

This volume celebrates the literary oeuvres of David Shroyer-Petrov—poet, fiction writer, memoirist, playwright, essayist, and literary translator (and medical doctor and researcher in his parallel career). Author of the refusenik novel *Doctor Levitin*, Shroyer-Petrov is one of the most important representatives of Jewish-Russian literature. Published in the year of Shroyer-Petrov's 85th birthday, almost thirty-five years after the writer's emigration from the former USSR, this is the first volume to gather materials and investigations that examine his writings from various literary-historical and theoretical perspectives. By focusing on many different aspects of Shroyer-Petrov's multifaceted and eventful literary career, the volume brings together some of the leading American, European, Israeli and Russian scholars of Jewish poetics, exilic literature, and Russian and Soviet culture and history.

"This fascinating collection provides many insights into one of the finest poets and an outstanding writer, David Shroyer-Petrov, who made a significant contribution to Russian and Jewish cultures. This multi-facing study explores many topics—from Shroyer-Petrov's life, his variety of themes, genres, and styles to textual and cultural sources of his poems, short stories, and novels. ... *The Parallel Universes* is the best thing written about the writer and an essential reading for all who are not indifferent to literature and culture."

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— Dennis Sobolev, University of Haifa; author of *Jerusalem and The Split World of Gerard Manley Hopkins: An Essay in Semiotic Phenomenology*

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ISBN 978-1-64469-526-5



THE PARALLEL UNIVERSES OF DAVID SHROYER-PETROV

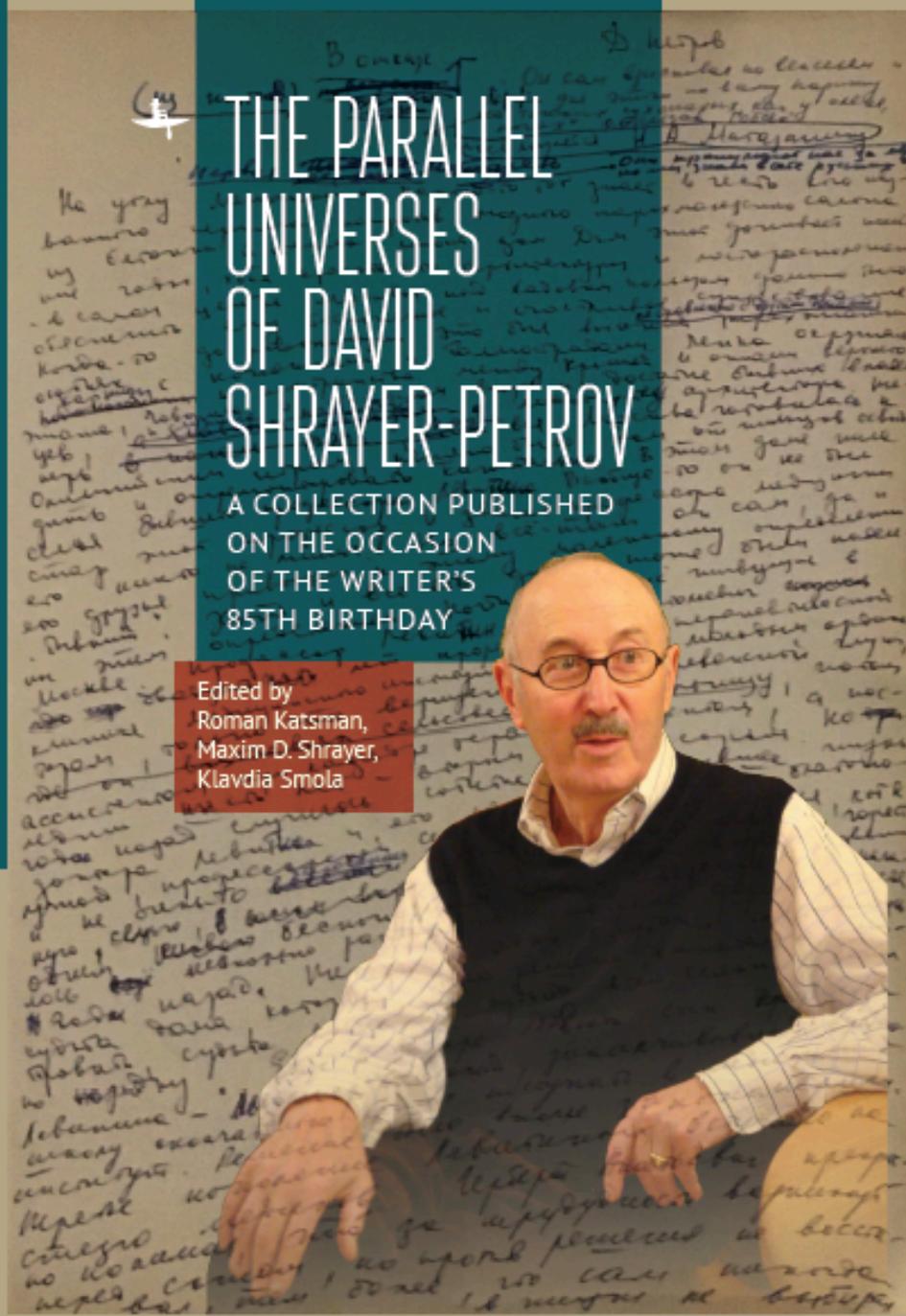
A COLLECTION PUBLISHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE WRITER'S 85TH BIRTHDAY

Edited by Roman Katsman, Maxim D. Shroyer, Klavdia Smola

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A Collection Published on the Occasion  
of the Writer's 85th Birthday

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A Collection Published on the  
Occasion of the Writer's  
85th Birthday

Edited by

**Roman Katsman,  
Maxim D. Shrayer,  
Klavdia Smola**

BOSTON  
2021

## Acknowledgements

The editors gratefully acknowledge the support of Boston College.

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

**Names:** ShraYer-Petrov, David, honouree. | Katsman, Roman, editor. | Shrayer, Maxim D., 1967- editor. | Smola, Klavdiĭa, editor.

**Title:** The parallel universes of David Shrayer-Petrov : a collection published on the occasion of the writer's 85th birthday / edited by Roman Katsman, Maxim D. Shrayer, Klavdia Smola.

**Other titles:** Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe and their legacy.

**Description:** Boston : Academic Studies Press, 2021. | Series: Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe and their legacy | Includes bibliographical references and index.

