

AFTERWORD
David Shraye-Petrov,
a Jewish Writer in Russia and America

MAXIM D. SHRAYER

The dual name of David Shraye-Petrov betokens his literary career. Born David Peysakhovich Shraer (Shraye is an Anglicized spelling), he was descended from Podolian millers and Lithuanian rabbis. His father, Peysakh (Petr) Borukhovich Shraye, an automobile engineer, came from an affluent Jewish family in Kamenetsk-Podolsk and was a naval officer during World War II. His mother, Bella Vulfovna Breydo, a chemist by training, came from the Broyda rabbinical dynasty of Šiauliai (Shavel) and Panevėžys (Ponevezh). As young people, both of Shraye-Petrov's parents made the transition from the former Pale of Settlement to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), where he was born on January 28, 1936. Growing up, Shraye-Petrov heard Yiddish in the traditional home of his paternal grandmother. Evacuated from his native Leningrad in the late summer of 1941, as the Nazi siege closed in, he spent three years in Siva, a Russian village in the Urals. Folk rituals and the richness of peasant dialects left an indelible imprint on the writer's imagination. In 1944, the eight-year-old Shraye-Petrov and his mother Bella Breydo returned to the devastated Leningrad. A Mediterranean-looking youth living in the city's

Vyborg working-class district, Shrayer-Petrov formulated the questions that his writings continue to probe to this day: Do Jews belong in Russia? Is assimilation impossible? Forty years later, in 1985–86, while living in Moscow and working on the first volume of his memoir-novel, *Friends and Shadows*, Shrayer-Petrov would apply these questions directly to himself as a Jewish-Russian writer: “Why do I not quote great Jews? I don’t know the language. I only know Russian. . . . To understand the difference between Russians and Jews . . .”

Shrayer-Petrov started medical school in 1953, the year of Stalin’s death, and entered the literary scene in the mid-1950s as a poet and translator of verse. He was one of the founding members of *Promka*, a literary seminar at the House of Industrial Cooperation, a group whose gatherings were attended by Vassily Aksyonov, Ilya Averbakh, Dmitri Bobyshev, Evgeny Reyn, and Leningrad’s other young literary lights. In 1958, upon the suggestion of the poet Boris Slutsky, he adopted the pen name “David Petrov,” the last name “Petrov” derived from Petr, the Russianized first name of his father Peysakh Shrayer. This assimilatory gesture hardly eased the publication of Shrayer-Petrov’s poetry in Russia. His first poetry collection was derailed in 1964 following the trial of the poet Joseph Brodsky for “social parasitism”; it finally came out, in expurgated form, in 1967. During his Soviet years Shrayer-Petrov made a name for himself as a literary translator (especially from Lithuanian and the South Slavic languages) and an essayist.

Two years after his marriage in 1962 to the philologist Emilia Polyak, Shrayer-Petrov completed his Ph.D. at the Leningrad Institute of Tuberculosis and moved to his wife’s native Moscow. His son Maxim was born in Moscow in 1967. By the early 1970s the relations between Jews and Gentiles became a principal concern of Shrayer-Petrov’s writing. In 1975–76 he composed poems where the disharmonies of his aching Russian and Jewish selves adumbrate

the writer’s conflict with the Soviet system. In “Chagall’s Self-Portrait with Wife,” the poet asks the levitating Bella, Chagall’s first wife: “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?” In “Early Morning in Moscow,” the poet encounters a janitor who “shovels the street, / rehearsing his snowy reverie / *dirty Jew dirty Jew dirty Jew* / in the camps I’d break your head in two.” Later the same day, a Jewish doctor comforts the poet as the echoes of the so-called Doctors’ Plot of 1953 sustain the rhythm and meaning of the poem: “The doctor knocks on my chest / rehearsing his wishful reverie / *one day we’ll one day we’ll one day we’ll* / be free to sing in the spring” (translated by Edwin Honig and Maxim D. Shrayer). Poems from Shrayer-Petrov’s period of unsettlement circulated in *samizdat*, adding to the writer’s publishing difficulties (many of them were later published in the West in his 1990 collection *Song of a Blue Elephant*).

