

**Mary Besemeres**  
**Travels through Russian in English:**  
**Dale Pesmen, Maria Tumarkin, Maxim Shrayer**  
**and Gary Shteyngart**

## Introduction

The ‘travels through Russian in English’ of the four authors discussed here took place in different directions, for different reasons, and at different times. American artist Dale Pesmen’s *Russia and soul* (2000) is a work of anthropology, a retrospective mining of Pesmen’s fieldwork in the Siberian town of Omsk, between 1990 and 1994, for what she learnt there of Russian *dusha* (or soul). Australian historian Maria Tumarkin’s memoir *Otherland: a journey with my daughter* (2010) recounts six weeks of travel with her twelve-year-old daughter, Billie, in Russia and Ukraine in 2008 – Moscow, Kiev, St Petersburg and Tumarkin’s birthplace of Kharkov – against the background of migration to Australia with her parents in 1989, aged fifteen. American literary scholar Maxim Shrayer’s *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* (2013) is an account of the nine *refusenik* years, 1978-1987, from his eleventh till his twentieth birthday, during which he and his parents waited for permission to leave the Soviet Union. Finally, American writer Gary Shteyngart’s *Little Failure* (2014) describes his early childhood in the Soviet Union and his growing up the United States, after migrating there aged seven with his parents in 1979. Pesmen is the only one of these authors not born in the Soviet Union, and not from a Russian-speaking background. Her language travel,<sup>1</sup> then, took her into Russian from (American) English, whereas the other three all moved initially from Russian into (American or Australian) English, with later return trips to post-Soviet Russia and Russian. All four authors are Jewish, and write of Russian-Jewish experience – in Pesmen’s case, the most obliquely, of how Jewishness shadows her provisional, adopted Russianness; in Tumarkin’s, additionally, of Ukrainian-Russian-Jewish experience. All four texts invoke ways of being with others which are possible in Russian, that is, possible among Russian-speakers, and translate these skilfully into English. Their engagement with these lingua-cultural<sup>2</sup> ways of being is the focus of my paper.

There are definite parallels between the concerns of these writers – particularly with the question of what it is to be Russian, Jewish and English-speaking - and the concerns of Vilém

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<sup>1</sup> See Besemeres, ‘Anglos Abroad: Memoirs of Immersion in a Foreign Language’, *Biography* 28.1 (2005): 27-42.

<sup>2</sup> Attinasi and Friedrich.

Flusser in the essays collected as *The Freedom of the Migrant*. In “The Challenge of the Migrant”, Flusser writes: “The attachments that bind the settled person to the people and things of his heimat are mostly hidden. They extend beyond adult consciousness into childish ... regions, into memory that is not well articulated. A mundane example: the Czech dish called *svickova* [beef tenderloin roast] awakens in me feelings that are hard to analyze but to which the German word *Heimweh* [homesickness] comes close. The loss of heimat allows fresh air into this hidden feeling, this comfortable murkiness, and shows it for what it is: the seat of most (perhaps even all) prejudice, that is, judgements that are made prior to all conscious judgments.” (Flusser 2003: 4)

Flusser goes on to describe ‘habituation’ as ‘a blanket of cotton wool’ that blocks out any new phenomena (Flusser 2003: 13), and takes this further, arguing that ‘Habit is not merely a fluffy blanket that conceals all; it is also a mud bath that is very pleasant to muck about in. Homesickness is *nostalgie de la boue*’ (Flusser 2003: 85). He writes ‘the mysterious bonds that bind one to the people of one’s heimat (such as love and friendship, but also hate and enmity) pull at the emigrant because they place in question the freedom that he has gained through his suffering.’ (Flusser 2003: 5) This is a compelling and bracing account of migrant freedom. However, in this paper I trace how in their memoirs, Tumarkin, Shteyngart and Shroyer continue to identify with certain culturally Russian ways of interacting, despite having left the Soviet Union due to experiences of anti-Semitism; these Russophone ways of relating continue to partially define who they are in their (largely) Anglophone present. This points to a limitation in Flusser’s account of migrant freedom: not everything that was habitual before expulsion can be dismissed as ‘prejudice’ and ‘nostalgie de la boue’ (Flusser 2003: 85). In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym has written eloquently of the ingenious recreation of Moscow interiors in New York apartments by emigrants from the Soviet Union; these memoirs’ evocation of a kind of human connection grounded in Russian language can be seen as a comparable restorative impulse.

