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'Of Politics and Pandemics: Songs of a Russian Immigrant'

Maxim D. Shrayer reflects on America's dark years in verse

By Michele A. Berdy

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Writer and translator Maxim D. Shrayer **Lee Pellegrini**

Maxim D. Shrayer was born in Moscow in the family of a writer and medical scientist, David Shrayer-Petrov, and a translator, Emilia Shrayer. His family applied to emigrate, and after more than eight years as refuseniks, they left for the U.S. in 1987 when Shrayer was 20 years old. In the U.S. Shrayer attended Brown University and then received his Ph.D. from Yale. He is presently a Professor of Russian, English, and Jewish Studies and co-founded the Jewish Studies Program at Boston College.

Shrayer is the author, editor or translator of twenty books in English and Russian. His prose in English includes documentary novels and short stories. "Of Politics and Pandemics: Songs of a Russian Immigrant" is his first book of poetry in English. It loosely follows the period from November 2019 to May 2020, in the U.S. and world, with occasional travel into the author's

remembered Soviet past.

The Moscow Times asked Shrayer about the memories and associations from the past few years — and few decades — summoned by the year 2020 and how they took form in poetry.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Before I emigrated at age 20, I was already writing poetry in Russian and beginning to publish. I had steadfastly held onto my Russian poetic identity, whereas I fairly quickly began to write fiction and non-fiction, and of course, academic work and criticism in English. I never thought I would be writing satire. And I honestly never considered myself a political writer.

But in the late fall of 2019 I began to feel this sense of political hopelessness, initially from the early election campaign and the impeachment trial. As a former Soviet, as a Jew, as certainly a humanist and a person of a liberal sensibility, I felt somehow let down by everything. So initially this was a kind of spontaneous outpouring of despair and angst that channeled itself into political satire.

And then in around March 2020 when COVID-19 really descended on us – or ascended on us from the underworld — I quickly realized that I cared less about politics and more about questions of survival. I'm married to a doctor working with COVID patients, and my father, who's a writer and a doctor, worked in the cholera epidemic of 1970 in Crimea. I felt emotionally, intellectually connected to these questions.

So, it was a system of moving parts where the political invited thinking about Soviet politics and totalitarianism, and then the epidemiological situation invited essential and existential questions — and that, too, brought back childhood memories.

I quickly found myself in conversation with some Russian poets and some American poets who had written very sharp political things in America, specifically Frost or also Carl Sandberg, and in Russia — as you can imagine, it's a very large list.

The connection with the Soviet past in the book is not in the realm of regret or out of a sense of feeling cheated, but rather in the realm of identifying things in the Trumpian American history that people should see and recognize. The writing on the wall is quite apparent or has been. And in general, I am very interested in the idea of the writing on the walls of history and why people don't see it when it's already there.

As is very often the case in poetry, some of the explanations for using "The Trump" rather than simply "Trump" are formal — it adds an additional unstressed syllable, which in metrical poetry sometimes makes a huge difference between a perfect line and imperfect one. But mainly, I felt as though I was representing something bigger than this particular person, this particular real estate developer or billionaire and this particular president, but rather a kind of larger than life, mythological, terrifying figure.

[The last poem that ends with the lines "The world makes no sense / it's lost its innocence] is very deliberately in conversation with "The House on the Hill," a villanelle by the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson. The past year has been a year of millions of Americans' shedding their illusions about this country... but the loss of innocence doesn't mean

something lasting, but more like a rude awakening.

How well do I remember coming here in 1987 and hearing so many Americans say, “This is the best country, you know, nothing bad will ever befall you.” Americans had been living with this (now I think) false idea that disasters could not happen here. I think people will think twice now.

Lev and Igor

Lev and Igor, princely lions
gave some money to the Trump,
“I love Jews,” he told them (lying),
they teared up and joined his camp.

Then they turned to dashing Rudy
who dispatched them to Ukraine,
where a scandal was gently brooding
over the end of the gravy train.

