Preface*

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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.

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Born on January 28, 1936 in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), David Shraye-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 Shraye-Petrov in conflict with the Soviet authorities, limiting publication of his work and prompting him to emigrate. A Jewish refusenik in 1979–1987, Shraye-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),”² Shraye-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, Shraye-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, Shraye-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.”³

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

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

3 Maxim D. Shraye and David Shraye-Petrov, “Dinner with Stalin: A 3-Part Conversation with David Shraye-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 Shrayer-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. Shrayer, 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 Shrayer-Petrov's literary and professional formation and development. A detailed bibliography of the writer's publications concludes the volume.

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