In his cogent overview of recent Russian Jewish American writers, “The Rise of the “Russian Debutantes””, Adrian Wanner argues that authors like Gary Shteyngart, Ellen Litman, Irina Reyn and Lara Vapnyar identify as Russian writers in the United States primarily because of the ‘cultural prestige of canonical Russian literature’ (Wanner 2011: 166); that Russianness is an identity which the authors claim in order to engage with readers. In his more recent essay on the life writing of Shteyngart, Shroyer and Vapnyar (2015), Wanner presents Shroyer as different from Shteyngart and Vapnyar in that he ‘subordinates the urge for translingual storytelling to the strong affirmation of a Jewish identity’ (Wanner 2011: 142). I don’t disagree with Wanner on either count, but my emphasis in relation to these authors’ Russian Jewish identity is different. I argue that each of the memoirs discussed here, Shroyer’s and Shteyngart’s as well as Tumarkin’s, evokes instances of *obsbchenie* (close interaction) or *dushbevnyi kontakt* (soul-connection) which the authors present as

formative, and as still significant to them. I find in each of these texts a valuing of this aspect of Russian linguaculture in spite of pervasive Soviet/Russian anti-Semitism which led to their family's expulsion from the Soviet Union. Pesmen differs in being an outsider to Soviet experience, but her book is very much about the extent to which outsiders such as herself can be included within the field of *dusha* and *obshchenie*, as well as excluded. Pesmen's writing on *dusha* illuminates the episodes I discuss in the memoirs by Tumarkin, Shteyngart and Shroyer.

## Dale Pesmen

Dale Pesmen's *Russia and soul* considers how Russian speakers help shape the social world they inhabit through their repeated yet varied uses of significant shared concepts, centrally (for her purposes) *dusha*, but also, and relatedly, others like *blat* (favours), *byt* (everyday life) or *obshchenie* (togetherness, close interaction). Pesmen herself remains mostly behind the scenes within her analysis, but draws everywhere on specific interactions she had in Omsk, on which she offers eloquent comment. An example of a typically minimal self-reference is the following, from her discussion of the Russian phrase *Iz griazi v kniazzi* (Out of the dirt and into princes) as it's used by her friends about their bosses - who, like them, are from working class or peasant backgrounds: "Although just being American, then and there, had a lot of power that I rarely wanted, I once, at a banquet, unintentionally used it to 'remind' a man where he had come up from. When I sat with worker friends rather than at my place at the VIP table, the guest of honor kept coming over, sentimentally saying that *these* were the people he'd always felt the most kinship to, this was where he *came* from." (Pesmen 2000: 239-240)

Discussing the local perception that bosses in 1992 are 'the same' as Communist Party officials of the past, she continues: 'Petrov treated me as his attribute the day of the banquet, with eye signals ordering me to his side to be introduced to a people's deputy or other dignitary as "Dale, from the United States, from Chicago" – *pretty tiring* [my italics]. Two teenagers and I took a walk. One said [...] these people are *the same*' (Pesmen 2000: 254). The aside 'pretty tiring' is one of the more explicit references in the book to the author's own feelings.

While *Russia and soul* is not a memoir like those by Tumarkin, Shroyer and Shteyngart, it is effectively an *auto-ethnography* (even if not declared as such)<sup>3</sup> in that it recalls conversations, encounters, anecdotes told to Pesmen by others, and her own subsequent questioning of what they might mean. At the end of part II, the beginning of part III, and the end of part IV, there are

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<sup>3</sup> Pesmen calls it an 'ethnography' (Pesmen 2000: 4).

several interlude-like pieces that read like fragments of memoir, with the titles ‘Story: for Anna Viktorovna’, ‘Two Stories: Decency (Oleg), Generosity (Grisha)’, ‘Story: Pulling something out of a hat’, and ‘Story: A second soul’. Pesmen’s own experiences in Omsk are the main material she interprets and reflects on in the book, relating it throughout to her wide reading on Russia in Russian and English. Likewise, her personal responses to what she sees and hears, such as some of her Omsk friends’ statements about Jews (e.g. Pesmen 2000: 204), Chukchi people or Chechens, are unmistakable, even if presented in passing: ‘Zina was calling Caucasians in Omsk “Chechens”’. In turn, all classificatory Chechens were “beasts”. “Killing means nothing to them”. Implied, *horribly*, is that Chechens may be killed’ (Pesmen 2000: 245, my italics). ‘Classificatory Chechens’ is Pesmen’s ethnographic term for Zina’s use of ‘Chechen’ about all people from the Caucasus, but also a tongue-in-cheek indictment of it; ‘horribly’ is all the more emphatic. Another example of parenthetically expressed yet pointed judgment is: ‘Oleg told me that “Sakharov did his best work in confinement,” also indicating (*though in the context of a rather repulsive justification of the values of political repression*) that formal restraints may unlock rather than kill generativity’ (Pesmen 2000: 212-213, my italics). Characteristically here, Pesmen is still listening to her friend Oleg, considering his point about creativity, while distancing herself from the aspect she finds repellent.