**Identifiers:** LCCN 2020050411 (print) | LCCN 2020050412 (ebook) | ISBN 9781644695265 (hardback) | ISBN 9781644695272 (paperback) | ISBN 9781644695289 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781644695296 (epub)

**Subjects:** LCSH: Shraer-Petrov, David--Criticism and interpretation. | Russian literature--Jewish authors--20th century--History and criticism. | Russian literature--Jewish authors--21st century--History and criticism. | Russian literature--United States--20th century--History and criticism. | Russian literature--United States--21st century--History and criticism.

**Classification:** LCC PG3549.S537 Z84 2021 (print) | LCC PG3549.S537 (ebook) | DDC 891.73/44--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020050411>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020050412>

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Book design by Lapiz Digital Services

Cover design by Ivan Grave

Published by Academic Studies Press

1577 Beacon St.

Brookline, MA 02446, USA

[www.academicstudiespress.com](http://www.academicstudiespress.com)

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# Preface\*

Roman Katsman, Maxim D. Shrayer, Klavdia Smola

This volume celebrates the literary oeuvres of David Shrayer-Petrov (Давид Шраер-Петров)—poet, fiction writer, memoirist, playwright, essayist, and literary translator (and medical doctor and researcher in his parallel career).

David Shrayer-Petrov is one of the most important representatives of the Jewish-Russian literature that gained its shape and form during the post-Stalin years, developed in both officially sanctioned and underground conditions, subsequently emigrated from the USSR along with its creators, and is presently dispersed across many countries and five continents. A product of three historical epochs and a bearer of three dimensions—Soviet, émigré, and transnational—Jewish-Russian culture has transcended national boundaries. Once vibrantly alive, it is starting its descent into the depths of history and memory. This is why the task of studying and documenting its rich and diverse legacy has become especially urgent today.

Published in the year of David Shrayer-Petrov's eighty-fifth birthday, almost thirty-five years after the writer's emigration from the former USSR, this is the first volume to gather materials and investigations that examine his writings from various literary-historical and theoretical perspectives. By focusing on many different aspects of Shrayer-Petrov's multifaceted and eventful literary career, the volume brings together some of the leading

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American, European, Israeli, and Russian scholars of Jewish poetics, exilic literature, and Russian and Soviet culture and history.

\* \* \*

Born on January 28, 1936 in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), David Shrayer-Petrov entered the Soviet literary scene in the late 1950s as a poet and translator. He published a collection of poetry, many literary translations, and two books of essays in the 1960s and 1970s. Exploration of Jewish themes put Shrayer-Petrov in conflict with the Soviet authorities, limiting publication of his work and prompting him to emigrate. A Jewish refusenik in 1979–1987, Shrayer-Petrov lived as an outcast in his native country but continued to write prolifically, despite expulsion from the Union of Soviet Writers and persecution by the KGB. “Jews and Russians are the two peoples . . . closest to me in flesh (genes) and spirit (language),”<sup>2</sup> Shrayer-Petrov wrote in early 1986, less than two years before emigrating from Russia. He was finally allowed to emigrate in 1987, settling in the United States. Since emigrating, Shrayer-Petrov has published ten books of poetry, ten novels, six collections of short stories, two plays, and four volumes of memoirs. He is best known for the trilogy of novels about refuseniks and the exodus of Jews from the USSR. The English translation of *Doctor Levitin*, the first part of the trilogy, was published in 2018. In a 2014 interview, Shrayer-Petrov commented on his experience as an immigrant writer: “Most of my recent stories fashion Russian—Jewish-Russian—characters living in America. In this sense, I’ve become an American writer. . . . I think that I’ve rooted myself in New England. It has become my second—now my main—habitat.”<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

Our volume consists of four sections and an addendum. Essays in the first section offer overarching views of David Shrayer-Petrov’s life and works. Klavdia Smola considers the question of the writer’s place in Jewish-Russian

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2 David Shraer-Petrov, *Druz’ia i teni. Roman s uchastiem avtora* (New York: Liberty Publishing House, 1989), 9.

3 Maxim D. Shrayer and David Shrayer-Petrov, “Dinner with Stalin: A 3-Part Conversation with David Shrayer-Petrov,” *Jewish Book Council / My Jewish Learning*, July 8–10, 2014, <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/crypto-jews-and-autobiographical-animals-part-3-of-a-3-part-conversation>.

culture, Roman Katsman analyzes the distinct features of Shrayer-Petrov's poetics in the context of late Soviet artistic nonconformism, while Maxim D. Shrayer offers a panoramic view of the writer's literary biography in dialogue with Jewish, Russian and American exilic literature.

The second section gathers together studies of David Shrayer-Petrov's poetry. Ian Probststein casts a long glance at Shrayer-Petrov's collections and cycles of poetry, written both in Russia and in America, while also identifying leitmotifs and prosodic trends. In his "notes in the margins," Oleg Smola regards such key terms of Shrayer-Petrov's poetry as fate and destiny, Jewishness, and Russianness, as well as his (neo-)futurist poetics and love lyric. Stefano Garzonio devotes his essay to the Italian themes and motifs in Shrayer-Petrov's poetic oeuvres. Andrei Ranchin contributes a detailed reading and analysis of one poem, thereby delving deep into Shrayer-Petrov's poetic laboratory. Finally, Evgeny Ermolin investigates one of the central literary-biographical lifelines in Shrayer-Petrov's career—his friendship with the "avant-garde classic" Genrikh Sapgir.

The third section of the volume focuses its attention on the refusenik trilogy, which has brought Shrayer-Petrov the most recognition. Klavdia Smola examines Shrayer-Petrov's writings in the context of the Jewish renaissance and the "*aliyah* literature" of the late Soviet period. Joshua Rubenstein zooms in on the theme of Jewish revenge as a psychocultural phenomenon in Shrayer-Petrov's refusenik fiction. Brian J. Horowitz considers the interrelationship of the author and his protagonist in *Doctor Levitin*—the first part of the refusenik trilogy. In her essay, Monica Osborne reads the novel as a reflection of the changing Jewish identity and of the relations between the Jewish community and power—both in the USSR of the late 1970s and early 1980s and in the present-day diaspora.

