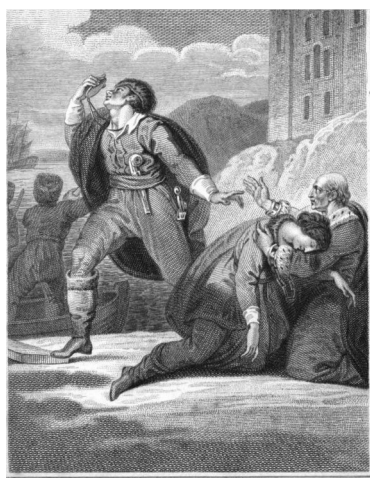


## “Afanasia – dearest daughter and generous liberator of Maurycy Beniowski”

Andy Drummond, March 2025

The first volume of Móríc Benyovszky’s *Memoirs and Travels*, which was published in a two-volume set in London in 1790, ran to 422 pages of text.<sup>1</sup> Of these, around 180 pages feature the admirable character of “Miss Afanasia Nilova”, the daughter of the military governor of the prisoner settlement at Bolsheretsk, in the south of the forbidding peninsula of Kamchatka. After about page 250 of Volume 1, Afanasia, despite being in close quarters on the same ship on the same voyage as Benyovszky, makes no further appearance until, on page 79 of Volume 2, she dies.<sup>2</sup> And that was the end of Afanasia Nilova.



*Benyovszky. "There you have her, old Father! — Emilia! my Wife! — Away on board!"*  
*Count Benyovszky. Act 5. Scene last.*

According to Benyovszky, Afanasia (or Aphanasia) was the youngest daughter of Captain Grigorii Nilov, governor of Bolsheretsk at the time of Benyovszky’s detention there (September 1770 to May 1771). Nilov had an entire family there – his wife, three daughters and a son. Almost immediately on Benyovszky’s arrival in Kamchatka, Nilov appointed him as the private tutor of his children, to teach them languages, music and so forth.<sup>3</sup> Afanasia, who seems to have been around 16 years of age, straight away fell in love with the new teacher, and the subsequent – and largely chaste – love-affair is described in a series of rather tedious and purple passages, at the end of which Afanasia’s mother was intent on marrying the young lovers off to each other. Benyovszky only avoided this by breaking the news to Afanasia that, in fact, he had a perfectly good wife at home. Afanasia took this bombshell with supreme courage and decorum, pledging herself instead to fulfil the role of Benyovszky’s daughter and protector. A role she fulfilled admirably, to the extent of warning Benyovszky and his followers, who were plotting to make their escape, of imminent arrests by her father’s soldiers.

*Illustration to Kotzebue’s play about Benyovszky - he suddenly remembers his wife, and abandons Afanasia to her father.*

When, during the escape, Captain Nilov was killed, it fell to his wife to forgive Benyovszky for his part in her husband’s death, and to Afanasia to insist on travelling on board the escapees’ ship.<sup>4</sup> And after this point, Afanasia Nilova disappears entirely from Benyovszky’s narrative, which continues to describe in great – and frequently unbelievable – detail, the ship’s voyage around the North Pacific Ocean, until it reached Macao in September 1771, after four-months of high adventure. No sooner had the surviving escapees arrived in Macao, than many of them died, probably from the effects of eating too much after a lengthy period of near-starvation.<sup>5</sup> Afanasia was among the first to go.

This is not the place to conduct a detailed investigation into the veracity of all Benyovszky’s claims. That would require an entire book.<sup>6</sup> We will concentrate solely on the figure of “Afanasia”.

### Did Captain Nilov have a daughter?

We will begin with her father, Captain Nilov. Such evidence as there is in Russian official archives suggests that he had been posted to Bolsheretsk from an equally desolate part of mainland Siberia, the village of Gizhiga at the northern end of the Sea of Okhotsk. His move to Bolsheretsk was something of a promotion. However, these same official records make no mention of any wife or daughters, only of a son.<sup>7</sup> Although it is not impossible that Grigorii Nilov had his entire family with him, this is not suggested by anyone other than Benyovszky. And while Nilov may have been a drunken bully (as several described him)<sup>8</sup> he surely cannot have been so stupid as to appoint a newly-arrived non-Russian prisoner-of-war to sit in close contact with his children and teach them the arts. His wife, too, is an

interesting character, clearly fed up with her husband – not impossible -- and scheming to have this same prisoner-of-war marry her youngest daughter. It seems a little unlikely. Even more unlikely is her unconditional forgiveness of Benyovszky after the death of her husband. And most unlikely of all is her plan to return to mainland Russia at a time of year when such roads as existed would be completely blocked by snow.<sup>9</sup> But that, apparently, is what the grieving widow did, as soon as her husband was killed, leaving her daughter in the paternal care of that non-Russian prisoner-of-war.

