

Maxim D. Shrayer's 'A Russian Immigrant: Three Novellas'

A quietly powerful addition to the canon of émigré literature.

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Before Maxim D. Shrayer became a professor of literature and Jewish Studies at Boston College, he spent over eight years as a refusenik in the Soviet Union. The son of Jewish-Russian intellectuals, Shrayer was born in 1967 and grew up in Moscow until he and his family emigrated in 1987. He arrived in the U.S. at age 20, and studied émigré literature at Brown, Rutgers, and Yale. He now directs the Project on Russian and Eurasian Jewry at Harvard's Davis Center.

"A Russian Immigrant," his new collection of three novellas, follows Russian Jew Simon Reznikov as he pursues his academic and literary career in America along a trajectory that parallels Shrayer's own.

Shrayer's troika of stories leaps between space and time with all the chaos and pathos of immigrant literature. The reader follows Simon to Russia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, and the American cities that are home to his various universities. Wherever he goes, Simon's new experiences resurface his Soviet past, scrambling the temporality of narration. Sometimes, thirty years pass in a paragraph. Sometimes, time is suspended altogether: "Paní Zrzavá spoke an émigrée's prewar Russian, unblemished and frozen in time" ("Bohemian Spring"). Simon is woven into a tightly knit culture that travels time and space. He vacations with other Russian Jewish families whether he is "by the shores of the Baltic or black Sea" or on the "unkempt lawns in the Russianized Catskills" ("Borscht Belt").

Just as Simon holds onto his Russian Jewish roots, Shrayer preserves many traditions of immigrant literature. His characters face the typical experiences of adjusting to America: "Stepan Agarunov became Steve Agarun, and Doktor Marat Gavriilovich Agarunov became Dr. Mark Agarun" ("Borscht Belt"). The novellas counteract the cultural erasure of Americanization by reviving the people, places, and memories of the past. In doing so, Shrayer offers readers another favorite staple of Russian-American writing: hilarious tales of Russian grandparents in America. In "Borscht Belt," two Russian Jewish grandparents play ball with their granddaughter in the Catskills: "'Throw up ball, Mishellochka,' the Russian grandparents were both screaming in English. 'Throw up.'" But although Shrayer is part of this community, unlike many Russian-American writers, Shrayer has authored over fifteen books in English and Russian, writes literary prose in both languages, and translates his own English-language works into Russian.

Readers need not have a special fondness for immigrant literature to enjoy Shrayer's blend of humor and poignancy. When Simon misses the friends he knew "from the age of zero," he compares his nostalgia to illness: "Nostalgia, he was learning, was like an acute infection, and time and distance eventually cured it. Unless, of course, it turned into a chronic condition" ("Brotherly Love"). Equally often, his reflections on his roots are bleakly funny: "Like most young Jews in the Soviet Union of the 1980s, he was doomed to pursue a degree in engineering" ("Brotherly Love").

This book will also find an enthusiastic audience among ardent students of literature. In the first novella, "Bohemian Spring," Shrayer creates a riveting plot almost entirely centered around an archive, the papers of a Jewish Czech author Simon is studying in graduate school. Lovers of literature can follow a trail of literary references, from the Russian canon to "Soviet unsentimental education" ("Brotherly Love"). Simon belongs to the specific culture of Russian Jewish émigrés in America, but through his love of literature, he shares an imagined community with all of his readers.

"Take me to the lake, darling," Madame Yankelson said and led Simon across the meadow. "I'm leaving the parasol with you," she said to Lydia Shmukler, who silently nodded. From her white rocking chair, Madame Yankelson picked up a sequined purse the shape of a Maltese dog.

As they walked across the front lawn in the direction of the lake, Madame Yankelson put more weight on his right arm, as though trying to shift the direction.

"I know a secluded spot. There's a little bench there, and a marvelous view of the mountains,"

she said to Simon.

Instead of following the main alley, they veered off to the left, walking on a narrower path, which first dropped, then corrected its course. They finally came to a clearing with the promised bench and ensnared shrubs behind its back. Through an opening between tree trunks, one could see three bands of color—milky-blue sky, pea-green woods, and ink-grey road. Like a child's innocent painting, uncluttered by people.

"I would like you to read some of your poems to me," said Madame Yankelson, half turning to Simon and resting her bare arm on the back of the bench.

"My poems?" Simon muttered. "How do you know I write poems?"