Essays, collected in the volume's fourth section, contribute to the study of Shrayer-Petrov's artistic prose. Marat Grinberg leans upon the figure of the writer "Grifanov" in Shrayer-Petrov's refusenik trilogy and draws far-reaching parallels between the writings of David Shrayer-Petrov and Yuri Trifonov. Leonid Katsis pursues various textual and cultural sources of Shrayer-Petrov's historical novel *Yudin's Redemption*, and in doing so unearths evidence of the spiritual quest that was characteristic of Soviet Jewish intelligentsia of the late Soviet period. Boris Lanin anatomizes the novella "Dinner with Stalin"—one of Shrayer-Petrov's best known works of short fiction—and also steeps it in the context of Russian-language prose, both Soviet and émigré, about the mythologization of Stalin.

The four sections of this volume reflect some, albeit not all, of the principal vectors of David Shroyer-Petrov's creativity. It is our hope that this book will serve as a catalyst for further study of his life and work. The addendum (Post Scriptum) is comprised of materials that could serve as a foundation for further study. Those include a long conversation with Maxim D. Shroyer, which raises a number of new and relevant questions, many of them related to the writer's "Jewish secret." The addendum also includes a curated pictorial biography, which highlights David Shroyer-Petrov's literary and professional formation and development. A detailed bibliography of the writer's publications concludes the volume.

*August 2020*

*Giv'at Shmuel, Israel—South Chatham, MA—Dresden, Germany*

# To Kill the Leader: The Morphology of David Shraye-Petrov's Novella “Dinner with Stalin” \*

Boris Lanin

David Shraye-Petrov's novella “Dinner with Stalin” (Russian: “Obed s vozhdem,” literally “Dinner with the Leader”) was composed in 2008 in Boston.<sup>1</sup> An exemplary text, it embodies the classical narratological notions of the form of the novella.

The novella features a limited number of characters—the participants of the dinner party with the visiting Georgian actor, Stalin's double. The action is restricted to one encounter, one dinner party conversation among a group of émigrés from the USSR, all of whom live in a small American city on the East Coast. The historical context is mostly introduced by the characters' direct speech.

The very opening of the novella contains a prompt: multilayeredness. The narrator, endowed with the author's own biographical features, tells historical anecdotes about doubles and doubleness. In the first anecdote,

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1 See David Shraye-Petrov, “Obed s vozhdem,” in D. Shraye-Petrov, *Krugosvetnoe schast' e. Izbrannye rasskazy* (Moscow: Knizhniki, 2016), 196–215. See Maxim D. Shraye's commentary in David Shraye-Petrov, *A Dinner with Stalin and Other Stories*, ed. Maxim D. Shraye (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 241–244.

on the balcony of an opera house, at the end of the 1890s, the memoirist saw Pushkin, as an old man. The memoirist was so struck by this that during the intermission he ran to Pushkin's box to assure the great poet that he had never accepted his death after the duel as real. [. . .] Just before the memoirist reached the box, someone whispered to him that Pushkin's son Aleksandr, already an old man, was present in the theater.<sup>2</sup>

In the second anecdote, the storyteller attends a poetry reading in the 1980s Moscow:

Looming behind the last row of chairs, like the legendary cop Uncle Styopa sprung from the pages of children's verses, was the tall figure of the chief poet of the Soviet land, Sergey Mikhalkov, author of the lyrics to the Soviet national anthem. What was he doing here among the semi-destitute brotherhood of third-rate literati?<sup>3</sup>

In the first anecdote Pushkin's aged son is perceived as his resurrected father; in the second, Mikhalkov's twin brother suddenly makes an appearance at a public poetry reading and then leaves, satisfied by the effect of false recognition. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote this about doubles and double-voiced discourse:

This transferal of words from one mouth to another, where the contents remains the same although the tone and ultimate meaning are changed, is a fundamental device of Dostoevsky's. He forces his heroes to recognize themselves, their idea, their own words, their orientation, their gesture in another person, in whom all these phenomena change their integrated and ultimate meaning and take on a different sound, the sound of parody or ridicule.<sup>4</sup>

Let us note this forcing of one's "characters to recognize themselves" and proceed with the analysis of Shraye-Petrov's novella.

The initially declared multilayeredness prevents one from forming a superficial impression about both characters and the depicted event.

2 David Shraye-Petrov, "Dinner with Stalin," tr. Aleksandra Fleszar and Arna B. Bronstein, in *Dinner with Stalin and Other Stories*, ed. Maxim D. Shraye (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 121.

3 Shraye-Petrov, "Dinner with Stalin," 122.

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 217; cf. the original in M. M. Bakhtin, *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (Kiev: NEXT, 1994), 118.

It demonstrates how encounters with doubles influence those who, by dint of circumstance, stand in their path.

It is evident that the structure of the novella is linked to its composition and storytelling technique. The first-person narrative is meant to render the narration more authentic, to convince one not only of the verisimilitude, but of the genuine truth of what is being related.

The literary scholar Mikhail Petrovsky (1887-1937), who devoted much attention to the morphological qualities of the novella as genre, identified two framing elements of the kernel of the novella plot: *Vorgeschichte* and *Nachgeschichte*, which he translated as, respectively, plot prologue (*siuzhetnyi prolog*) and plot epilogue (*siuzhetnyi epilog*). The *Vorgeschichte* of “Dinner with Stalin” are the two anecdotes—about Pushkin’s son and Mikhalkov’s twin brother—which serve to tune the readers attention.

Petrovsky stated that in the novella:

[...] everything must be directed toward capturing the attention of the listener (or reader) with the narrative flow, so that the impression from the novella be complete and uninterrupted [indeed!—B.L.]. The attention must be captured and strained, like a taut bowstring, and there must be the target which the arrow hits. Only then does the act of straining obtain its meaning and justification.

The hand is the narrator [Рука — рассказчик]. Just how taut is the bowstring of attention and how precisely the narrative “hits” the target.<sup>5</sup>

The narrator in “Dinner with Stalin” exudes self-irony. He denounces the way he is mesmerized by Stalin’s entrance to the dinner party: now the narrator wants to stuff Stalin’s pipe, now he is so taken with him that he forgets to take care of his own wife and the dinner table. The narrator only briefly digresses to comment on the guests’ characteristic behavior. He sticks strictly to the overarching line of the narrative. This line consists in demonstrating that the arrival of “Stalin” provokes the guests at the gathering and unearths their subconscious phobias. According to Petrovsky’s observation, “by itself the strained predicament as it is experienced by its participants should appear less strained for the exterior contemplators. The better the contemplator is informed of all the circumstances, the more calm and unbiased his reflection [of the narrative].”<sup>6</sup> This is exactly how the

5 M. A. Petrovskii, “Morfologiya novelly,” in *Ars Poetica*, ed. M. A. Petrovskii, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, 1927), 76.