If we suppose for a moment that the Nilov family was not constituted as Benyovszky claims, then do we also suppose that Afanasia did not exist? After all, she would have to co-exist with a mother who may be invented, along with siblings who may be invented. And if she did not exist, then why was she in Benyovszky's narrative? To which the simple answer would be that it provided a swashbuckling and romantic story, the kind of thing European readers would lap up and swoon over. If you remove Afanasia and her crush for her teacher from the story, Benyovszky could still very simply have wormed his way into the good favours of Nilov (as he claimed he did), and still have plotted with his fellow-prisoners to make a successful escape. There is just too much amiss with Benyovszky's description of his relationship with the entire Nilov family.

### **Did Afanasia die in Macao?**

As we have noted, from the point when the escapees board ship and sail to freedom, in May 1771, until their arrival in China four months later, Afanasia disappears entirely from the story. Even while Benyovszky and his crew are consorting with assorted native women in the Aleutian Islands<sup>10</sup> and the islands of Japan,<sup>11</sup> she is neither mentioned by Benyovszky, nor does he manage to take her feelings into account. She lives, we must suppose, demurely below deck, until such time as she can emerge on the dockside at Macao and promptly die. The narrative thread of Benyovszky's adventures no longer requires her presence. But he would have to tie up a loose end somehow: Afanasia clearly never made it back to France, or even Mauritius, with the rest of the group, so she had to expire somewhere else. Macao was as good a place as any, given the fact that around twenty other of the ship's passengers and crew did die there.

In the London edition of Benyovszky's *Memoirs* published in 1790, and the Paris one which appeared one year later,<sup>12</sup> the death of Afanasia is covered in a couple of rather uncharacteristically dry sentences:

On the 25<sup>th</sup> [September], Miss Aphanasia paid the debt of nature. Her premature death affected me greatly, and more especially as it deprived me of the satisfaction of repaying her attachment, by her marriage with the young Popow, son of the Archimandrite, to whom I had given the surname of my family.<sup>13</sup>

And then the author moves on to more important things. It seems a little bald. But there was, it seems more. Some things appear not to have made it into the published work from Benyovszky's manuscripts. According to the Polish historian, Edward Kajdański,<sup>14</sup> a lengthy passage was omitted, which described Benyovszky's torment at losing his "daughter", and his arrangements for giving her a decent burial. Rather misleadingly, Kajdański states that this passage was taken from the 1791 French edition (no, it is not there) which was reproduced in a Polish translation of the *Memoirs* by Pior Jaxa-Bykowski in 1887. We shall return to this claim shortly.

The new passage consist of ten paragraphs, totalling about 1,000 words. Benyovszky describes his mental affliction at Afanasia's death, and states that he had given her the most comfortable cabin on board ship, surrounded by all Benyovszky's books (where had these come from?) and that he had 'loved her with a father's heart'. He had arranged that she should marry the 'young Popov' and that she had been quite content to stick to this arrangement once they all reached Europe. But then, after contracting a 'chest disease', her 'noble soul flew off to heaven', leaving Benyovszky in such despair that he 'remained unconscious for several days'; it was only through the tender ministrations of his many friends, a Bishop, some doctors and God's help, that he recovered. Immediately, he set about arranging Afanasia's funeral. To cut a long story short, she was buried in the garden of a property

owned by one of the French traders, Monsieur Hiss. A lovely wooden carving was made to adorn the grave, with the inscription “Afanasia – dearest daughter and generous liberator of Maurycy Beniowski, † 25 September 1771.”

And then he got on with the business of organising the next stage of their extraordinary voyage, to France. It should be stated here that at the start of this passage, Benyovszky declares that he wrote “these notes ... only for the sake of my own memory”.

It is not entirely clear who exactly was the fiancé, this “young Popov”.<sup>15</sup> Four different Popovs are mentioned in the published *Memoirs*: Ivan (killed on Formosa), Leontii (survived and sailed to Mauritius), Pyotr (a Kamchatkan ‘workman’ who died en route to Mauritius), and Prokotii (who subsequently returned to Kamchatka via Paris). In the passage in the *Memoirs* mentioning Afanasia’s death, he is also described as “the son of the Archimandrite”; in the unpublished passage summarised above, he is further described as “the younger brother of the one who was killed by savages”. This older brother must be Ivan, who was in a party of three men ambushed and killed by native Formosans (in retaliation for which Benyovszky allegedly attacked and killed 1,156 natives and burned down their village). It is not entirely clear which of the surviving Popovs – if any – was this younger brother. To add to the confusion, the son of the ‘Archimandrite’ (a high-ranking priest in the Greek/Russian Orthodox Church), was elsewhere named by Benyovszky as a 13-year old boy named Ivan Ustyuzhinov; a fact which was confirmed by Russian investigations into the escape.<sup>16</sup> For some obscure reason, Benyovszky now claims to have given Afanasia’s young man – whoever he was – the Benyovszky surname; which, evidently, the young man never used in later life.

