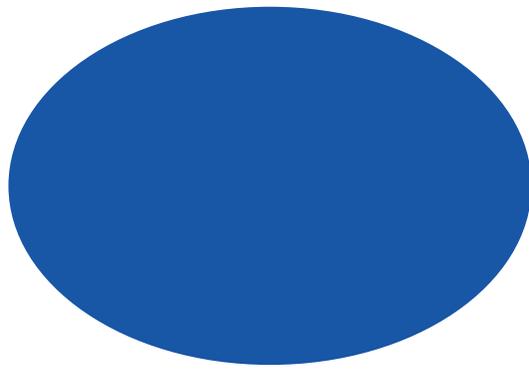


# FOUR CENTURIES

Russian Poetry in Translation



7

2014



Four Centuries

Russian Poetry in Translation

fourcenturies@gmx.de

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David Shraye-Petrov

Давид Шраер-Петров

Runner Begoon\*

Translated into English by Maxim D. Shraye

*for Yosef Begun*

I had a dream  
A huge stadium  
Flung open like a giant's ear;  
A ravine or a canyon  
Filled with stones to the brim.  
With stones or heads?  
I peered at them:  
Red, rough hewn, hollering stones,  
Thousands, hundreds of thousands in the grandstands,  
All--meaty faces, glittering mica eyes.

\* Translator's Note: Titled "Бегун" in the original Russian and composed in March 1987 in Moscow, this long poem originally circulated in the Jewish *samizdat* and was subsequently published in the USA, originally in the anthology *Klub poëtov. 1994* (New York, 1994). The English translation appears here for the first time. The poem's oneiric narrative was informed by the refusenik protests that took place in Moscow in February 1987 and led to the release of Yosef Begun, the famous refusenik activist and prisoner of Zion, from incarceration. In Russian, Begun's last name literally means "runner" and is pronounced "be-goon" with the stress on the second, long syllable. The poem centers around a play on the meaning of Begun's last name; this paronomastic wordplay can be only partially rendered in English translation--hence this solution. For more information about Begun, go to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iosif\\_Begun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iosif_Begun).

The translator thanks Professor Andrew Sofer (Boston College) - poet and critic - for his generous comments on a draft of this translation.

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Their stone jaws were chewing,  
Ghastly lips were spitting,  
Massive fists were brandishing bricks,  
And their traps were savagely screaming:  
"BEGOON, RUNNER BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON..."  
So even a Mongol or Hunnic warrior would grow numb.  
In my sleep I fought off with my hands  
Their clutches pouring at me like dirty bottles.  
Meanwhile, enraged, they knocked their skulls  
Against the ferroconcrete stands:  
"BEGOON, RUNNER BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON..."  
He ran. I shielded him from the deluge  
Of bottles, bare, green and furious  
Because a bald liar had brought them out of swamps.  
And a martyred magus had seduced them with Nazarene oil,  
They now threatened to burst from the stone chalice,  
They threatened with supreme and righteous penance:  
"How dare you touch Russian strings, your hands unclean,  
BEGOON, RUNNER BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON..."

Passing through death's final spiral,  
Catching particles of God's breath,  
Showered with shards of glass, cigarette butts and slurs,  
Wiping off bloody sweat with his angelic palm,  
He gasps out:  
"I didn't touch Russian strings. We're strangers.  
I never tried to pass for one of you,  
Though I've embraced you as we wallowed together  
In prison bunks, in perineums of ditches;  
Though our sweat is equally bloody, spelled out likewise,  
I'm a Jew,  
I never tried to pass for a Russian."

The stadium howls: "Then why did you stay?  
Don't mess with our haystacks.  
Run! There you'll find manna and capon.  
Bear it! Scram!  
BEGOON, RUNNER BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON..."

Where to run?  
Where can he run?  
A trench-coated troop has blocked the gates.  
Ominious companies stand in the aisles.  
Where to run?  
To gulp down his soul  
And in the stadium's stone gut  
To RUN, TO RUN, TO RUN, TO RUN, RUN, RUN.

Where am I?  
In my dream above him am I flying?  
"Stop, RUNNER BEGOON," I say to him,  
"Stop or your heart will fly away  
Into the boundless ether toward searing heights."  
"Stop? How can you say that, my dear boy?  
You see: between the stone wall,  
The yelling bowl of the stadium and me--  
Open space, pit, asphalted ground--  
A dozen women, like a dozen verses.  
It wouldn't take much to crush them,  
To beat them up or tear them to pieces,  
A dozen refusenik women standing there,  
Each--a poster on her breast.  
You see, your wife's among them,  
Her poster says: RELEASE BEGOON!  
My boy, I cannot break the host of guards,  
Nor can I wrest these women from the stadium's maw,  
Just as neither the public, nor this armed host  
Can wrest a groan from me.  
And as a RUNNER I have nothing left  
But TO RUN, TO RUN, TO RUN, TO RUN, RUN, RUN.  
For how long?  
Forever.  
I know this for sure.  
To run from chilly Palm Sundays  
Where people carry broken-off sprays.  
My dear boy, we cannot escape.