"I read, my young friend, I read émigré magazines," she replied.

"Well, perhaps another time, Madame Yankelson," he said, somehow unable to put things right.

"I will be your best audience," Madame Yankelson insisted.

She took a thin brown cigarette out of her purse.

"I don't suppose you smoke, no? Well, you should know that I've been inspiring poets since I was a young lady." Holding the cigarette between her thumb and index finger, Madame Yankelson inhaled with affect. "You don't believe me?" she uttered with a labored laugh.

"No, I—"

"Mayakovsky himself was very fond of me, you know."

"Mayakovsky?"—now Simon couldn't hide his curiosity. It wasn't very often that one ran into people who knew the great poet.

"To explain I would have to tell you my age. And a true lady never reveals her age," said Madame Yankelson, making the kind of upward motion of her neck and cheekbones that was meant to pull back the furrows and wrinkles.

"Madame Yankelson, you're as young as you look," Simon said, horrified by the platitudes he was prepared to spout.

"Thank you, you're becoming a very dear friend," she said, removing a perfumed handkerchief from her purse. She waved the handkerchief, letting its skein brush against her lips.

"We moved from Riga to Moscow in 1925. I was thirteen," Madame Yankelson said, beginning her story. "My father was a renowned gemologist. He started working as an expert at the Central Jewelry trust."

"So you're originally from Riga," Simon interrupted.

"You're a student of literature. You must have heard of my famous relative, Roman?" said

Madame Yankelson.

“Roman Yankelson is your relative? The great medievalist?”

“My second cousin. Same last name. Their branch is also from Riga,” Madame Yankelson affirmed, her voice feigning indifference. “Roman and I were a few years apart. When we emigrated, he was living in Boston, actually in Cambridge. I believe he had already retired. My late husband, too, was still alive, and we saw Roman in Manhattan when he was in town for a conference. I can’t say he was dying to embrace his long-lost relatives.”

“Why not?” Simon asked, naively.

“He had himself baptized, you know. Non-Jewish wife, non-Jewish family. You know how it goes.” A toadish frown crept onto Madame Yankelson’s face, but she immediately chased it away with her white fleshy hand.

“I said to him: ‘Romochka, why do you need this nonsense? You want to write about Prince Igor, be my guest, but you don’t need to go to their church and convert to feel more Slavic.’ I don’t think Roman or his Slovak wife liked hearing this. And he didn’t even ask about the family that stayed behind in Riga. still, Roma was my cousin, and when he passed on, I went down to Boston for his funeral.”

“Madame Yankelson,” Simon asked, trying to steer the conversation back to Mayakovsky and poetry. “You moved to Moscow from Riga—”

“Oh yes, in 1925.” she picked up the dangling story. “Moscow was terribly overcrowded. At first we lived in an awful hole in the wall—even though my father was getting a very good salary and had connections. Finally—this was already 1926 — my father managed to secure two rooms in a very decent apartment. Communal, of course, but that’s the way it was back in those days. We moved to Gendrikov Lane, a very nice central location—you’re from Moscow, you should know where it is.”

“Vaguely,” Simon said. “Isn’t it somewhere near the Taganka Theater?”

Madame Yankelson sighed and dabbed off tiny beads of dew on her forehead.

“I was a girl, but already a young woman,” she continued. “Now imagine: we’re moving in. It’s a hot sunny day in June. My father is at his office, my mother is running around and supervising the movers, and I’m just standing in everybody’s way, wearing a lovely little sailor dress with ribbons and frills, taking everything in. And suddenly I see a big handsome man with a shaved head descending the stairs. At first I thought he was mean-spirited, but then he smiled at me—not even a full smile, but a half smile and a flicker in his eyes—and I could tell he was a gentle soul. ‘Hello, young lady,’ he said. ‘Let’s get acquainted. I’m Mayakovsky.’ ‘I’m Violetta Yankelson,’ I said. ‘Are you by chance related to my good friend Romka Yankelson?’ he asked me in such a way that I felt I could trust him completely. And, may the Lord punish me if I’m lying to you, I felt that I would have done anything for this beautiful sad man. Anything.”

“So you lived in the same building as Mayakovsky?” Simon asked, just to make sure he

understood her correctly. The whole story was so fabulous.

Excerpted from “A Russian Immigrant: Three Novellas” published by Cherry Orchard Books.

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