

## David Shroyer-Petrov -- Давид Шраер-Петров\*

**David Shroyer-Petrov** (b. 1936), poet, fiction writer, translator, essayist, and memoirist, was born and grew up in Leningrad. Descended from Lithuanian rabbis and Podolian millers, Shroyer-Petrov heard Yiddish in the traditional home of his paternal grandparents. Both of Shroyer-Petrov's parents (father an engineer, mother a chemist) made the transition from the former Pale to Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in the 1920s. Evacuated from Leningrad in 1941, Shroyer-Petrov spent three years in a Russian village in the Urals.

Shroyer-Petrov entered the literary scene as a poet and translator in the mid-to-late 1950s. He was a founding member of a literary seminar (*lito*) at the House of Culture of Industrial Cooperation (known as "Promka"); the group's gatherings were attended by Vassily Aksyonov, Ilya Averbakh, Evgeny Reyn, and others who were then young literary lights. Upon the suggestion of Boris Slutsky, he adopted the penname David Petrov, derived from Pyotr—a Russianized form of his father's first name, Peysakh. This assimilatory gesture did not ease the publication of Shroyer-Petrov's poetry in the USSR, and he made a name for himself largely as a translator of verse. After graduating from Leningrad First Medical School in 1959, Shroyer-Petrov served as military physician in Belorussia. Following his marriage in 1962 to Emilia Polyak, Shroyer-Petrov moved to Moscow, where his son, Maxim D. Shroyer, was born in 1967. Shroyer-Petrov received a Ph.D. from the Leningrad Institute of Tuberculosis in 1966, and he worked as a researcher at the Gamaleya Institute of Microbiology in Moscow from 1967 to 1978.

From his earliest verses, Shroyer-Petrov explored the nature of Jewish identity and the relations between Jews and Gentiles. Although he managed to publish a collection of poems (*Canvasses*, 1967, with an introduction by Lev Ozerov) and two books of essays in the 1970s, most of his writings were too controversial for Soviet officialdom to allow their publication. Shroyer-Petrov's occasional flights into official Soviet subjects (e.g., space exploration, the Baikal–Amur Railroad) in poetry, essays, and song lyrics earned him no trust on the part of the regime. Despite recommendations by such prominent writers as Viktor Shklovsky, Shroyer-Petrov was only admitted to the Union of Soviet Writers in 1976 after a long battle. His second poetry collection, *Winter Ship*, moved up the frozen straights of the "Sovetsky pisatel" (Soviet Writer) Publishing House with discouraging slowness and was finally never published. By the early 1970s, the relations between Jews and Gentiles became a principal concern of Shroyer-Petrov's writing. In 1975–76, Shroyer-Petrov composed poems where disharmonies of his Russian and Jewish selves adumbrate his conflict with the Soviet regime. "Chagall's Self-Portrait with Wife," "My Slavic Soul," and "Early Morning in Moscow" were first published in the writer's first émigré collection, *Song about a Blue Elephant* (1990). Read in April 1978 at the televised closing ceremony of the Spring Festival of Poetry in Vilnius, Lithuania, "My Slavic Soul" brought forth repressive measures against the author and finalized his decision to emigrate. In January 1979, Shroyer-Petrov and his family applied for exit visas. Fired from his academic position and expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers (three of his books derailed), Shroyer-Petrov became a refusenik. Shroyer-Petrov was unable to publish in the Soviet Union throughout his nine years of a refusenik's limbo.

In 1979–80, while driving an illegal cab at night and working in a hospital emergency room, Shroyer-Petrov wrote the first part of *Herbert and Nelly*, a novel about refuseniks. (In 1986, the first part of *Herbert and Nelly* appeared in Israel; the entire novel came out in Moscow and was longlisted for the 1993 Russian Booker Prize; a revised edition came out in 2005 in St. Petersburg.) In spite of persecution and arrests by the KGB, Shroyer-Petrov's last Soviet decade was prolific; he wrote two novels, several plays, a memoir, and many stories and verses. The refuseniks' isolation from the rest of