In 1978, a scandal erupted following a televised reading at a poetry festival in Vilnius, Lithuania, where Shrayer-Petrov recited the controversial poem “My Slavic Soul.” In it, unable to cope with the anxieties of a Jew who is culturally Russian, the poet’s “Slavic” soul abandons his body, described as a “perennial, banal, so typically Jewish wrapping,” and hides in a hayloft. The officials of the Union of Soviet Writers, to which Shrayer-Petrov had been admitted in 1976 with great difficulty and resistance from the organization’s nationalist wing, threatened him with expulsion. The threat of ostracism for having transgressed the unspoken taboo on open treatment of Jewish subjects may have been the final draw, weaning the writer from his last illusions and pushing him to emigrate from the Soviet Union.

In January 1979 Shrayer-Petrov and his family applied for exit visas. Immediately fired from his academic position at the Gamaleya Institute of Microbiology and soon denied permission to emigrate,

Shrayer-Petrov became a *refusenik*. (The Russian term *otkaznik* means “the one who was *refused*, denied permission” to leave the Soviet Union. In its literal English translation, the term *refusenik* has acquired an ambiguity whose irony was hardly intentional: the Soviet authorities, not the Jews, were *refusing*, unless, of course, one also considers the fact that the *refuseniks* themselves had *refused* the ticket to Soviet paradise, some of them even renouncing Soviet citizenship). Following Shrayer-Petrov’s expulsion from the Union of Soviet Writers, three of his books—a novel, a poetry collection, and a book of translations from Lithuanian—were removed from production, their galleys broken. Except for a few reprints of his translations, Shrayer-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 at an emergency room lab, Shrayer-Petrov conceived of a panoramic novel about the mutilated destinies of Jewish *refuseniks*. *Herbert and Nelly*, one of the most significant and artistically compelling works to explore the massive exodus of Soviet Jews, awaits its English-language translator and readership. The novel exhibits a Tolstoyan sense of epic proportions in painting the lives of Jews from different walks of life sharing the plight of being *Refuseniks* and outcasts. The protagonist, Dr. Herbert Levitin, is a Moscow professor of medicine. His Jewishness evolves in the course of the novel from a prohibitive ethnic garb to a historical and spiritual mission. Levitin is married to Tatyana, a Russian woman of peasant stock, and their decision to emigrate ultimately results in the killing of their son in Afghanistan and Tatiana’s own death of grief. In documenting with anatomical precision the mutually unbreachable contradictions of a mixed Jewish-Russian marriage, Shrayer-Petrov also treats the story of Dr. Levitin as an allegory of Jewish-Russian history. The Jews’ marriage to Russia is doomed, the novels suggests to its Jewish readers. Emigrate or die! In book two of the novel, Palestinian drug

dealers, chess, and sex fuel the plot as Dr. Levitin finds transcendent love in his new beloved Nelly but eventually perishes in his struggle with the Soviet system. The complete edition of *Herbert and Nelly* was published in the post-Soviet Moscow in 1992.

Soon after Shrayer-Petrov and his family requested permission to emigrate from the Soviet Union, the KGB unleashed a series of persecutory measures against the writer and his family, ranging from arrests and physical harassment to a smear campaign in the press. The persecution intensified in 1985, when the publication of the first part of *Herbert and Nelly* was announced in Israel (it appeared in Jerusalem in 1986 under the title *Being a Refusenik*). In 1985–86, denunciatory articles against Shrayer-Petrov appeared in central and provincial Soviet newspapers. Shrayer-Petrov was labeled a “Zionist” author and accused of “infecting” Soviet Jews with a hostile ideology. A real threat of being prosecuted, charged with anti-Soviet activity, and imprisoned hung over the writer and his family throughout 1985–87.

In spite of the persecution, Shrayer-Petrov’s last Soviet decade was strikingly prolific. A *refusenik*’s isolation from the rest of Soviet society, coupled as it was with the pervasive sense of the absurdity of being a Jewish writer who is both silenced by and shackled to Russia, led to Shrayer-Petrov’s discovery of the prose form he calls *fantella*. One is tempted to decipher the author’s coinage as “fantastical novella.” How fantastical are these narratives? How fantastical are the Bible stories, Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, E. T. A. Hoffman’s *The Devil’s Elixir*, Gogol’s *Nose*, Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, Bashevis Singer’s *The Magician of Lublin*? In Shrayer-Petrov’s *fantellas*, love, talent, and miracles oppose (and sometimes vanquish) totalitarianism and philistinism. In the title story of this collection, the *fantellic* gift of the Jewish composer-*refusenik* Jonah returns a long-lost son to the singer Sarah. “In the Reeds,” the most overtly political story in the present collection, conjures up a bitter