To return to the funeral of Afanasia, however. Two other accounts are worth mentioning. One was written by an English trader by the name of Nathaniel Barlow, who was the first to alert Europe to Benyovszky’s arrival in Macao.<sup>17</sup> He made several reports, in one of which he reported that “there were in the vessel five persons in womens apparel”, a somewhat cautious statement. In a subsequent letter, he then wrote the following:

Since I wrote the above, the following strange account has reached me from Macao (every day brings forth new matter concerning these people) : One of the persons dressed like a woman died a few days since. The body was sent on shore, with the following very extraordinary request to the governor, That the corpse should be interred where none had lain before, and in an honourable spot; that the baron might have liberty to attend the funeral to pay particular honours to the deceased. This remarkable request producing that never-failing curiosity peculiar to the Romish Priesthood, two *worthies* of the Franciscan order, taking advantage of the night, *peeped* into the coffin and discovered the body of a man. This deception disgusting the Portuguese exceedingly, the body was ordered common interment. Various are the accounts we have of the rank of the deceased: some say the Baron declares he was a Prince of the empire; others report him a Bishop. This account has produced many conjectures, not very favourable to remaining petticoats.

We have somehow moved from a simple funeral and burial to something more bizarre and secretive. (It should be observed here that, due to restrictions placed by the Chinese authorities on which Europeans, of which religion, might be buried where, the whole process of interment was fiendishly complex.) Clearly, the man was not Afanasia. But if not, then who was he, and why did Benyovszky go to so much trouble about the obsequies? Was he that “Prince Zadscoi”, of whom we know nothing more, except that Benyovszky tells us he died in Macao? We have no answer.

A second statement comes from the Governor of Mauritius, du Dresnay, who filed an official report of his conversations with Benyovszky when the latter arrived in March 1772. The story is similar to the one recounted by Barlow, but with a significant difference.<sup>18</sup>

At Macao, something happened which is worthy of report, but which may not ever be clarified until they reach Europe. A young girl of eleven or twelve years of age, who had been with M. de Aladar [*Benyovszky*], died at Macao. The Baron wanted her to be buried with ceremony in the ground attached to the church, and he had several initial letters engraved on the tombstone. This event attracted a lot of attention, especially from the English, for Mr. Russell told me recently that it was a young and beautiful woman disguised as a priest, and her gender was only realised during the burial. He sticks by his story, nevertheless, and the priest Surida, a Spanish Dominican, also assured me yesterday that it had been a child which he saw dressed according to her gender.

Du Dresnay's suggestion – that the story would later be clarified – turned out to be wishful thinking. If anything, things grew ever more obscure as Benyovszky worked away at his *Memoirs*. Neither his, nor Barlow's reports can be verified from any other source. Kajdański, in his essay, reproduces a second-hand report that a Swedish traveller (name unknown) of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century had seen the grave of “the Russian girl who joined her fate with the adventurous Count”.<sup>19</sup> This grave, however, was no longer in the garden of M. Hiss' house, but in a churchyard.

The documents which have come down to us are simply not clear enough for us to draw any firm conclusions about who was buried where in Macao. Barlow may have got his facts wrong, and the man dressed as a woman was in fact the very opposite, as related by Dresnay. Or maybe there was one of each? Anything is possible.

### **Other inconsistencies**

Kajdański seems convinced that the suppression of this, and other passages, from the manuscript was the result of some kind of pressure from Russia on the publishers in London and Paris. Either that or that certain passages were expunged in order to make the book more saleable in Russia.<sup>20</sup> These claims are intriguing – as always with anything connected to Benyovszky – but hard to justify. There are many passages in the published volumes which are scarcely complimentary about Russians, including the deprecatory characterisation of Nilov himself. And why would a few more words about Afanasia cause offence, when so much more about her – some of it quite intimate – was retained earlier in the book? In any event, the concept of sales to a foreign market was entirely alien to publishers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As an aside, Pasfield Oliver, when he prepared a new edition of the *Memoirs* in 1893, was quite happy to suppress a passage in which Benyovszky described spending the night in Afanasia's bedroom (it should be noted that nothing of a risqué nature occurred there); one suspects that this was a piece of moral censorship on Oliver's part, to prevent possible offence to a Victorian readership.<sup>21</sup> It is not beyond the bounds of reason to suppose that the passage about the burial was suppressed by the 1790 editor, William Nicholson, in order not to offend the Chinese authorities in Macao, whose regulations on the burial of Westerners were, to say the least, restrictive.

