



MUSÉE BALZAC
Château de Saché



BALZAC, MADAME HANSKA AND UKRAINE

At a time when the European Union is giving its full support to Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, the Balzac Museum – Château de Saché expresses its solidarity with the Ukrainian people by remembering the special ties that Honoré de Balzac had with this territory at the turn of the 1840s.

In the same spirit, the Département, the owner of the monument, has chosen to decorate it with the colours of Ukraine throughout the 2022 season.

The Foreigner, A Balzac Reader in Ukraine

Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) had his first literary successes in the early 1830s, not only in France but also in countries where French speakers and French lovers devoured French literary news.

Ève Hanska (1803-1882), née Rzewuska, came from a Polish noble family where French was the language of culture. After her marriage to Venceslas Hanski in 1819, she moved to the castle of Wierzchownia in Ukraine, located 150 km southwest of Kiev. After reading *The Wild Ass's Skin*, she sent Balzac a letter in February 1832 signed *The Foreigner*, which she posted in Odessa. In the letter, she reproached him for having forgotten the delicacy of feelings and the refined nuances of the female characters painted in his previous *Scènes de la vie privée*.

Intrigued by this letter with no address given, Balzac published an announcement in *La Gazette de France* to find out the identity of his mysterious reader. That was the start of a long correspondence between Balzac and "Madame Hanska".



Madame Hanska,
by Jean Gigoux, lithograph,
1856, Musée Balzac collection.

In a letter written at the beginning of their relationship, Balzac describes the castle of Saché, one of his favorite places to stay, and dreams of Ukraine, which he still does not know, as a territory as secluded as Touraine:

*You asked me for information about Saché. Saché is the remains of a castle on the Indre river in one of the most delightful valleys of Touraine. [...] I always go there to meditate on serious works. The sky is so pure, the oaks so beautiful, the calm so vast. [...] **But not a woman, not a possible conversation. It is your Ukraine, minus your music and your literature.***

(Balzac to Madame Hanska, Paris, end of March 1833).

Origins of a love story

Balzac and Madame Hanska met for the first time in Neuchâtel in September 1833. The novelist returned to Paris on 1 October. But, on 24 December, he met the Countess in Geneva where she was staying with her husband. He took her the manuscript of *Eugénie Grandet as a Christmas present*. Balzac stayed in Geneva writing the manuscript of *Séraphîta* in January 1834, and 26 January was an "unforgettable day" for him¹. Balzac offered this second manuscript to Madame Hanska in memory of those first moments spent together². He had it bound in a very original way by his bookbinder Jacques-Frédéric Spachmann, with a piece of grey cloth and black satin from the dress that Madame Hanska wore on that famous 26 January 1833.

Balzac learnt of the death of Venceslas Hanski at the beginning of 1842. The novelist then considered marrying the Countess. He met her again in St. Petersburg in 1843, and then, during the summer of 1845, he introduced her and her daughter Anna to Touraine: They could not go to stay at the Indre valley as Jean Margonne was absent from Saché at that time. Nevertheless, Balzac dreamt of buying a residence for himself and Madame Hanska in Touraine in 1846. He stayed in Saché for a few days with Jean Margonne who, between two games of trictrac, advised him to buy the castle of Moncontour in Vouvray. Balzac finally gave up on that project two months later before buying a mansion in Rue Fortunée in Paris to live in with the countess. The latter went to Paris incognito from February to May 1847. Balzac then spent a lot of time fitting out his new home. But, in September 1847, the novelist left for Ukraine for his first long stay in Wierzchownia with Madame Hanska.

Balzac in Ukraine

Honoré de Balzac tells of his first trip to Ukraine in the *Lettre sur Kiev*, an unfinished account which was not published during the author's lifetime, in which he gives precise information about the route he followed for eight days while expressing his opinions about the territories he crossed and their people. He also gives witness of his experimentation with exotic means of transport, such as the *kitbitka* (wicker carriage) that took him from Radziwiłłów to Berdychiv, and the *bouda* (oblong basket on a pole carried by four wheels) from Berdychiv to Wierzchownia:

¹ Expression noted on the dedication of the manuscript of *Père Goriot* one year later.

² This eminently symbolic object is preserved, like most of Balzac's manuscripts, in the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France in the collection donated by Viscount Spoelberch de Lovenjoul in 1905.

*[...] I left at two o'clock in a Jewish bouda. Then I saw real steppes because Ukrayne begins in Berditcheff. What I had seen until then was nothing. **It is the desert, the kingdom of wheat. It is Cooper's Prairie and its silence. There begins the humus of Ukrayne, a black and greasy earth fifty feet deep, and often more, which is never smoked, and where wheat is always sown.***

Honoré de Balzac had fond memories of his stay on his return to Paris in February 1848. While in Saché in June, he talked of it with nostalgia in his letters to Madame Hanska:

*We go for a walk and play whist; we have breakfast at 10 o'clock, lunch at 5 o'clock. We play after breakfast and after lunch, and that is how we pass the time. **It is a very similar life to that of Wierzchownia, but without the three dear entertainers³**, so you can judge the difference.*

(Balzac to Madame Hanska, Saché, 6 June 1848)

At the end of his stay in Saché, Balzac began to feel the first symptoms of a serious heart disease. But, in September, he joined Madame Hanska once again in Ukraine where he stayed for a year and a half. Balzac wished to marry the Countess, but she was hesitant. The law forced her to sell her property because, in the Russian Empire, the wife of a foreigner could only keep her fortune by virtue of a decision by the tsar. Finally, Madame Hanska decided to give her land to her daughter Anna and married Balzac in March 1850 in the church of Sainte-Barbe in Berdychiv to become Madame de Balzac.

The very ill Balzac returned to Paris in May 1850 with his wife. He died on 18 August in his mansion on Rue Fortunée. Ève de Balzac had to face the debts of the novelist that she paid for little by little, having repatriated significant funds from Ukraine and benefiting from Honoré de Balzac's royalties by organising the republication of his works. She had a bronze bust of Balzac by David d'Angers erected on the tomb of her late husband in the Père-Lachaise cemetery as a final tribute in 1854. She was buried in the same tomb when she died in 1882, as was her daughter Anna and her son-in-law Georges Mnischech, so that the *entertainers* could be reunited for eternity.

³ Revealing an intimate complicity, this term was used by Balzac, Madame Hanska, her daughter Anna and her son-in-law Georges Mnischech to refer to themselves in their respective correspondence, in reference to the comedy *The Entertainers (Les Saltimbanques)* by T. Dumersan and Ch. V. Varin (1838). Each had a pseudonym taken from the play: Bilboquet (Balzac), Atala (Madame Hanska), Zéphyrine (Anna) and Gringalet (Georges).