

## TAVRIA'S «GOLDFISH»

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Sofia Falz-Fein (1835-1919) was a well-known representative of the Falz-Fein family. She was born in Yekaterinoslav (now Dnipro) to the family of Russian German colonists, who moved to the city in the 18th century. Her father, Mr. Knauf, was an owner of a commercial enterprise. He was a highly educated person. Sofia took after her father. She was intelligent and pretty.

In those days there was a custom among German colonists to choose future wives in other German colonies. For this purpose brothers Edward and Gustav Falz-Fein came to Yekaterinoslav. Sofia Knauf was the most remarkable girl among the local ones. Both brothers fell in love with her. Though Miss Knauf chose younger brother Gustav, his father Friedrich Falz-Fein forced the girl to marry Edward – according to the family tradition the younger brother couldn't marry ahead of the elder.

It was an unhappy marriage, though seven kids were born. Edward was a good master and a fair landowner. He built rural schools, was the head of a court, and established the board of trustees, which patronized orphans. But no one in the family liked him. This man was a dragon, thrifty and sullen – a spitfire. He died when he was 45 and Sofia was finally able to marry Gustav, but, unfortunately, he also died five years later. Sofia was left a widow twice and inherited a huge fortune.

Her husband's death coincided in time with the collapse of the world wool prices. Inexpensive wool from Australia and New Zealand struck a new blow to the European manufacturer. It seemed as though Sofia ought to do as all widows and daughters who inherited large-sale farms and undertakings did: to sell everything, deposit money in the bank and get a percentage. But Mrs. Falz-Fein thought differently. The family enterprise meant so much to her husbands. Besides, she wanted to save it for her children.

To start with, Sofia transferred the wool and mutton trade to the domestic markets of the Empire, where Australians and New Zealanders didn't reach. By slaughtering the surplus of livestock, Sofia avoided bankruptcy, and retained a 150 000 herd of sheep to secure domestic markets.

She began to invest the money received in other types of production. First, she paid special attention to the development of poultry farming, started by her first husband. Then she opened a winery in Preobrazhenka, a confectionery in Dauphigny, and in our native city of Kherson she founded one of the largest canneries in Ukraine. Canned meat and fish from the Falz-Fein family, decorated with an emblem (a goldfish riding a bicycle) were sold not only throughout the Russian Empire, but were also exported. Sofia achieved such results within only seven years.

Nevertheless, Sophia's next project was ridiculed by everyone. She decided to ensure the export of her shipping company's products through her own non-freezing seaport. This grandiose idea became a reality thanks to the efforts and energy of this woman. Sophia discovered a harbor in the heart of the Karkinit Bay (near Perekop) whose water was heated up by a hot natural spring.

In 1897 Sophia Falz-Fein founded the Khorly settlement on the bank of the harbour and began to invest in the construction of ships and the port. The project demanded hundreds of thousands of rubles, but immediately began to generate profit. All the ports of the Black Sea froze in winter but Khorly accepted ships all year round. Trade began to develop in the settlement. Merchants paid a lot of money for the right to use the port and the berths. In addition, the production of the Falz-Feins' factories was carried by their own steamships throughout the whole year.

In 1903 their own steamship line consisted of six vessels, two of which were passenger steamers and were very popular on the Black Sea lines. Sophia Falz-Fein became one of the most famous personalities of her time. She left a distinctive mark in the history of Kherson region's development.

The history has kept a little from the Falz-Fein business. After the revolution, the Khorly port gradually declined, the company was nationalized, and the ships were lost in the Civil War. Perhaps, the only reminder of the activities of this wonderful family is the Askania-Nova Reserve.

**Based on:**

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