Then the Trump pressured Zelensky
and Congress said: “Investigate!”
Lev and Igor were quickly linked to
the emerging Ukrainegate.

Poor pigeons, Lev and Igor...
You’ve been thrown under the bus!
You’re in jail now, both eager
to impeach your former boss.

Lev and Igor, cruel fortune,
A Russian Immigrant mourns your fate.
Politics is not your forte—
better stick to real estate.

Ode to Absurdity

Coronavirus crowns your lifespan,
Corovavirus serves your latte,
Corozovirus carves your buttons,
Corojovirus rolls your smokes.

The Trump pretends he didn’t know
that viruses could be so lethal
and millions (that included grandpa)
had perished from the Spanish flu.

Meantime the candidates infect us
with sluggishness and hopeless banter,
their videos just won’t go viral,

their slogans only irritate.

Our country, like a drunken cruise ship,
is sailing toward the great pandemic,
I'm running out of disinfectant,
and only vodka clears the soul.

Look Homeward and Recoil

for Anna Brodsky-Krotkina

I heard Ms. Tereshkova at the Duma,
her face was shiny and her perm was iron-clad,
the speech she gave couldn't be any dumber,
I listened and I thought: boy, am I glad
that we gave up this paradise of Soviet ladies
who wear party suits and hate the West,
who breathlessly live into their eighties
like mad *matreshkas* fallen out of the nest.

She was the first, the glorious *kosmonavtka*,
but not the first to dress the Leader's arse
with kisses though she wasn't a nut case,
her speech was not a constitutional farce.
Her message was: the foreign agents send us
their viruses across the airspace,
we need a mighty ruler to defend us,
Tsar Vladimir will shield us from disgrace.

I watched the speech by Valentina Tereshkova,
she looked so good, her eyes so brutally kind,
she was a perfectly post-Soviet cover
for everything we immigrants left behind.

A Prayer for Italy

for Stefano Garzonio

Death dares not rhyme with Italy,
for Italy only rhymes with vita—
perhaps not always sweet, yet vibrantly
alive, beloved, undefeated.

To Russian Jews this love came free,
here we spent our Roman holiday,
we rested, one foot in Ladispoli,
the other in America's doorway.

O Italy, who will steal your bicycles

and rent Umberto D.'s old lodgings?
Milan, devoid of your miracles
the world feels so lonely.

What use are verses of remembrance
when the Italian earth is trembling,
when Bergamo, like a frenzied ambulance,
is racing to its day of reckoning?

The Tiber meets the sea at Ostia,
the Arno sleeps at Ponte Vecchio.
These broken rhymes, a feeble offering…
My friends in Italy, I pray for you.

Cholera in Crimea

And I remember a photo: a military
Man, clean-shaven like a billiards ball
Genrikh Sapgir

I don't remember the epidemic, just the panic:
August 1970, Sebastopol, the smell
of rotting apricots, my mother's dainty tunic,
Uchkuevka beach, the cotton heat, the groundswell

of fear. Seething lines at the ticket office,
vacationers like wartime evacuees.
The talk of spreading illness. Words like "orifice"
or "dehydration" hanging in the breeze.

The hasty packing. My collection of stag beetles
forgotten on the windowsill. Our train
arriving at Kursk Station. Empty bottles.
My parents kissing on the platform. Reunion.

I didn't know another parting was near:
my father, a doctor, would be dispatched to Crimea.

Taking Stock of the Past Five Months

There is nothing more to say
Edwin Arlington Robinson

The world makes no sense:
Over the past five months
it's lost its innocence.

We've learned the art of distance,
we've mastered wearing masks;
the world makes no sense,

we’re living in a trance,
without its daily tasks
it’s lost its innocence.

What happened to the scents
of life and simple tastes?
The world makes no sense,

what do we tell ourselves:
that our world is nuts,
it’s lost its innocence?

Will we regain our strength?
Will we recover our wits?
The world makes no sense,
it’s lost its innocence.

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