6 *Ibid.*, 88.

narrative works in Shraier-Petrov's story. In Petrovsky's view, "the unity of perspective [единство аспекта] thus creates a greater dynamics of the story. This way the unity of perspective is the most essential element in the novella's dynamic structure and, besides its natural function also serves as a unifying element."<sup>7</sup>

In the novella "Dinner with Stalin" Stalin functions as the agent provocateur. Actually, Stalin himself could not have been present at a dinner party for a group of Soviet émigrés in America; Stalin has been long dead. However, his double appears there. The situation becomes deliberately complicated. The guests await the arrival of the actor who has successfully transformed himself into Stalin. The host drives to the airport to pick up the guest. When they return from the airport, the guest turns out none other than Stalin himself. Nowhere does it state that this is an actor playing Stalin, a double, in fact. Noteworthy is the servility and toadying, with which the guest and the hosts play up to Stalin. When he enters—understandingly a double—the host, a giant of a man, shrivels up and minces behind him: "Гриша как бы сократился в росте, съёжился. Шажки стали мелкими и голова внаклонку" ("Bristling, Grisha seemed to have shrunk in height. His steps were tiny, and his head was bent down").<sup>8</sup> The double gets drunk, not too keen on the hors d'oeuvres, and mixing the fine Georgian wine "Alazan Valley" with the Grey Goose vodka, even though just a little while back, in the collective imagination of those gathered at the dinner table, he swam "somewhere outside of the realm of that wonderful meal" ("где-то вне реальности прекрасного застолья").<sup>9</sup> He does not feel like getting to know the guests, has no reason to remember their names—everything will have fallen into place as the dinner party unravels.

But for Stalin's double the dinner party is also an opportunity to ask questions, in essence, to interrogate. The enormous distance between him and the other dinner guests allows him to ask any question. These questions serve as a test of the author's mythological thinking.

A real Stalin invades the body of the actor; he remembers the names of those long deceased, recalls the details and specifics. Quite soon it becomes apparent that the visiting actor from Tbilisi's Marjanishvili Theater has turned doubleness into his main métier. For him being Stalin's double is both a joy and a fine pleasure. The actor remembers the anti-Stalin long poem,

7 Ibid., 90.

8 Shraier-Petrov, "Obed s vozhdem," 203; Shraier-Petrov, "Dinner with Stalin," 125.

9 Ibid.

composed by the narrator back in 1956; he recalls once meeting the couple of artists from among the émigré gathering at a meeting they attended as young people half a century ago; then recollects meeting Zhora's father, a nuclear physicist. He has not just studied and mastered Stalin's biography and his inner and outer circle; the actor has become an ageless portrait of Dorian Gray, and the original, alas, does not share his appearance with Wilde's beautiful protagonist:

Лицо у него было нечисто выбрито, или так казалось из-за неровной рябоватой кожи — следствия перенесенного фурункулеза или даже оспы. Но усы! Классические усы Вождя. У детей сталинской эпохи остался в памяти портрет Сталина во френче или шинели, маршальской фуражке, с трубкой, на горловину которой упирались усы. Усы любимого Сталина.

("His face was not cleanly shaven, or it seemed that way owing to his uneven, pockmarked skin, the result of having had bad acne or even smallpox. But his mustache! The leader's classic mustache. Children of Stalin's time still remember Stalin's portrait in a military jacket or overcoat, a Marshal's brimmed cap, and a pipe with his mustache pressed against its mouthpiece. Beloved Stalin's mustache.")<sup>10</sup>

In the novella the mustache is glorified as the leader's principal attribute. They become the detail-motif which is given a special place in the end of the novella.

Only two guests pose questions to Stalin, and these questions most of all bespeak the ones asking them. The couple from Erevan, Vlad and Asya, like to ask questions with a psychological seasoning, although, as the narrator puts it, "not without a distinctive Soviet seasoning being detectable in their arguments" ("советская подкладка не отпускала").<sup>11</sup> Their problem is how to solve the Karabakh question by "using psychology" ("психологически"). The same problem preoccupies the hosts, a mixed Armenian-Azeri couple. Psychology, as it were, is not of concern to Stalin; his recipe is to execute the instigators from both sides. But the matter can no longer be contained just to instigators of national conflicts: now Stalin the actor is fiercely attacking the young artists: "Враги и предатели

10 Shraer-Petrov, "Obed s vozhdem," 206; Shraye-Petrov, "Dinner with Stalin," 127–128.

11 Shraer-Petrov, "Obed s vozhdem," 207; Shraye-Petrov, "Dinner with Stalin," 128.

уничтожили мои портреты и мои скульптуры, чтобы унижить достоинство нашей социалистической Родины! А вы и не попытались защитить и сохранить произведение искусства. Разве я не прав?” (“Enemies and traitors destroyed my portraits and my statues to demean the honor of our socialist Motherland! And you didn’t even try to defend and protect a work of art. Am I not right?”).<sup>12</sup>

Stalin is the embodiment of the unconscious of the ones gathered at the dinner table; he is their secret idol. Grisha, the party host, imagines himself as a true beneficiary, even though he is nothing but a “butler” at Stalin’s benefit performance. And now the lyrical moment has arrived: after Grisha’s announcement, the guest from Tbilisi recites a Russian translation of Stalin’s poem “Morning,” and then the same poem in the original Georgian. Sycophancy grows and soars up to the ceiling, when one of the guests, Elya, retrieves her accordion, and all the others follow and sing “March of the Artillerymen” (“Marsh артиллеристов”) with its famous refrain “Artillerymen, Stalin ordered you! Artillerymen, our country calls to battle!” And now the culmination: the actor’s a toast in praise of the actor himself: “Comrades, let’s drink to the Motherland! To Stalin!” Moreover, the emboldened and inebriated actor confronts Mira and Alyosha: “А вам что, особое приглашение?” (“And you, do you two need a special invitation?”).<sup>13</sup>

This question, both somewhat obnoxious and haughty, turns out to be fatal for the whole dinner party. Mira, the narrator’s wife, asks questions for all the others at once, and her questions become a denunciation:

— Хватит нам этого маскарада! . . . почему для мира на земле и прогресса человечества понадобилось фабриковать дело кремлёвских врачей-убийц? Зачем было ломать суставы рук и ног моему дяде, знаменитому хирургу, прошедшему всю войну? Ради какой высокой идеи надо было готовить массовое выселение евреев, как это было сделано с немцами Поволжья, крымскими татарами и чеченцами? Зачем, если не для того, чтобы завершить геноцид, начатый Гитлером?