Does the additional passage about Afanasia's death take us any further forward in deciding whether she really existed? No. Another of Benyovszky's descriptions of Afanasia does not constitute proof of her existence. If anything does emerge, it is the fact that someone – probably a young woman – died in Macao. That being the case, are there other candidates?

### **Was someone else 'Afanasia'?**

And of course there are. Between 15 and 25 members of Benyovszky's crew and passengers died in Macao. Benyovszky has a list of 15 names; of these, three are women: Afanasia; someone described as “the wife of Perevalow” (the latter was a ‘corporal’ in the Kamchatkan garrison); and “Catherine

Kusmika” – who Benyovszky alleged was Afanasia’s maid.<sup>22</sup> Using other sources such as Ryumin, a figure of 25 deaths occurred there,<sup>23</sup> of whom six were women or girls. In amongst those are two women of interest: one was Nastasia Fedorova Tchurina, described as the daughter of the navigator Maxim Tchurin; the other was Katarzyna Kuzmina, the “girl-friend” of a merchant named Jakob Kuznetsov (she was most probably the same person as Benyovsky’s Catherine Kusmika).

Nastasia Tchurina is of particular interest. Maxim Tchurin was the qualified captain of the small ship *St Peter* which the escapees commandeered from Kamchatka. He was accompanied by his wife, Stepanida Fedorova. According to Benyovszky, Maxim was one of those who died in Macao. According to Ryumin, Tchurin’s wife and daughter also died there;<sup>24</sup> Stepanov in his account asserted that Tchurin had two daughters, both of whom accompanied him on the voyage, but does not tell us their fate.<sup>25</sup> However, it is possible that one, or both, of those daughters was in fact a girl-friend or mistress. According to Benyovszky, Tchurin, when approached in Kamchatka to take on the responsibility of captaining the ship, gave him a sob-story about a girlfriend of his, whom he did not wish to leave behind; Benyovszky sorted it all out.<sup>26</sup> This girl-friend may or may not be Nastasia. Nastasia’s patronymic ‘Fedorova’ strongly suggests that she was not Maxim’s daughter (that would be ‘Maximova’). Perhaps the surname “Tchurina” was used simply because she was part of Tchurin’s household? Further obscurity is thrown up Nastasia having the same patronymic as Stepanida, who was supposedly her mother.

As always, everything is entirely murky here. To make matters worse, and completely contradicting Ryumin’s statement that Tchurin’s wife Stepanida had died in Macao, governor Dresnay on Mauritius reported that

the woman who arrived at Île de France [*Mauritius*] with the Baron is the widow of the captain who commanded the ship from Kamchatka, and she has voluntarily followed the fortune of M. de Aladar. This captain died in Macao and the Baron felt he had to take care of this woman like a sister or a daughter. One suspects that he has gone slightly further than that, although the widow is neither very young nor pretty.<sup>27</sup>

So, assuming that the Frenchman was reporting the facts (and ignoring his throwaway Gallic comments on the woman’s appearance) ... who was this? There is some suggestion that this was a woman named Uliana Sakarina, also known as “Mme de Rick”, also known as Uliana Tchurina, who subsequently remained on Mauritius when the ship stopped there, and married another crew-member.<sup>28</sup> So, probably neither Stepanida nor Nastasia, but apparently another ‘wife’ of Tchurin. Confusing? – not at all.

Meanwhile Ryumin had another piece of scandal:

After that he [*Benyovszky*] berated his companion, who was called Major von Vinblat, and placed him under arrest, meanwhile going on to violate the Kamchatkan serving-girl of [*the ship’s captain*] Churin. At this act of rape, people began to voice disapproval.<sup>29</sup>

We are into very strange territory indeed here; it is extremely difficult to believe Ryumin’s account – he was after all engaged in writing an account which would show himself in favourable light, and Benyovszky in the worst possible light. And it is highly unlikely that Benyovszky would risk breaking the law, or moral codes, when he was trying to persuade the Europeans around him to take him back to Europe. Whether the unfortunate girl was the servant or the girl-friend or the daughter of Tchurin remains entirely unclear. This alleged rape is mentioned by Ryumin chronologically after the deaths of a number of travellers, so we would have to suppose the victim was not the young Nastasia Tchurina.