According to Pesmen, when Omsk residents used ethnic stereotypes, their attitudes might shift between negative and positive within the same utterance, and stereotypes could be springboards for talk of something else. Commenting on her piece ‘Two Stories’, she writes: ‘In the Generosity story I showed how Grisha converted a “stupid Chukchi” joke into a self-referential one about how stupid Russians were to buy into what the current authorities were selling – the whole idea of a market economy’ (Pesmen 2000: 256). Many of her interlocutors are of mixed ethnicity (‘a friend’s mother was ethnic Ukrainian and his father Chuvash; their passports called them Russian’, Pesmen 2000: 22). Omsk’s population at the time of Pesmen’s stay in the 1990s was primarily Russian but also Kazakh, Ukrainian, German, Belarusian and Tatar,<sup>4</sup> with smaller numbers of people of other ethnic descent including Chuvash, Estonian, Jewish and Armenian (Pesmen 2000: 22). Social and familial networks crossed ethnic lines. ‘She herself was Belorussian, Polish, and God knows what else, she said. Her husband said he himself was fully Russian. Only his “exterior” (pointing at his face) was ethnic Korean’ (Pesmen 2000: 155). Pesmen brings out the complexity of ethnic identity in Omsk with a Ukrainian example: “Ukrainian ethnics told *Kbokhol* [Russian slur for ‘Ukrainian’] jokes, remarking that Russians really *were* more generous. Ethnicities were nested; people felt local, Siberian, Ukrainian, Soviet, and Russian. The ‘Russian’ category

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<sup>4</sup> The proportions of the main ethnic groups in the Omsk region are similar now: <http://ved55.ru/en/page/92>

became evident and was invoked in situations of expansiveness and generosity. Telling stingy *Khokhol* jokes, ethnic Ukrainians had recourse to their Siberian ‘Russianness’”. (Pesmen 2000: 155)

The ethnic ‘nesting’ here is clearly ordered according to local Soviet hierarchies. Ukrainians in newly independent 1990s Ukraine might have viewed such self-perceptions among Siberian Ukrainians as a symptom of internalized colonization.

People Pesmen spoke with in Omsk alternated between expressions of shame at perceived local backwardness and of pride in the distinctively Siberian and ‘Asian’ character of the place, at once *less* Russian than Moscow or Leningrad and *more* Russian, archetypally so: ‘Siberia is often imagined as an extreme version of much of what is considered Russian: greater expanses, warmer hospitality, etc.’ (Pesmen 2000: 21) (see also Pesmen 2000: 153-154). ‘Central Asians, though often depicted as disrespectful and thieving, were also seen as supremely hospitable. Tatar and Kazakh women were said to make the smallest (most time-consuming) *pelmeni*’ (Pesmen 2000: 155). Anna Viktorovna, a retired schoolteacher and one of Pesmen’s closest friends in Omsk, is quoted as saying: ‘Siberia. We have none of that natio-natio-natio-nalism. There were a lot of Tatars here. *A lot*. But they and the Russians lived in harmony [*dusha v dushu*]’ (Pesmen 2000: 20). Anna Viktorovna’s stammering over ‘nationalism’ suggests her discomfort with it, even as ‘*A lot*’ emphasizes the visible difference to her of Tatars. Her use of ‘*dusha v dushu*’ (literally ‘soul in(to) soul’, like *ruka v ruku* [arm-in-arm]) about Siberian Russians and Tatars sees them as soul-knit, as equally people.

Pesmen comments on attitudes to ethnicity in Omsk: “‘Ours’ and ‘not-ours’ was fluid and rigid’ (Pesmen 2000: 155), and ends her discussion of ethnic dimensions of hospitality in Russia with the following observation-and-report: “Including non-Russians in the community of Russian-souled is not always possible. Failures to do so happen in all sorts of hybrid and ambiguous situations. In another interview a woman who called herself ‘pure-Russian-blooded’ and who spoke romantically of ethnic Russians’ unique creativity said that several years earlier she had almost gotten married, but hadn’t because her mother had said, ‘We don’t need any Jews.’ Then the woman added that she suspected her mother was at least partly Jewish herself.” (Pesmen 2000: 156)

Pesmen makes no further comment here, but leaves the reader to wonder whether the woman guessed that Pesmen was herself Jewish (and this prompted her admission about her mother’s ancestry), or assumed that Americans (as non-Soviet others) are ethnically homogeneous Anglos, or rather spoke reflexively to Pesmen as to a fellow Russian. Perhaps an element of all three? Here, the ‘hybrid and ambiguous situation’ is not only the near-marriage put off by the possibly part-Jewish mother on anti-Semitic grounds, but also the interview itself between the ‘pure’ Russian woman and Dale Pesmen.