parable of perestroika through the eyes of a genius who rescues his beloved and his fellow dissidents by helping the inept *partocrats* to escape. Exile and lovelessness are the double price the protagonist of "In the Reeds" pays for his own freedom. In "Dismemberers" (1987), also included in this collection, Olympia the author's beloved typewriter continues to type subversive stories even after her owner has left Russia for good (the *fantella* was composed in Shrayer-Petrov's apartment while Dan Rather and a CBS crew were filming a fragment about him for the special *Seven Days in May*). Central to all three of these *fantellas* is the figure of a nonconformist Jewish artist clashing with the regime (the composer Jonah of the title story, the inventor Gulliver of "In the Reeds," the writer-narrator of "Dismemberers").

Leaving for the United States on June 7, 1987, Shrayer-Petrov brought with him a manuscript of the first of the two books of memoirs he would publish abroad. He insists on calling them "novels with the participation of the author," and they offer fascinating opinions about the making of Jewish writers in the Soviet Union (including a discussion of Joseph Brodsky's tangled Jewishness). Of *Friends and Shadows*, Victor Terras wrote in 1990 that "in its intellectual honesty and emotional ingenuousness [Shrayer-Petrov's] is indeed an 'open book.'" Emigration and an outwardly calm life in New England afforded Shrayer-Petrov both distance and perspective. Among the most celebrated works emerging from Shrayer-Petrov's American years is "Villa Borghese," part dirge, part confession of a Jew's expired love for Russia. Putting aside tortuously nostalgic recollections, the poet confesses that "For you and us, Russia, no closeness survives, / We sons of Yehudah who used to be yours" (this English translation by Dolores Stewart and Maxim D. Shrayer appeared in *Salmagundi* in 1994). As with other doctor-writers, such as Anton Chekhov in Russian literature and William Carlos Williams in Anglo-American, the writings of Shrayer-

Petrov are characterized by both analytical exactitude and passionate humanism. Notes of a Chekhovian treatment of a child's desperately literal—hence unmistakably truthful—vision of life's treacherous gray are particularly audible in "David and Goliath." A story of disorientation and transit, "David and Goliath" was composed in Ladispoli, Italy, where the writer and his family spent most of the summer of 1987 awaiting their American refugee visas. In a number of works, Shrayer-Petrov's scientific interests dovetail with those of a fictionist. The writer's lifelong research on bacteriophages and his investigation of the career of the great French-Canadian microbiologist Félix d'Herelle have informed his recent novel, *The French Cottage*.

Spanning two decades of Jewish themes and characters, this collection retrospectively showcases about one third of David Shrayer-Petrov's short fiction. In a number of stories written after coming to America—"Hände Hoch!," "He, She and the Others," and "Tsukerman and His Children" in this collection—love and marriage between Jews and Gentiles continue to fuel the imagination of Shrayer-Petrov the belletrist. Some of them gently ironic, others sharply polemical, the short stories about Jewish-Russian émigrés in America have become his form of popularity, and Shrayer-Petrov contributes to periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Jews and Russians are the "two peoples [who] are the closest to me in flesh (genes) and spirit (language)," Shrayer-Petrov wrote in 1985, less than two years before emigrating from Russia. Rooting into his adopted land and its culture, Shrayer-Petrov features a greater variety of American characters. In three stories chosen for this collection—"Old Writer Foreman," "Hurricane Bob," and "Hände Hoch!"—as in the other recent fiction, Shrayer-Petrov inscribes his (autobiographical) émigré writers into the landscapes and culturescapes of his adopted country. Writing in Russian about

the anonymity of American life, an anonymity that is both liberating and stifling, Shrayer-Petrov also assumes a greater role in the Englishing of his short fiction. Might he not wake up one day, magically equipped to write in English about his own America—Jewish-Russian, Russian-Jewish, ever unhyphenated?

