MEMORIES OF CHEKHOV: From His Family and Friends by Peter Sekirin

FOREWORD by Alan Twigg, Vancouver, Canada

One can argue Anton Chekhov is the second-most popular writer on the planet. Only Shakespeare, in 2011, outranks Chekhov in terms of the number of movie adaptations of their work, according to the well-respected "international movie data base" IMBD. The rankings are: William Shakespeare (836 titles); Anton Chekhov (324 titles); Alexandre Dumas père (245 titles); Edgar Allan Poe (243 titles).

This will be news to most North Americans.

We generally know less about Chekhov than we do about the mysterious Shakespeare, even though Chekhov died, at age 44, in 1904.

All the more reason to welcome Memories of Chekhov—a ground-breaking work for several reasons:

Here is a “documentary biography” that provides intimate knowledge of Chekhov from more than 100 people. Extant biographies have not emphasized much of this first-hand evidence.

Nearly all of the material in Memories of Chekhov appears in English translation for the first time.

And here, as well, for the first time, we are introduced to Chekhov the playwright and short story master combined with Chekhov the lover. Until now, the English-speaking world has had no idea about the richness of Chekhov’s personal life.
Chekhov asked himself this question. “For whom do I write?” he wrote to Suvorin in December of 1888. “For the public? But I have never seen the public. For the money? Is it the money that I want? But I have never seen the big money, and therefore, I am quite indifferent to it.”

Equally unanswerable, why do we like Chekhov? Richard Ford has pondered the mystery of Chekhov’s appeal in his foreword to The Essential Tales of Chekhov (Ecco Press 1998). “There is, of course, no typical Chekhov story a fact that by itself should please us, and makes the pseudo-critical shorthand of ‘Chekhovian’ essentially pointless.”

Ford and Sekirin have both identified “The Lady with the Dog” as their favourite or quintessential Chekhov story. Letters have revealed it’s an autobiographical work, the story of a dalliance that turned into an affair that turned into an obsession. Why did this happen? Chekhov apparently doesn’t know either. And he didn’t attempt to explain, apologize or supply an ending. Instead he records:

“Anna Sergeyevna and he loved each other,” he writes in the story, “like people very close and akin, like husband and wife, like tender friends; it seemed to them that fate itself had meant them for one another, and they could not understand why he had a wife and she a husband; and it was as though they were a pair of birds of passage, caught and forced to live in different cages.”

The prototype for Anna was Elena Shatrova. She was 15 and Chekhov was 29 when they met for the first time. She brought him the manuscript of her first short story, and instantly fell in love with him. By the age of 20, she understood that she had no chances, after approaching him many times, and got married, without thinking much about her choice, to a civil servant, Mr. Youst. In 1897, when Chekhov was 37 (and she was 23), they met in Moscow briefly, and instantly eloped to Yalta. Around 1898-99, when “Lady with the Dog” was published, they parted—never to meet again.

Eventually Chekhov met his future wife, Olga Knipper. Chekhov wrote 68 letters to Elena/Anna, more letters than to any other woman (except for his wife). Meanwhile three other women—Ms. Podgorodnikova, Ms Vasilieva, and Ms Tsingovatova (or their friends)—stated they were the female prototypes for the story. Evidently here was no shortage of women who wished to be associated with Anton Chekhov.

Original, in English, in terms of both its genre and contents, Memories of Chekhov is the first biography of Anton Chekhov, one of the world’s greatest storytellers, to be based on verbatim text culled from the letters, diaries, essays and memoirs of Chekhov’s friends and contemporaries.

Famous Russians such as writers Ivan Bunin and Maxim Gorky, theatre director Konstantin Stanislavsky, composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky and the poet Tatiana Kupernik have left vast and reliable accounts of Chekhov, but the majority of Sekirin’s research materials were retrieved, one at a time, for obscure sources. Over a ten-year period,
Sekirin uncovered numerous now-extinct periodicals and newspapers, with tiny circulations, from Siberia and Ukraine.

Approximately two-thirds of the material in Sekirin’s *Memories of Chekhov* does not appear in the Russian volume that inspired it, *Chekhov in Memories of His Contemporaries (Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov)*, first published in 1947. Four subsequent editions were printed in 1952, 1954, 1960 and 1986, each with more than 100,000 copies per printing.

Peter Sekirin’s “documentary biography” develops this genre even further.

The thoroughly engaging material in *Memories of Chekhov* deserves to be greeted with the blaring of trumpets. It is a triumph of diligence and curiosity.