Pesmen suggests on the basis of what she hears about *dusha* that ‘by becoming wealthy, powerful, stingy, or insensitive, ethnic Russians seemed to de facto lose their right to be assumed to have a Russian soul’ (Pesmen 2000: 260). Russian ethnicity was considered by some a necessary pre-condition for having *dusha*, but clearly not a sufficient one; and individuals without ethnic Russian ancestry could be included – by virtue of how they acted or were perceived within Russian-speaking contexts - in the ‘community of Russian-souled’ (Pesmen 2000: 156). Pesmen sums up the two tendencies, inclusive and exclusive, as follows: “the volatile, flexible way in which groups of ‘ours’ were constructed and remade left the possibility for anyone either raised in Soviet or *dusha* culture or engaging in it, even briefly or ephemerally, to have Russian soul. This was a competing theme to those of *dusha* as encoded in ‘blood’ or ‘genes’, but these themes were mediated by the way the experience of Soviet or Russian life was felt to leave an exceptionally “deep” mark on the soul.” (Pesmen 2000: 165-166).

Fellow ethnographer Fran Markowitz, while citing Pesmen on *dusha*, makes a strikingly similar observation about the potential inclusivity of *dusha*: “the young people I met in post-Soviet Russia frequently invoked soul to express a certain way of being in the world, a specific sort of morality or character (see Wierbiczka 1989; Pesman [sic] 2000). They spoke of soul as broad or wide to index generosity, openness, and empathy. And as they articulated their notions of what being Russian means to someone who was not, they hinted that should I understand, appreciate, and most important, *feel in my soul what they were communicating, I too could be Russian.* (...) Russianness as soulfulness demands fluent usage and cherishing of the Russian language and its literature while embracing a soulfully Russian way of being in the world. Russian soul and Russian blood frequently combine in the same human bodies, but not always and not necessarily.” (Markowitz 2006: 48, my italics)

Markowitz was being recognized as ‘Russian’ because of the soul-connection these young people felt to her. This highlights the defining role of *obshtchenie* (close interaction) in *dusha*, and encapsulates a view of Russianness as realized through ways of talking and being together, rather than based in genes – a perception that connects with all four of the texts discussed here, especially Pesmen’s, Tumarkin’s and Shrayner’s.

In “Story: Pulling Something Out of a Hat”, a small narrative about the meaning of exchanging gifts in Russia, Pesmen describes herself performing a stereotypically Russian quality for an Omsk friend and her boss: “I then did a strange, rather self-serving performance of a kind of ‘Russian’, buffooning my own alleged inspired calculations when I was asked [by Omsk-based US colleagues what Russian worker Vera would like as a present]. Perhaps I *did* think those things; perhaps I made them up later. Vera and the boss shook their heads, pleased with my accented performance of the familiar gambling daring (*azart*). Vera, by way of complimenting my luck and

alertness, rhetorically asked the boss if I had Russian blood. “She does, she does,” he said (...). (Pesmen 2000: 148)

Pesmen’s account of her performance of *ažart* for Vera and her boss exemplifies Markowitz’s point that ‘Russian soul and Russian blood frequently combine in the same human bodies, but not always and not necessarily’ (Pesmen 2000: 48). The Russian ‘blood’ the speakers jokingly impute to Pesmen here is their way of accounting for her convincing display of Russian soul, or at least, of valued Russian qualities.

## **Maria Tumarkin**

Pesmen defines *obščenie* in a way that brings out its centrality to people’s lives: ‘*Obščenie* is communion, but, unlike the English word communion, *obščat’sia* had become as easy to say as “socializing” (though different in spirit). One could *obščat’sia* with art, books, people, one’s *dusša* or conscience, anything with a “voice”. ... People characterized [memories of student days] ... as connected with a circle of friends, *obščenie* with whom you value more than anything.’ (Tumarkin 2010: 165, emphasis mine) Closely connected to *obščenie* is the concept *druž’ia*, the ‘circle of friends’ referred to by Pesmen. Russian-born linguist Anna Gladkova offers a revealing definition of *druž’ia* when she writes of her friendships with fellow residents at Graduate House, a university residential college in Australia: “Who are these people to me? ... Are they *druž’ia* – the most obvious Russian equivalent for the word ‘friends’ ...? *Drug* (friend) is someone one knows for a long time and with whom one develops a very close bond. It is necessary to be in constant contact with a *drug*, to share each other’s lives. Even though I get to know some residents at University House quite well, I can’t call them *druž’ia* in Russian. We enjoy our time together, but we also know that this time will end, we will have to be in different parts of the world again and there is no certainty that we will ever see each other again. The English word ‘friend’ suits such a relationship because it reflects the reality of a mobile society ... In Russia most people are much less mobile; many live in one city for their whole lives and therefore establish closer ties that are expected to be lifelong. ... I want these people to be my *druž’ia*, but at the same time our reality stops me from thinking in these terms. (Gladkova 2007: 147, emphasis mine)

As I will show, there is a very strong resonance between Gladkova’s account of *druž’ia* here and both Maria Tumarkin’s and Maxim Shrayner’s representations of their friends in the former Soviet Union.