"I am the Wandering Jew,  
I am the Flying Dutchman,  
The spring of a stone womb,  
The mechanism  
Holding in check the Russian aphorism  
That links the salvation of Russia  
With the slaughter of a potential Messiah.  
So that's my fate; my star:  
To run to the roar of stone gullets,  
To run before the tommy guns of guards,  
To run before the trembling wings of angelic posters,  
To run to the sound of your angular poems,  
Which you, my boy, recite to friend or foe.  
I am the Wandering Jew of Russia.  
I am BEGOON, RUNNER BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON..."

Am I dreaming?  
Or am I at the Stygian shore,  
Against which oblivious waves go on lapping?  
"Why do you run from liberty and freedom?  
Give me your hand, BEGOON, I'll help you leap over these walls."  
"I can't, my boy, just leave them here,  
I can't give up or stop or disappear,  
Stygian waves have rolled up to the feet of refusenik women,  
I can't swerve from my course or lose it,  
I can't slow down my step; can't fly away with you.  
It would mean their death.  
Heads of the crowd will roll, like stone cannonballs,  
Brick fists will crush and maul.  
You'll never see your wife again.  
My freedom? Could that ever be a tribute  
To the loneliness of your remaining days?"  
"But what about the guards?"  
"Like a narrow creek, the guards  
Will run into the sand, will shake off their fatigues  
And merge with the crowd,

Their mica eyes  
Madly sparkling amid the rattling stones.  
And there will be no one left in the stadium:  
No guards, women or stormy crowd.  
But in the center, where the refusenik women stood before,  
There will be a pile of cannonballs or skulls; a sepulcher.

From behind the stadium walls--a newborn rumble,  
Newborn columns streaming here  
From Frya, from Lyu, from Mee,  
Should I, should you--why should we rile them up?  
In their country these hordes spawn legally and freely,  
Guards and stone thugs arise steadily  
Without needing bulls, safe conducts or decrees."  
"What should we do, BEGOON?"  
"My boy, I'll keep running around  
Inside the stadium--to hold them back."  
But how to run before the stone grandstands  
Without troubling Russian strings?"

BEGOON, RUNNER BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON, BEGOON...

*Moscow, March 1987*

**David Shraye-Petrov (Давид Шраер-Петров)** was born in 1936 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), debuted as a poet in the 1950s, and emigrated to the USA in 1987. Presently retired from medical research, Dr. Shraye-Petrov lives in Brookline, Massachusetts with his wife Emilia Shraye. The latest among his twenty-four Russian books are *The Story of My Beloved* (Moscow, 2013), a novel, and *Nevan Poems* (St. Petersburg, 2011), a poetry collection. Three volumes of Shraye-Petrov's fiction, *Jonah and Sarah: Jewish Stories of Russia and America* (2003), *Autumn in Yalta: A Novel and Three Stories* (2006), and *Dinner with Stalin and Other Stories* (2014), have appeared in English translation, edited by his son Maxim D. Shraye and published by Syracuse University Press/Library of Modern Jewish Literature. For more information, visit <http://fmwww.bc.edu/SL-V/Dsp.html>

**Maxim D. Shroyer (Максим Д. Шраер)**, Shroyer-Petrov's son, is a bilingual author and translator and Professor of Russian, English, and Jewish Studies at Boston College. Shroyer's recent books include *I SAW IT: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (2013) and *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* (2013). His *Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature* won a 2007 National Jewish Book Award. For more information, visit [www.shroyer.com](http://www.shroyer.com)

Letter from the Publisher

**Four Centuries Library**

Dear Friends,

The following text of the Publisher's Letter was published in *Four Centuries*, Nr. 3:

Dear Friends,

Thank you very much for reading our magazine.

I would like to open its third issue by launching a new initiative to create a library of Russian poetry in translations - **Four Centuries Library**.

The ambitious goal of this project is to collect books, periodicals and other papers with Russian poetry, old and new, translated into different languages, and finally to donate collection as a whole to one of the university or public libraries. At the end of this issue you will find the list of more than thirty items - a starting contribution from my personal collection. You can join me in my efforts to implement this idea by sending your donations in the following categories:

A. Monographic poetry collections by separate poets translated into different languages

B. Anthologies of Russian poetry translations

C. Periodicals with translations of Russian poetry

Please, send your donations to:

Dr. Ilya Perelmuter, Erikapfad 7, 45133 Essen, Germany

The list of all the gifts with the names of the donators will be published in *Four Centuries*. Thanks a lot for your support in advance!

Yours,

Publisher

In this issue you will find new donations to the *Four Centuries Library* at page 64.