(“We’ve had enough of this masquerade! . . . why it is that in order to have peace on earth and humanity’s progress it was necessary to fabricate the Kremlin doctors’ plot. Why was it necessary to break the joints of my uncle’s

12 Shraer-Petrov, “Obed s vozhdem,” 209; Shraer-Petrov, “Dinner with Stalin,” 130.

13 Shraer-Petrov, “Obed s vozhdem,” 213; Shraer-Petrov, “Dinner with Stalin,” 132.

arms and legs, he a famous surgeon who spent the entire four years saving lives at the war front? For the sake of what lofty ideal was it necessary to design mass deportations of Jews, as had been done earlier to the Volga Germans, the Crimean Tatars, and the Chechens? For what, if not to complete the genocide of Jews Hitler had started?"<sup>14</sup>

Mira covers her face with a napkin and sobs. Stalin's double now faces a moment of retribution: for his bravado, for having tried on the leader's effigy, ultimately, for the choice to venerate Stalin. As it turns out, he has nothing to say in response, except for tired propagandistic formulas from Soviet newspapers and perestroika-era antisemitic newspapers.

Mikhail Petrovsky suggested that the "arrow" of the narration may not hit the target at all, but rather hit the target "only flatways."<sup>15</sup> In that case one could not speak of the full realization of the genre, but only of approaches to the genre. As a realization and embodiment of the world, the genre demands a correspondence to specific criteria. If such a correspondence does not occur, then the reader faces a different world, living in accordance to other principles. In the course of his analysis of some of Boccaccio's novellas, Petrovsky notes that one could not call them fully realized novellas; they have remained anecdotes, or, in the best case, "novella-anecdotes." These "novella-anecdotes" lack the point, that which "can hit and penetrate [the target] with the arrowhead, and therein lies the art of the storyteller [искусство рассказчика]. The sharpness of the novella's final effect is its point (arrowhead)—the technical term of the novella's composition."<sup>16</sup>

The pitiful actor from Tbilisi has exhausted his rhetorical arsenal. To quote the leader does not mean to be one, but it does mean to be responsible for the delivered quotations. Alyosha delivers the verdict to Stalin: "Да вы, к сожалению, и сейчас живы! Явились с того света и продолжаете смердеть!" ("But unfortunately you're alive now! You have returned from the other side, and you continue to emit a foul odor.")<sup>17</sup> After these words Alyosha rips a hunting rifle from the wall. Belatedly, the guest from Tbilisi tears off his glued-on mustache, tries to stop Alyosha, but it is too late: a shot is fired.

14 Shraer-Petrov, "Obed s vozhdem," 213; Shrayer-Petrov, "Dinner with Stalin," 133.

15 Petrovskii, "Morfologiya novelly," 75.

16 Ibid., 75–76.

17 Shraer-Petrov, "Obed s vozhdem," 215; Shrayer-Petrov, "Dinner with Stalin," 134.

Riddled with pellets, the painting behind Stalin's back bears symbolic significance. The actor plays Stalin against the backdrop of a painting based on Pushkin's narrative long poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, and yet this "fairy tale" is the childhood of so many who were executed by bullet. The actor from the Georgian theater played Stalin with delight, with pleasure, and he had lost himself in the act of playing. And thus one more question lingers: Could it be that Stalin had once lost himself in playing Stalin?

Mikhail Petrovsky underscored that both structural elements, *Vorgeschichte* and *Nachgeschichte*, are potentially (implicitly) present in the text: "Only in one case—that of the cohesion of the kernel plot with the death of the hero—can the plot epilogue [*Nachgeschichte*] be consumed by the middle part, the very 'Geschichte' of the plot."<sup>18</sup> This is what happened in Shrayer-Petrov's novella: the rifle firing at Stalin, the culmination of the "very *Geschichte*," consumes the *Nachgeschichte*. But what actually happens in the novella? Is the actor deadly frightened or killed? Who is deadly frightened or killed, the actor or Stalin? This remains understated. Petrovsky writes: "The effect of an incomplete denouement consists in a retrospective shifting of the center of story's semantic gravity from the *facts* to the *attitude* toward them. *Factually* (plotwise) the knot has not been untied, but *architectonically* (formally) all the components are apparent, except the place of denouement is filled with a special (not factual) semantic content."<sup>19</sup>

So is the actor killed? Is Stalin killed?

Petrovsky makes an important observation regarding the wholesomeness and completeness of the novella: "The *understatedness* of the denouement does not constitute the story's incompleteness, for the completeness of the story is defined by the way it is delivered and by its composition, and not by the completeness of some life-related content, always fictional in an artistic work."<sup>20</sup> In this sense "Dinner with Stalin" is, without a doubt, a complete novella.

When Stalin dropped into the abyss of jokes and became something like Chapayev (the legendary hero of the Civil War and subject of numerous—and largely irreverent—popular Soviet-era jokes), he had thereby gained

18 Petrovskii, "Morfologija novelly," 73.

19 Ibid., 87.

20 Ibid., 87.

a true immortality. Even today in Russia tens of thousands of people still honor the tyrant and long for his authoritarian and willful rule. His “charm” grew out of the base pleasure of hearing a nighttime knock at the neighbor’s, and not one’s own, door. Before it had gained the quotation marks, this ability to manipulate the emotions of people had been noted by urban folklore.

After the first reading of Shrayer-Petrov’s novella the reader is puzzled by its title. Why “Dinner with the Leader,” and not “Dinner with Stalin”? (In the English translation, which lent its title to the third translated collection of Shrayer-Petrov’s stories, this question is resolved in favor of greater historical clarity.) After all, Grisha returns from the airport with Stalin, and not with the actor, whose real name we would never learn throughout the story. It is precisely the presence of Stalin that renders Grisha, “a man of gigantic height with a bull’s unbending neck and head,” so pitiful, diminished, mincing. The role of the title is to serve as a tuning fork for the narration, but not only that. The title is also a synecdoche of the novella itself. The willingness to share a dinner table with the leader a priori provokes all the ones present at the dinner, demanding their co-participation in the leader’s ethical legitimization. To share a table with him means, to some extent, to forgive and understand the table-mate.