Characteristic examples of Tumarkin’s depictions of friendship with Russians and Ukrainians with whom she remains in contact from Australia include the following: “Katya felt deeply and

understood loyalty. ... She loved and remembered us with the kind of fidelity that marks our first, and often the deepest, real friendships.” (Tumarkin 2010: 96-100) After a shouted disagreement shakes but fails to derail her friendship with ‘Marina’ (with whom she and Billie stay in St. Petersburg), Tumarkin reflects: “What we really need is for our friends to stand behind us, to have our back, to hold us, especially when we are ridiculously far away from each other.” (Tumarkin 2010: 162-3). She writes that her father’s “full-fledged, strong, enduring friendships” (Tumarkin 2010: 229) in his home-town of Kharkov were part of what convinced her mother to move there from Kiev and marry him. Most significantly, of her mother’s close friendship with ‘Ira’ as young women in Kiev, Tumarkin writes: “How can simplicity, purity and freedom – once the hallmarks of their friendship – survive twenty years of this kind of apart? she wonders. For her the answer is that it cannot: “We lived a shared life and we no longer do. ... To remain real friends you have to be part of each other’s lives.” (Tumarkin 2010: 228) This phrasing repeats almost verbatim Anna Gladkova’s definition of *druž’ia* and, I’d argue, affirms a common experiential reality: ‘It is necessary to be in constant contact with a *drug*, to share each other’s lives.’ On the return journey to her mother’s birthplace of Kiev, arranging to meet Ira, Tumarkin stands in for her mother who is glad that Maria and Ira are meeting but feels unable to engage face-to-face with Ira again herself.

Ira affirms that she and Tumarkin’s mother ‘never again’ had ‘such a close friend’ in their lives (Tumarkin 2010: 233). Tumarkin muses: “Why cannot I get enough of Ira’s stories? Of how she and Mum separated at night only to be reunited without fail the next morning, whether at work or somewhere else; how their friendship came first and everything else needed to fit around it (even Ira’s post-secondary education – she went to evening classes in whatever time she had left from being with Mum.” (Tumarkin 2010: 233) Ira’s fitting ‘everything else’ around her friendship with Tumarkin’s mother closely echoes Pesmen’s lines about *obshchenie* with friends being something ‘you value more than anything’.

What makes Tumarkin’s take on friendship more transcultural and translingual than her mother’s is her readiness to imagine a future for *druž’ia* who are no longer able to ‘share’ their lives in the way they once could. Of her own at times strained but, on this return journey, re-affirmed friendship with her childhood best friend ‘Sasha’, she writes: “To this day, I am sustained in some essential way by the belief that there are friendships that do not need to be lubricated and reconfirmed at every turn, that are strong enough to absorb long hiatuses as easily as daily talk. Such friendships are essentially time-proof, distance-proof. I do not naively think there will be no friction, no shocks, but I trust that our differences can be bridged.” (Tumarkin 2010: 280)

This is Tumarkin’s creative personal response to the concept of *druž’ia* as understood by her mother: whereas for her mother, *druž’ia* are only those whose lives can be shared on a nearly daily basis, for Tumarkin, living on different continents does not annul such friendships, they *can* be



revived by renewed contact. Yet the intensity of the value she accords them is very much that implied by Gladkova's *druž'ia* and Pesmen's *obshchenie*.

Emotional intensity is both a recurring motif and an integral part of the style of *Otherland*. On arrival in Moscow, Tumarkin berates herself for not experiencing stronger emotions: "Here I am, ... baring my family's soul to my no longer childlike child", she recalls, feeling bad for not feeling more: 'where is the painful apprehension I *should be* feeling? The reckless elation of imminent self-exposure? Can I have at least one big emotion befitting the occasion?' (Tumarkin 2010: 31, my italics). The connection to *druž'ia* are one of the strongest manifestations of this intensity in the book.

