lomonosov got married in a reformation church in Marburg. He planned to return to
Russia and begin his scientific work there. He could not take Elizabeth Zilch to an empty space. They agreed he would send for her from Russia and provide the money for her transportation.

On June 8, 1741 Lomonosov arrived to St.Petersburg. Unfortunately, not everything in his life went as he planned. On January 8, 1742 he became an adjunct (an assistant of a professor) at the Academy of Science but received a very poor salary. After some quarrels with the staff of the Academy he was arrested and stayed at home till the end of January 1744.

On January 1, 1742 Elizabeth gave birth to their second child, Johannes. The boy lived only a month.

Lomonosov managed to send one hundred rubles to his wife, and at the beginning of 1743 Elizabeth Zilch with her brother and her four-year daughter came to St.Petersburg. Unfortunately, the same year Catharina-Elizabeth died.

Lomonosov’s biographers conclude they married in an orthodox church. After their marriage Elizabeth Zilch received a Russian name Elizaveta Andreevna Lomonosova.

Elizaveta was intuitive to her husband’s mood, protected him from everyday problems, and created a real cozy harmonious home where everyone felt good. On February 2, 1749 she gave birth to their third child, daughter Elena.

On September 9, 1757 the family moved to their own house. Lomonosov’s followers, for example, Alexei Protasov⁴ and Ivan Barkov⁵, often visited him. Frequently the scientist had guests such as Count Ivan Ivanivich Shuvalov. It was an astonishing alliance of two highly educated people. Shuvalov was thirteen years older than Lomonosov but had a European education and understood well that the scientist’s destiny was aimed at the glory of Russia. That is why he supported Lomonosov’s idea about establishing the first Russian university, Moscow University, with development of education and science.

On June 7, 1764 the Lomonosovs were visited by Empress Ekaterina. She saw the scientist’s mosaic works dedicated to Peter the Great, physical instruments invented by Lomonosov, watched some physical and chemical experiments and had dinner with the scientist’s family. Afterwards the Empress invited the Lomonosovs to have dinner at her place.

From February 1762 Lomonosov felt ill. On July 25, 1762 the copyist whose duty was to bring registers to the scientist was not allowed to see Lomonosov “because of

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⁴ The first Russian academician-anatomist
⁵ A Russian poet and translator
serious illness Mister Adviser could not go to the Register Office and sign documents at home”.

At this difficult period the Lomonosov’s family became more united. The daughter helped her mother in taking care of her father. Having visited their house, one Italian professor said that he had never seen a happier family. Currently there is little available documented information about Lomonosov’s wife and daughter, Elena. It is known that Elena was highly-educated, could speak several languages, excelled in literature and music. Her parents took care in her upbringing. Elena’s father and mother gave their blessing on her marriage to the Chief Librarian of the Emperor Library, Alexei Konstantinov, a month before Lomonosov’s death.

From March 4, 1765 the scientist stopped visiting the Academy of Science. At the beginning of April he wrote a letter to the Senate in which he said that after his death the mosaic work that he had started should be continued by his brother-in-law Zilch and the mosaic skilled craftsman Vasilyev.

On April 4, 1765 at five o’clock in the evening, having said good bye to his wife, daughter and other friends, the first Russian academic died. On April 8 he was buried at the Lazarevskoe cemetery of Alexander-Nevski Lavra. Many people came to say good bye to him.

Living nearly thirty years with Lomonosov, Elizaveta Andreevna felt that she was protected and quite well-to-do. After her husband’s death she experienced serious problems with money and was solely responsible for solving all the problems concerning house-keeping.

In the Russian North there is a good word – bereginya. It means “a woman that guards a family hearth”. Elizaveta Andreevna exemplifies this type of woman. She and her husband were a happy couple. Following Pomor traditions, Mikhail Vasilyevich never showed openly his feelings towards Elizaveta Andreevna but the leitmotif of his attitude towards her during all his life were the words: “I shall never leave you…”

The article was translated by V.K. Kharina, English lecturer, Northern (Arctic) Federal University.

6 Monastery of the highest rank