“What does the title of the novella point to?” Petrovsky wonders. And he goes on to explain:

It must obviously highlight a substantial moment in the story. Any story, in the end, is a story about that which its title announced. [. . .] But the title stands outside the temporal order of the narration. It is not so much at the beginning, as above, over the entire novella. Its significance is not the significance of the opening of the novella, but is commensurate with the novella as a whole. The novella is related to its title in a synecdochic fashion: the title co-implies the novella’s content.<sup>21</sup>

Let us recall that in literature the conceptualization of Stalin started after his death. One of the first to turn to the figure of Stalin was Vasily Grossman. Although Stalin had treated Grossman with a lack of trust, he had not had him arrested or punished; however, year after year Stalin personally crossed Grossman’s name from the list of candidates for the Stalin Prize. And he added some writers to the list. Stalin crossed Grossman

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21 Petrovskii, “Morfologija novelly,” 92.

out, but he did not have him arrested, he did not destroy him or dispossess him, and he allowed Grossman to write as the others were allowed to write. The only correction was made in the novel, which Grossman really wanted to title *Stalingrad*. But Mikhail Sholokhov, not a friend of Jews, to put it mildly, stood up and opined: “Is that whom you trusted to write about Stalingrad!” Stalin had his own hierarchy, and Sholokhov’s words reached him. According to the recollections of the writer Semyon Lipkin, a close friend of Grossman’s, Grossman was told that his novel could not bear such a title.

For Grossman, Stalin is a totally magical figure. Grossman’s artistic discovery lay in the fact that his image of Stalin was deprived of psychology. Grossman does not study Stalin’s psychology the way Anatoly Rybakov would subsequently attempted to study it in the novel *Children of the Arbat* [*Deti Arbata*], drawing abundantly from various sources. Psychology appeared only in Stalin’s actions, whereas Grossman’s prose on principle refused to engage in psychological analysis of Stalin’s image. Stalin was “something” that did not succumb to psychological analysis. Stalin’s actions had *fatal* consequences, *created* fate. They could bring happiness, or could bring unimaginable, unsurmountable misfortune. Grossman depicts Stalin’s actions. Stalin sings a little song, and one feels chilled to the bone from a fear of consequences. Stalin affixes his signature to a piece of paper, and entire nations are transferred to such place where no people had lived before. Stalin makes a call to Pasternak, and this call is remembered forever, simply forever. For Grossman Stalin is a symbol of humanity’s enslavement. He is one person who has chained millions.

Two short chapters from Grossman’s *Life and Fate* are devoted to Stalin. Prior to making an appearance in them, Stalin is reflected in images—like in mirrors—and manifests himself through destinies of the novel’s different characters. Stalin is shown through the eyes of people who observe him, follow his every move. The image of the tyrant is woven from fear and adulation, hate and love, loyalty and provocation. He himself had architected this terrifying life, and for many decades after his death the stable regime sustained it.

In Grossman’s last work *Goodness Be To You!* (*Dobro vam!*), published posthumously, a colossal monument to Stalin appears already in the opening pages. Nobody came to meet the writer, who arrived to Erevan in order to translate into Russian a novel by an Armenian writer. A gigantic Stalin, hanging over the city, greeted Grossman upon his arrival. Even a cosmonaut

flown in from a distant planet would immediately see and recognize Stalin, towering over Armenia's capital, notes Grossman. Along with the base, the height of the monument was seventy-five meters (almost 256 feet). It looked as though clouds touched the bronze brimmed hat on his head:

He towers over Erevan, over Armenia, he towers over Russia, Ukraine, over the Black and the Caspian sea, over the Arctic ocean, over the East Siberian taiga, the sands of Kazakhstan. Stalin is the state. [...] All heads bowed before the master, the leader, the builder of the Soviet state. Stalin's state expressed Stalin's character [Государство Сталина выразило характер Сталина]. In Stalin's character was expressed the character of the state he built.<sup>22</sup>

Published in the USA in 1981, the book by Ilya Suslov (the émigré humorist who had founded the popular "12 Chairs Club" in Moscow's *Literary Gazette*), was given the title *Stories of Comrade Stalin and Other Comrades*.<sup>23</sup> The book's foundation was folklore about Stalin captured in the form of *belle-lettres*. According to a review in then the Parisian émigré magazine *Kontinent*,

the very style of these stories (although they include commonly known jokes and anecdotes), their very style parodies the style of instructive, "hagiographic" slobbery-didactic stories about Lenin or Dzerzhinsky. To put it simply, the style of these stories, precisely parodied by Suslov, [...] unequivocally betrays ideology by showing that it amounts to a creation of religion without God, that such ideology is a parody of religion. Thus I. Suslov's stories are a parody of parody.<sup>24</sup>

Here is an example particularly fitting for the subject of this article:

### A Double

Comrade Beria ran over to see Comrade Stalin and said:

"Comrade Stalin, a double of yours is walking around Moscow. Same height, age, voice, and mustache. What are we going to do, comrade Stalin?"

22 V. Grossman, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. S. I. Lipkin, vol. 2 (Moscow: Vagrius, 1998), 151.

23 Il'ia Suslov, *Rasskazy o tovarishche Staline i drugikh tovarishchakh* (Ann Arbor, MI: Hermitage, 1981).

24 Review of Il'ia Suslov, *Rasskazy o tovarishche Staline i drugikh tovarishchakh*, *Kontinent* 33 (1982): 412.

“Shoot him!” comrade Stalin gave a brief answer.

“Perhaps we should shave off the mustache?” comrade Beria pensively asked.

“We could also do that,” comrade Stalin agreed.<sup>25</sup>

The mustache is a constant feature of Stalin’s perception. The visiting actor in Shrayer-Petrov’s novella disowns his inner Stalin when, upon seeing rifle pointing at him, he tears off the glued-on mustache, that symbols of doubleness.

Suslov’s stories about Stalin have been circulated in collections of urban (or “intelligentsia”) folklore. They can be found in the collection *USSR in the Mirror of Political Jokes (Sovetskii Soiuz v zerkale politicheskogo anekdota)*, 1985; expanded edition 1987), edited by Dora Shturman and Sergei Tiktin, or in Yuri Borev’s two-volume set *The Staliniad (Staliniada)*, 1990) and *Phariseia (Fariseia)*, 1992). Not surprisingly, the collections do not contain references to Ilya Suslov’s book. But Suslov himself, in publishing his stories, borrowed them from the legends and jokes he had heard. He was writing about the Soviet tyrant Stalin, but he recreated a Chapayev of popular Soviet jokes.