Tumarkin describes approaching an official in Moscow to register her Russian visa, an encounter that leaves her feeling crushed and powerless in the face of a petty bureaucrat's "almost biological need to diminish and humiliate." This scene immediately follows a description of conversations with friends in Moscow where Tumarkin experiences "the happiness that comes from being in the presence of a person whose every thought and word find in you the deepest kind of recognition" (Tumarkin 2010: 53). The whole chapter ("The space inside") implicitly contrasts the 'contempt' meted out by Soviet and post-(neo?)Soviet officialdom with the warmth and closeness possible among *druž'ia*. After the incident with the official, Tumarkin imagines (addressing her daughter Billie in the text) how her Russian/Soviet self would view her response: "If I, Billie, were to meet myself the way I am now, all shaken up and enraged by the routine humiliation this guy dished out almost automatically and certainly without any special malice, I would smile to myself and think today's Maria a complete foreigner" (Tumarkin 2010: 58-59). In other words, Soviet citizens developed a way of coping with the need to deal with a pervasive hostile bureaucracy (because everything was controlled by the state, all public dealings were with representatives of this bureaucracy): 'play the game, find a way to this guy's heart. Money, cognac, French perfume for the missus...' This is the Soviet institution of *blat* or 'favours' also discussed by Dale Pesmen (e.g. Pesmen 2000: 130-135) who writes about the need to 'stavit' butylku' or 'stand a bottle' (i.e. before an official) (Pesmen 2010: 171). Convincingly, Tumarkin writes that part of the huge appeal of singers like Boris Grebenshchikov (Tumarkin 2010: 59-60) was that they gave public voice to the thoughts and feelings that were mostly forced underground in Soviet society. As she puts it, "most of us were undercover agents living in the shadow of the seemingly unbreachable gulf between what we thought and what we said" (Tumarkin 2010: 61).

The Soviet-born American sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh has argued that the intensity of friendships in Soviet Russia was proportional to the degree of prevailing political repression: "... the lower the sense of security among people and the weaker their confidence in the future, the more intense and vital are interpersonal relationships" (Shlapentokh 1984: 218). This insight

connects with Tumarkin's implicit contrast between the 'cockroach' official who humiliates her and the 'deepest ... recognition' she finds in conversation with Moscow friends (or *druž'ia*). As we will see, it is equally relevant to Maxim Shrayer's memoir, where the closeness to his childhood friends Katia Tsarapkina and Max Mussel and his parents' bond with the Arrak family in Estonia were clearly intensified by the Shrayers' refusenik status: by overt and pervasive anti-Semitism in Moscow and by a general sense of despair about prospects for liberalization in Soviet Union, which mobilized their struggle to leave the Soviet Union.

### Gary Shteyngart and Maxim Shrayer

A significant difference between Shteyngart's *Little Failure* and Maxim Shrayer's *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* is their approaches to the authors' experience as Russian Jews. A strong sense of pride in being Jewish and an awareness of readers as potentially fellow Jewish Americans characterize *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* (published in Syracuse University Press's 'Library of Modern Jewish Literature'). By contrast, Shteyngart's projected readership appears to be broader and more multifarious, the unpredictable audience of a standup comedian who veers between comedy and drama, his sense of Russian Jewishness at once sadly fatalistic and humorously neurotic: "Why was I so scared of everything?" I ask my mother nearly forty years later. 'Because you were born a Jewish person,' she says. Perhaps." (Shteyngart 2014: 25).

Shteyngart suggests that his parents regard him as positively 'anti-Semitic' in his difference from them. He recalls how his father was once "happy to have a little sidekick named Igor (my pre-Gary Russian name), palling around with this Igoryochek, who is not judgmental or anti-Semitic" (Shteyngart 2014: 9). The warmth of his father's use of the double-diminutive 'Igoryochek' (from Igoryok, from Igor) is conveyed here at the same time as their later antagonism. His parents' perception of his anti-Semitism begins with his disaffection at the Solomon Schechter School of Queens (where to gain popularity he wrote a parody of the Torah called the 'Gnorah'), and is later cemented by public criticisms of Israeli policies (Shteyngart 2014: 4 and 31). The epithet of the title, 'Little failure' is a translation of his mother's hybrid Russian-English word 'failurchka' (another diminutive), her unhappy response to her son's stubborn refusal to become a lawyer, accountant or engineer, his embrace of an improvident creative future seeming to entail in her eyes opting out of the Jewish project. Ironically, Maxim Shrayer, who enrolled in Soil Sciences at university in Moscow to avoid conscription into the notoriously brutal Soviet army, in the US switched to a degree in literature with the full blessing of both parents. Shrayer's physician father David was a published (and once he became a refusenik, banned) Soviet author who encouraged Maxim's

writing from an early age, his mother a scholar and teacher of English. Shteyngart's father was a mechanical engineer in Moscow and later in New York, his mother a piano teacher who in America found work as a typist.