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David Shroyer-Petrov, "K avtoportretu Shagala s zhenoi. . .," "Moia slavianskaia dusha. . .," "Ranee utro zimoi," and "Villa Borgeze." Copyright © by David Shroyer-Petrov. Translated and reprinted by permission of David Shroyer-Petrov. English translation copyright © by Maxim D. Shroyer, Edwin Honig and Maxim D. Shroyer, Maxim D. Shroyer and Dolores Stewart. David Shroyer-Petrov, "Hände Hoch!" Copyright © by David Shroyer-Petrov. Reprinted by permission of David Shroyer-Petrov and Maxim D. Shroyer. English translation copyright © by Maxim D. Shroyer.

Soviet society, coupled with the absurdity of being a Jewish writer who is both silenced by and shackled to Russia, led to Shrayer-Petrov's discovery of the form he calls *fantella* (perhaps decipherable as "*fantastic novella*"?).

In 1982–87, Shrayer-Petrov and his wife hosted a salon for refuseniks, where a number of Jewish-Russian writers, including Yury Karabchievsky and Genrikh Sapgir, gave readings. Shrayer-Petrov was finally granted permission to emigrate in April 1987. Leaving the Soviet Union on 7 June 1987, Shrayer-Petrov and his wife settled in Providence, Rhode Island, after a summer in Austria and Italy. Arriving on the tail end of the third wave, the writer began to sign his literary publications with the hyphenated Shrayer-Petrov—a dual name that betokens his literary career. Since emigration, six books of his poetry have come out, among them *Petersburg Doge* (St. Petersburg, 1999) and *Drums of Fortune* (Moscow, 2002); two memoirs and six novels by Shrayer-Petrov have appeared. Shrayer-Petrov continued to divide his time between writing and medical research. In several of his works, notably the novel *French Cottage* (Providence, RI, 1999), scientific interests dovetail with those of a fiction writer. Marriages between Jews and non-Jews continue to fascinate Shrayer-Petrov in his outwardly unturbulent life as a Jewish-Russian writer in New England. Rooting into his adopted land and its culture, Shrayer-Petrov features a greater variety of American characters in his fiction as he continues to inscribe (autobiographical) émigré writers into the landscapes and culturescapes of his adopted America. A number of Shrayer-Petrov's stories were featured in Shrayer-Petrov's English-language collection *Jonah and Sarah: Jewish Stories of Russia and America* (2003) and in his recent *Carp for Gefilte Fish: Jewish Stories* (2005). Published in Moscow in 2004, his book *Those Strange Russian Jews* was composed of two new novels. One of them, the autobiographical novel *Strange Danya Rayev*, appeared in English in Shrayer-Petrov's *Autumn in Yalta: A Novel and Three Stories* (2006).

In the summer of 2007 David Shrayer-Petrov and his wife Emilia Shrayer moved to Boston. Shrayer-Petrov's *Vodka and Pastries: A Novel with Writers* appeared in St. Petersburg in July 2007.

*Maxim D. Shrayer*

## **Four Poems by David Shrayer-Petrov**

### **Chagall's Self-Portrait with Wife**

*for Boris Bernstein*

Bella, why did you fly out  
With Marc over the old hut?  
There are no coins in his purse,  
He doesn't belong in Russia.  
Better if in that little church  
You'd had a fling with the deacon,  
Together you could steal the kopecks  
From the poor village plate.  
But look there, you are flying—the bride  
In white over the white countryside.  
What? Isn't there space enough  
In that one-room hut to press

Your tired wings  
Against his seething brushes,  
And love this country painlessly  
All your life?