Anatoly Gladilin’s short story “A Friday Rehearsal” (“Repetitsiia v piatnitsu”), written in 1974 prior to Gladilin’s emigration but originally published abroad,<sup>26</sup> reminded the reader of the possibility of a Stalinist restoration. The story is based on fantastical circumstances: Stalin has been removed from the Lenin Mausoleum yet not buried but rather preserved for a return at an opportune time. In view of an astonished guard Iosif Vissarionovich rises from a comfortable coffin, modified and outfitted for long-term storage and preservation, and leaves his abode. Stalin’s appearance at meeting of a regional party economic council sends all those present into a state of trepidation, but only initially. Immediately people come forward who organize a mass adoration of the leader who has returned to service. Rosy-checked Komsomol members organize scientific-technical seminars, sprouting up right there in the foyer of the regional party committee and devoted to Stalin’s legacy.

However, nothing is the same in the once mighty and perfectly functioning Stalinist empire. It is impossible even to gather a rally at the town square: the work day is over; those who are not already drunk have gone back home to

25 Il’ia Suslov, “Iumor tovarishcha Stalina,” *Vremia i my* 1 (1975): 212.

26 Anatolii Gladilin, *Repetitsiia v piatnitsu. Povest’ i rasskazy* (Paris: Tret’ia volna, 1978), 3–21. The story was first published in Russia in *Iunost’* magazine (*Iunost’* 2 [1991]).

watch TV, and Stalin is not even allowed to speak on the local station. In fact, a major soccer game is being transmitted live, and the one to interrupt the transmission, even in favor of a political event, would forever become an enemy of the working Soviet people.

But that is not all. The problem runs deeper: the neo-Stalinists who now hold power have asserted a new style of nomenclature. For simpler folks everything has remained unchanged, even though the means of control have grown weaker: even during the work day one can now venture out to a store or to run other errands. The Stalinist mechanism had gradually come undone, and there is no one left who would carry out executions for gathering bread stalks in the fields or arrests for being five minutes late to work. The party elite is no longer interested in reanimating the leader and teacher. The resulting status quo suits everybody, which is why in Gladilin's story Stalin is not allowed to appear on TV and instead is retired to a classified secret base.

During the years of perestroika, the production of the Moscow State University's Student Theater based on Viktor Korkiya's play *A Black Person, or I, Poor Soso Dzhugashvili* (*Chernyi chelovek, ili Ia, bednyi Soso Dzhugashvili*, 1988) enjoyed phenomenal popularity among the Moscow intelligentsia. Following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party (1956) Stalin's writings were no longer reprinted, and the playwright conflated themes from Stalin's epoch with a dotted plotline, enriched with quotations from classical works: *Hamlet*, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and *Little Tragedies*, and others.

Thus the post-Stalinist conceptualization of the epoch continued, grew a baggage of new works. However, the absence of final and categorical de-Stalinization was (and has remained) the socio-political backdrop for such a conceptualization. To the present day this serves as a foundation for the appearance of school textbooks of history with the assertion of Stalin's alleged "managerial abilities," for the deliberately lowered numbers of victims of Stalin's regime, for calls "not to demonize" him, for the praise of Stalin's alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church and so on.

The very tradition of the annual laying of flowers at his grave by leaders of the Russian Communist Party, who form a faction of the Russian Federation's Duma, constitutes a shameful trampling of the humanistic foundations of Russian society. A photograph of Aleksandr Prokhanov, one of the leaders of today's Russian "red-browns" (*krasno-korichnevye*),

praying on his knees before a bust of Stalin at his grave, has become an icon for the new generation of Stalinists.

The novella “Dinner with Stalin” strikes me as the concluding note in the tradition of Russian-language prose about the mythologization of Stalin. With this note—this shot—David Shroyer-Petrov has succeeded in creating closure in the conceptualization of the recurrent outbreaks of Stalin’s cult. One must put an end to them. Not to debate, not to fool around with Stalin’s legacy or to tell jokes, not to join dinner parties with Stalin reenactments, and not to play at questions and answers. There will be no honest answers, because there were no interrogations: no one has managed to interrogate Stalin.

Rifle. Shot. Period.

*Translated, from the Russian, by  
Maxim D. Shroyer*

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**Andrei Ranchin**, professor of philology at Moscow State University, is the author of over seven hundred publications on the history of Old Russian literature and Russian literature from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Among his interests are the Old Russian lives of the saints, writings of Mikhail Lomonosov, Edokiya Rastopchina, Nikolai Gogol, Lev Tolstoy, Nikolai Leskov, the poetry of Joseph Brodsky, and the poetics of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He has published commentaries to Russian writers' works, textbooks, and children's tales. He had been the recipient of the Yury Tynyanov Prize (1994), Arkady Belinkov Prize (1995), the Novyi Mir Prize (2013) and other prizes. Ranchin's books include *Essays on Old Russian Literature* (1999), *Joseph Brodsky and Russian Poetry of the Eighteenth–Twentieth Centuries* (2001), *A Garden of Golden Words: Old Russian Book Culture Through Interpretations, Analyses and Commentaries* (2007), *A Guide to Afanasy Fet's Poetry* (2010), *About Brodsky: Reflections and Analyses* (2016), *The Tale of Igor's Campaign: A Guide* (2019) and others.

**Joshua Rubenstein**, Boston-based author and scholar, was on the staff of Amnesty International USA from 1975 to 2012 as the Northeast regional director. He is also a long-time associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. In the spring of 2015, Mr. Rubenstein became associate director for Major Gifts at the Harvard Law School. Working as an independent scholar, Rubenstein is the author of many books, including *Soviet Dissidents, Their Struggle for Human Rights and Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg*. He is the co-editor of *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (recipient of a National Jewish Book Award in the category of East European Studies). He is the co-editor of *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov* and of *The Unknown Black Book, the Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories*. Rubenstein contributed a concise interpretive biography of Leon Trotsky to the Jewish Lives series at Yale University Press. His most recent book, *The Last Days of Stalin* (2016), has been translated into nine languages.