Shteyngart quotes his father as regularly invoking the Russian saying '*Tot kto ne byot, tot ne lyubit* [...] He who doesn't hit, doesn't love' (Shteyngart 2014: 125) and acting on it freely, while swearing violently. His mother often refused to speak to him, for example if he didn't 'eat the farmer's cheese with canned peaches (eighty-nine cents: Grand Union)' (Shteyngart 2014: 126), ignoring his cry 'If you won't speak to me, *luchshe ne zhit*'. It is better not to live' (Shteyngart 2014: 26) and later mimicking it to amuse their relatives. Clearly, a writer's perspective owes much to the impact of particular parents and family histories. A sense of grievance towards one's parents might put one's ethnicity in a different light than an uncomplicatedly loving bond like that depicted by Shroyer.

## Gary Shteyngart

Adrian Wanner refers to Shteyngart's account of his 'overbearing and abusive parents' (Wanner 2001: 143). *Little Failure* invites this reading, at least in relation to the father, yet at the same time, the author's love for both his parents and a sense of theirs for him are persistently conveyed throughout the memoir. It is most evident whenever he quotes Russian words, such as the term of endearment 'solnyshko' (little sun) used by his mother when he was a boy, but also words such as '*vetchina*' (ham), '*buzhenina*' (cold baked pork) and '*sgushchyonka*' (sweetened condensed milk) - items which his mother went to great trouble to procure for him from Leningrad '*gastronom*' (chronically understocked Soviet grocery stores) when he was a child. Even when the much-hated cupping he was subjected to as a boy for his asthma is recalled in the text with the Russian word *banki*, there is paradoxically an aura of warmth surrounding the episode, a sense of nostalgia for love without (disappointed) expectations. Particularly memorable and amusing is the image of the seven-year-old Igor straining on the toilet to 'make kaka' when the family are in Italy, en route to the U.S. from the Soviet Union: "I can't get the *kakashka* out. *Staraisya, staraisya*, my parents urge me... Try harder try harder. *Napryagis*'. Strain yourself." (Shteyngart 2014: 77) The combination of an unpleasant feeling with the strong sensation of being loved conveyed by the diminutive in *kakashka* is characteristic of Shteyngart's depiction of his relationship to his parents.

In one of the stranger examples, the author's father conveys ambivalent affection for his adolescent son through a Russian anti-Semitic slur: "my father has started calling me *gubastyi*, or 'big lips', and some days he grabs me by the chin and says, *Akh ty, zhidovskaya morda*. Eh, you, Yid-

face” (Shteyngart 2014: 171). The father often lacerates his adult son with ‘shutki’ or jokes: “After each barrage of jokes presented as insults, my father finishes with, “You should call me more” (Shteyngart 2014: 41). Again, there is a pungent mix in this description of love and pain and humour, presenting this belittling as a (warped) expression of love.

Shteyngart uses Russian in the text regularly, including the transliterated Russian words and phrases and then translating them adroitly to convey a strong impression of how it feels to hear them. For example, of his father he writes: “His warm hand is at the back of my head brushing the fine hairs with sympathy, but he can hardly hold back the frustration when he says to me, ‘*Akb, ty, Sopyak.*’ Eh, you, Snotty.” (Shteyngart 2014: 23) The cumulative effect of all these Russian words, tender, insulting, or both, is to affirm their importance to him, their formative presence as memories and as terms that still characterize his relationship to his parents.

The most significant of these is ‘*synochek*’, first referred to when Shteyngart recalls playing hide-and-seek as a child with his father, who sings out: “*Synochek, Igoryochik, gde ty?*” (Little son, Little Igor, where are you?)” (Shteyngart 2014: 48). The translated phrase, ‘little son’, recurs in the narrative. When the child Igor and his mother were on vacation away from Leningrad, he would regularly receive letters from his father beginning ‘dear little son’ – presumably, in the original, *dorogoi synok* or *dorogoi synochek*. What Shteyngart writes about his five-year-old self’s response to this form of address is striking: “as I am reading ... the words aloud ... I am lost in the ecstasy of connection” (Shteyngart 2014: 12). While there is undoubtedly an element of irony here, of a piece with the sardonic humour that characterizes the rest of the book, there is also a certain celebration of the closeness permitted by ‘little son’. The same note is struck a few pages later: “Little son, there are only a few days left until we meet again,” my father writes, and ... each moment, each meter of distance between us is intolerable” (Shteyngart 2014: 15). In the last chapter where Shteyngart describes meeting with his parents in Leningrad on a return trip to Russia in 2011, his parents address him again as ‘little son’. In the preceding chapter we are shown how the author, having undergone psychoanalysis for a number of years, is now able to resist his parents’ “opinions of me” and ability to “bring back the small, unquestioning child at their mercy” (Shteyngart 2014: 321). But in the final chapter their continued use of ‘little son’ is presented as loving, and the idea that it diminishes him (‘I feel smaller still’) is jocular rather than serious. When he writes early in the book “this is the model of the cloying Russian Jewish family” (Shteyngart 2014: 24) he indicates that he realizes how his representation of his family life must sound to an American reader (the envisaged reader overlaps with his analyst here). Yet the closeness to his parents even in his adulthood persists, albeit without its previous overpowering effects: “at a table in Leningrad, and a table in ... New York, the ridiculous garlic [to make of me a man] crunches beneath our teeth as