1975

*Translated from the Russian by Edwin Honig and Maxim D. Shrayer*

### **My Slavic Soul**

My Slavic soul trapped in the shell of a familiar Jewish wrapping,  
Forswearing the daily strife that suffocates me all my life,  
One day will outsmart its lot, turn a clever somersault,  
And dashing escape to burn like anthracite, the wondrous stone.  
I'll chase her: Wait! What shall I do alone amid this grove of birches  
In my perennial, banal, so typically Jewish wrapping?  
The ruts and roadside ditches that have viewed me as a solid fellow  
Will realize that I'm barren, like an abandoned charabanc.  
Come back, my soul, you're my guide; a blind cripple, I'm helpless.  
I don't have the wild expanse of those generous Slavic cheeks,  
Come back, my soul, come back to me! I once resembled a human being,  
And once the people weren't loathe to share with me their drunken joy.  
Hiding from me in someone's barn, where in the hayloft she took refuge,  
Bulging her bare-naked eyes as though she were an octopus,  
My soul said: I'd rather be with those who have lost their riches,  
Than shatter myself, a teardrop that falls into the icy night.

1975

*Translated from the Russian by Maxim D. Shrayer*

### **Early Morning in Moscow**

The woodpecker knocks on the pine tree,  
rehearsing his wooden reverie:

*knock-knock-knock,*  
*knock-knock-knock,*

On the ground  
falls the deadening wooden sound.

The janitor shovels the street,

rehearsing his snowy reverie:

*dirty Jew dirty Jew*

*dirty Jew—*

In the camps

I'd break your head in two.

The doctor knocks on my chest,

rehearsing his wishful reverie:

*some day we'll,*

*some day we'll,*

*some day we'll*

be free to sing in the spring.

Sounds filling the dawn,

keep time with my salt tears:

*on the verge of life*

*on the verge of life*

*on this low verge lies*

Moscow muffled in snow.

1976

*Translated from the Russian by Edwin Honig and Maxim D. Shrayer*

### **Villa Borghese**

These dogs copulating at Villa Borghese,  
Copulating, the casual bitches and males,  
Taking over the place, blaring out Brothellaise,  
Blatantly wagging their tails—oh, details!

The concrete music of dog bodies rustling,  
Of dogs' scrawny bodies, a low street ballet.  
The concrete tears for the anguish of Russia.  
The weeping ballet has flown, rushed away.

Like a stray with the Roman dogs of the Villa,  
Like a gasping fish on the banks of the Tiber,  
Forget the purging, the crushing, the spilling,  
Forget the evil caress of the empire.

At Villa Borghese, on Italianate evenings,  
In grandeur, the lap of luxurious Rome,  
A stray is still howling for his Russian leavings,  
The lost, irretrievable things of his home.

To wake and feel pressed by tails to the railing,  
To wake and feel grass intertwining with hair,  
Beneath skies of Rome, to go madly on mumbling  
Oh, Nádenka, Nádyá—a stumbling prayer—

Oh Véra, Verúnychik . . . Oh, Lyúbushka, Lyúba,  
Valyúsha, Marína, Katyúsha, and Zína.  
Here the soberest New England winters  
Offer their lips to me, cool and serene.

When my time comes to die, when I'm barely alive,  
Half-dead lips will whisper, like never before:  
For you and us, Russia, no closeness survives,  
We, sons of Yehudah, who used to be yours.

To lie here embracing—perhaps it's a laugh—  
Last bottle, last letter, whatever remains.  
At Villa Borghese, like an old photograph  
On history's dump. Along with the frame.

At Villa Borghese, hang out with the gang  
Of roaming wild dogs, an antique mosaic.  
How much can you care, oh my Lord, for the paining  
Soul and how much for the marble, anemic

Creatures arranged among columns of wood.  
Like Petersburg's Summer Gardens. We walked  
A sweet winding path, lovers' lane, and we stood  
All night beneath skies that would never grow dark.

Those archangels blaring their trumpets of exile,  
Those animals hounding us, shunned and banned,  
Those judases killing with kindness and smiles.  
And yet, despite all, we still loved that land

That cast us away like inferior stuff,  
Aborted like something conceived out of error,  
All that wasn't all, it was never enough,  
Until they were rid of us cursed ones forever,

Until I came here to this barbarous Villa  
Where statuesque maidens and dogs crowd my sight,  
Out walking the dear little paths, like my darling.  
Remember, back home, how we walked those white nights?

*1987–1990*

*Translated from the Russian by Maxim D. Shraye and Dolores Stewart*