But what if it was Nastasia Tchurina who was actually the object of Benyovszky’s affections, in Kamchatka and beyond? What if such a love-interest really existed, but Benyovszky chose to give her a different parentage, to improve his narrative? At the very least this would match one love-interest with one death and one peculiar funeral. But that may just be clutching at straws.

## Conclusions

Did Afanasia Nilova exist? The answer remains elusive. There is no third-party evidence to suggest that she ever existed. Neither Ryumin nor Stepanov mention her, and – given that she was allegedly no less than the governor's daughter – you would have thought she was worth a mention in their narratives. Neither do the surviving documents from the Russian investigation into the mass-escape. The absence of such independent evidence, however, neither proves nor disproves the case.

We have to consider other matters, such as the whole Nilov family dynamic, with a cultured wife who is quite happy to marry off her daughter at short notice to a convicted prisoner-of-war, and her husband's willingness to entrust the education of their children to him – all of which seems highly improbable. And the fact that Afanasia completely disappears from the narrative for the duration of the voyage is also suggestive.

Finally, there is the confusion about who was buried in Macao. A young female certainly seems to have been interred. But we have only Benyovszky's word that the girl was Afanasia.

Does it matter if Afanasia did or did not exist? In the wider scheme of things, of course not. But if she did not exist, then the reader must begin to doubt the veracity of almost all of Benyovszky's other claims.

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- 1 The Memoirs and Travels of Mauritius Augustus, Count de Benyowsky. Translated from the original manuscript (by W. Nicholson). 2 vols., London, 1790. Available online at <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Rr0NAAAAQAAJ> and <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=r70NAAAAQAAJ>
  - 2 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. II, p.79
  - 3 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.95
  - 4 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.251-261
  - 5 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. II, p.77 and p.84
  - 6 For example, Andrew Drummond's *The Intriguing Life and Ignominious Death of Maurice Benyovszky*, Abingdon/New York 2017.
  - 7 See: V.I. Stein, *САМОЗВАННЫЙ ИМПЕРАТОР МАДАГАСКАРСКИИ (М. А. Беньковский) (Self-styled Emperor of Madagascar (MA Benovsky))* In: *Istoricheskii Vestnik* No.7 . St Petersburg (1908)
  - 8 A. S. Sgibnev *Bunt' Benyovskavo v' Kamchatke*. In: *Russkaya Starina*. Vol.XV, St. Petersburg, 1876. p.528
  - 9 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.255-256
  - 10 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.345-346
  - 11 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. II, pp.14-15
  - 12 *Voyages et mémoires de Maurice-Auguste, Comte de Benyowsky*, Paris 1791. Available online at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=J9UBZi2yNC4C> and <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=PFvqFgz1L0UC>
  - 13 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. II, p.79
  - 14 Edward Kajdański, *Pod Polska Bandera W Portugalskim Makau (Under the Polish Flag in Portuguse Macao)* in: *Gdanskie Studia Aszji Wschodniej (Gdansk East Asian Studies)* 2014/6, pp.48-68)
  - 15 For a full list of all of Benyovszky's companions, see: [https://www.andydrummond.net/benyovszky/Images/benyovszky\\_companions\\_list.pdf](https://www.andydrummond.net/benyovszky/Images/benyovszky_companions_list.pdf)
  - 16 Sgibnev (1876), p.540
  - 17 See Nathaniel Barlow's report in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, Vol.52, London 1772, pp.272-273
  - 18 Cited in: Prosper Cultru, *Un Empereur de Madagascar au XVIIIe siecle.* (1906), p.194 Reprinted Paris (2006), p.162
  - 19 Kajdański (2014), p.63
  - 20 Kajdański (2014), pp.58-59
  - 21 See *The Memoirs and Travels of ... Bnyowsky*, edited by Captain Pasfield Oliver, London 1893, p.50
  - 22 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.210
  - 23 See Note 15 above
  - 24 See Stein (1908), p.607
  - 25 C.D and J.P. Ebeling (eds.). *Neuere Geschichte der See- und Land-Reisen, Vol.IV. Begebenheiten und Reisen des Grafen Moritz August von Benjowsky [...] wie auch einem Auszug aus Hippolitus Stefanows russisch geschriebenenem Tagebuche.* Hamburg 1791. p.286
  - 26 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.202-205
  - 27 Cultru (2006), p.163
  - 28 See: Edward Kajdański, *Tajemnica Beniowskiego. Odkrycia, intrzygi, falszerstwa (The Mystery of Beniowski)*, Warsaw 1994, p.379
  - 29 Stein, (1908), p.604