Suggested Further Reading

Selected Books by David Shrayer-Petrov

- Forma liubvi* (Form of love). Moscow: Argo-risk, 2003.
- Barabany sud'by* (Drums of fortune). Moscow: Argo-risk; Tver': Kolonna Publications, 2002.
- Zamok v Tystamaa* (Töstemaa Castle). Tallinn: Aleksandra, 2001.
- Frantsuzskii kottedzh* (French cottage). Providence, R.I.: APKA Publishers, 1999.
- Piterskii dozhl* (Petersburg Doge). St. Petersburg: Petropol', 1999.
- Propashchaia dusha* (Lost soul). Providence, R.I.: APKA Publishers, 1997.
- Moskva zlatoglavaia* (Gold-domed Moscow). Baltimore: Vestnik, 1994.
- Gerbert i Nelli* (Gerbert and Nelli). Moscow: GMP Poliform, 1992.
- Villa Borgeze* (Villa Borghese). Holyoke, Mass.: New England Publishing, 1992.
- Pesnia o golubom slone* (Song about a blue elephant). Holyoke, Mass.: New England Publishing, 1990.
- Druz'ia i teni: roman s uchastiem avtora* (Friends and shadows: Novel with the participation of the author). New York: Liberty, 1989.
- V otkaze* (Being a Refusenik). In *V otkaze*, 147–242. Jerusalem: Biblioteka Aliia, 1986.
- Poeziia i nauka* (Poetry and Science). Moscow: Znanie, 1974.
- Kholsty* (Canvasses). In *Pereklichka*, 115–60. Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1967.

About David Shrayer-Petrov

- Bobyshev, Dmitrii. "Shraer-Petrov, David." In *Slovar' poetov russkogo zarubezh'ia*, edited by Vadim Kreyd et al., 432–34. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo russkogo khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 1999.
- Gandel'sman, Vladimir. "Roman s uchastiem vremeni" (Novel with the participation of time). *Vestnik* 13 (1992): 32–33.
- Katsin, Lev. "Kogo razdrazhaet boroda Tsukermana i pochemu. . .?" (Who is irritated by Tsukerman's beard and why. . .?). *Evreiskii mir*, 31 January 1997.
- Lesnykh, R. "Raskaianie obmanutogo" (Repentance of the deceived one). *Fakty i argumenty*, 8 April 1986.
- Lukić, Irena. "Razgovor: David Šrajer-Petrov. Život u tri dimenzije" (Conversation: David Shrayer-Petrov: Life in three dimensions), *Vijenac*, 20 May 1999.
- Sapgir, Genrikh. "Introduction." In *Gerbert i Nelli*, by David Shraer-Petrov. (Moscow: GMP Poliform, 1992), 3–4.
- Terras, Victor. Review of *Druz'ia i teni* (Friends and shadows), by David Shrayer-Petrov. *World Literature Today* 64, no. 1 (1990): 148.
- . Review of *Moskva zlatoglavaia* (Gold-domed Moscow), by David Shrayer-Petrov. *World Literature Today* 69, no. 2 (1995): 388–99.
- . "Roman ob otkaznikakh" (Novel about Refuseniks), *Novoe russkoe slovo* 28 Dec. 1992.
- . "Villa Borghese." *Novoe russkoe slovo* 3 July 1992.
- Tukh, Boris. "Legko li byt' russkim pisatelem v Amerike?" (Is it easy to be a Russian writer in America?). *Vesti* (Tallinn), 22 Jan. 1999.

Parts of the Afterword originally appeared as "Shrayer-Petrov, David" in *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sorrel Kerbel (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 534–36.

Copyright © 2003 by David Shraye-Petrov and Maxim D. Shraye
Copyright (specific stories) © 1987, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1999,
2000, 2002, 2003 by David Shraye-Petrov

All Rights Reserved

First Edition 2003

03 04 05 06 07 08 6 5 4 3 2 1

The short stories published in this collection are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, or to actual locations, is entirely coincidental.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.∞™

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shraye-Petrov, David.

[Short stories. English. Selections]

Jonah and Sarah : Jewish stories of Russia and America / David Shraye-Petrov; edited by Maxim D. Shraye.— 1st ed.

p. cm.—(The library of modern Jewish literature)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8156-0764-4 (alk. paper)

I. Jews—Fiction. I. Shraye, Maxim, 1967– II. Title. III. Series.

PG3549.S537 A2 2003

891.73'44—dc21 2003009848

Manufactured in the United States of America

JONAH AND SARAH

JEWISH STORIES OF RUSSIA AND AMERICA

DAVID SHRAYE-PETROV

Edited by Maxim D. Shraye



Syracuse University Press