**Maxim D. Shrayer**, translanguing author, scholar, and translator, was born in Moscow and emigrated in 1987 with his parents, David Shrayer-Petrov and Emilia Shrayer. He is professor of Russian, English, and Jewish studies at Boston College and Director of the Project on Russian and Eurasian Jewry at the Davis Center, Harvard University. Shrayer is the author and editor of nearly twenty books of criticism and biography, fiction and nonfiction, and poetry. His books include *The World of Nabokov's Stories, Russian Poet/Soviet Jew, Yom Kippur in Amsterdam, Bunin and Nabokov: A History of Rivalry* (which was a bestseller in Russia), *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*, and, most recently, *Antisemitism and the Decline of Russian Village Prose* and *Of Politics and Pandemics: Songs of a Russian*

*Immigrant*. He is the editor of *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature* and *Voices of Jewish-Russian Literature*. Shroyer is a Guggenheim Fellow and the winner of a National Jewish Book Award. His works have appeared in ten languages.

**Klavdia Smola**, a Moscow-born scholar, is professor and chair of Slavic literatures and cultures at the Department of Slavic studies, University of Dresden (Germany). She obtained her PhD at the University of Tübingen, taught at the University of Greifswald, and was research fellow at the universities of Jerusalem, Moscow, Barcelona, Constance, and Cracow. She authored the books *Types and Patterns of Intertextuality in the Prose of Anton Chekhov* (2004, in German) and *Reinvention of Tradition: Contemporary Russian-Jewish Literature* (2019, in German). Smola co-edited *Jewish Underground Culture in the Late Soviet Union* (Special Issue of *East European Jewish Affairs*, 2018); *Russia—Culture of (Non-)Conformity: From the Late Soviet Era to the Present* (special issue of *Russian Literature*, 2018, with Mark Lipovetsky); *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures after Communism* (2016, together with Dirk Uffelmann); *Jewish Spaces and Topographies in East-Central Europe: Constructions in Literature and Culture* (2014, in German, together with Olaf Terpitz), and *Eastern European Jewish Literatures of the 20th and 21st Centuries: Identity and Poetics* (2013).

**Oleg Smola**, author and literary scholar, was born in Georgievsk, Stavropol Region and graduated from Moscow State University. He holds a *kandidat nauk* (PhD equivalent) and *doktor nauk* (habilitation equivalent) degrees in philology. He worked as an editor at the journal *Voprosy literature* (*Questions of Literature*) and, from 1973-1995, as a researcher at the Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Oleg Smola's work has focused on the study of poets and poetry. In his own words, "perhaps this has to do with the fact that Pushkin and Lermontov has each visited my native town twice. Pushkin stayed at the building with an annex, which a century later would become School no. 3, where I studied for the first four years." Oleg Smola is the author of numerous articles about Andrei Voznesensky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksandr Blok, Vladimir Mayakovsky and other poets. His books included: *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Life and Work* (1977), *Nikolay Aseev's Lyrical Poetry* (1980), "Black evening. White snow . . .": *The Creative Story and Destiny of Blok's Long Poem The Twelve* (1993), "If words ache . . ." (co-authored with Klavdia Smola, 1998).

### **Translators**

**Anastasia Degtyareva** holds a degree in linguistics from Lomonosov Moscow State University. She has been working as a freelance translator since 2015 and specializes in the fields of humanities and social sciences. She lives in Moscow.

**Dobrochna Fire** was born in Łódź, Poland, and grew up in the United States. She holds a PhD from Harvard University in Slavic languages and literatures. Her translation credits range from articles to books, children's literature to scholarly works and include Edward Kopówka's *Jews in Siedlce: 1850–1945* and Szymon Zakrzewski's *Yoke of the Night: Along*

*the Trail of the Bowed*, both from Polish. Her copyediting credits include *The Staszów Yizkor Book* and Maxim D. Shrayer's *Of Politics and Pandemics*.

**Daria Sadovnichenko**, a native of Moscow, graduated from the Russian State University for the Humanities. She will receive an MA in Russian literature at Boston College in 2021. As Maxim D. Shrayer's research assistant, she had worked on a number of research projects, including a cultural history of the 1943 Krasnodar Trial and Russian émigré poetry. She has also translated Russian poetry into English.

**Maxim D. Shrayer** (see above).

### **Praise for *The Parallel Universes of David Shroyer-Petrov***

“This fascinating collection provides many insights into one of the finest poets and an outstanding writer, David Shroyer-Petrov, who made a significant contribution to Russian and Jewish cultures. This multi-facing study explores many topics—from Shroyer-Petrov’s life, his variety of themes, genres, and styles to textual and cultural sources of his poems, short stories, and novels. Many essays illuminate the brilliant mind and the innovations of David Shroyer-Petrov. The bibliography compiled by his son Maxim D. Shroyer is a vital contribution to this book and helps to appreciate the outstanding achievements this poet, writer and translator. *The Parallel Universes of David Shroyer-Petrov* the best thing written about the writer and an essential reading for all who are not indifferent to literature and culture.”

- Valentina Polukhina, University of Keele; author of *Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for Our Time* and *Brodsky Through the Eyes of His Contemporaries*

“The book contextualizes, analyzes, and celebrates the work of a nonconformist writer who for several decades explored the thought, the feel, and the fantasy of Russian-Soviet-Jewish, Jewish-refusenik, and Jewish-immigrant-American experience. The studies collected in this volume discuss the ways in which the hyphenated literary identity of David Shroyer-Petrov enters an interface with a variety of intellectual communities without catering to their biases or expectations.”

- Leona Toker, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; author of *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intertextual Reading* and *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*

“This book, devoted to the prose and poetry of the brilliant Jewish-Russian writer David Shroyer-Petrov, both from his Soviet and his American periods, is more than a collection of essays. The first book devoted to the works of Shroyer-Petrov, it is a thoroughly conceived and impressively structured full-length study of Shroyer-Petrov’s literary exploration of Russian and Soviet Jewry. The nuanced psychological reflection, sharp socio-historical vision and high aesthetic qualities of Shroyer-Petrov’s literary works make them of significant interest both to those who self-identify with the refuseniks’

worldview and to those who oppose it on political or ethical grounds. The same is true of *The Parallel Worlds of David Shrayer-Petrov*. Bringing together a powerful group of scholars, among them some of the leading students of Russian-Jewish culture, this is an outstanding study which is bound to attract the attention of different audiences, with diverse personal experiences, worldviews, and convictions.”

- Dennis Sobolev, University of Haifa; author of the novel *Jerusalem* and *The Split World of Gerard Manley Hopkins: An Essay in Semiotic Phenomenology*