we sit across from each other, the garlic obliterating whatever else we have eaten, and *making us one.*” (Shteyngart 2014: 44, my italics)

The use of Russian words, especially diminutives, in Shteyngart’s writing about relations with his parents, is significant, and reveals the value attached in his memoir to ways of relating that are bound up with aspects of Russian language not readily translatable into English.

## Maxim Shrayer

In Shrayer’s memoir *Leaving Russia*, there are fewer quoted Russian words than in Shteyngart’s *Little Failure*. A significant one that does feature, however, is ‘*kompaniia*’. In Moscow, Shrayer’s father is persecuted for his unorthodox writings and for his subsequent application for an exit visa for his family. The family find a temporary refuge from this persecution in the town of Pärnu, in Estonia, where they spend their summer holidays. It is here that Maxim establishes his closest and most lasting friendships with two of his peers from what he calls his ‘Pärnu *kompaniia*’.

He writes that the “core of our Pärnu *kompaniia* was formed around 1975...” (Shrayer 2013: 57). The ‘Pärnu kompaniia’ includes above all Katya Tsarapkina and Max Mussel – the friends Shrayer continues to meet with whenever he is in Russia (Shrayer 2013: 61-64). They are clearly, in the terms of Anna Gladkova’s essay, his *druż’ia*, and in Pesmen’s terms, those with whom ‘*obshchenie*’ meant ‘more than anything’. And, as with Tumarkin’s friendship with Sasha referred to earlier, Shrayer’s close connection to Katia and Max continues in spite of his permanent emigration to the U.S. in 1987. The post-Soviet mobility that permits him to return to Russia and to meet with Katia and Max in Moscow every year or two post-1991 is, as with Maria Tumarkin and her mother, in part generational; although in 1987, like his parents, he could not have envisaged that he would ever see his friends again, in writing of return visits now he clearly views the opportunity as normal and part of his right as a Russian-born US citizen.

Shrayer offers a picturesque description of different ethnic accents in Russian among students at university in Moscow: “the yogurt-gulping Central Asian pronunciation; the humid, wheezing *b* sound of the Ukrainians speaking in Russian (instead of the hard and crunchy *g* of the standard Russian); the de-voiced consonants and sing-song intonation of Russian-speaking Estonians” (Shrayer 2013: 103). The ‘de-voiced’ Estonian Russian which here may sound as though it were a lesser form of Russian, in fact has positive connotations elsewhere in the memoir, when overheard while on board a train to the summer resort of Pärnu in Estonia: associations of family summers there with Estonian friends of his parents, the Arraks, a sense of greater freedom than in Soviet Russia, and of his Jewishness no longer being a source of stigma: “The waitress[s] [...] de-

voiced, accented Russian immediately transported me to a space where I felt more at home.” (Shrayer 2013: 96) This remembered trip takes place just after Shrayer has gotten into university, after an arduous process in which despite his coming first in his final school year a gold medal was withheld because of his Jewishness and refusenik status.

The representation of his family’s Estonia is poignant and complex. Shrayer writes, for example: “I hadn’t yet learnt that Estonia was the first country in Europe to become *Judenrein* [...] Should I embitter the perfect memories of Estonia by staining them with the blood ink of my afterknowledge?” (Shrayer 2013: 70). Yet, he also affirms that “while the Estonian landlords, postal workers, waiters, or sales clerks weren’t especially friendly to the [predominantly Russian Jewish] vacationers, they still treated us a thousand times better than those working in the everyman’s Soviet office ... outside Estonia” (Shrayer 2013: 54). At the heart of his account of times spent in Estonia are his family’s close friendship with the Arraks, and the foundation of his own with his part-Jewish Russian peers Katia Tsarapkina and Max Mussel. The Shrayers and Arraks spoke Russian together. We’re told that Shrayer’s father David and artist Jüri Arrak would always call each other “*staraiia krysa* (‘old rat’)” (Shrayer 2013: 66). At one point this *obsbchenie* between the Arraks and the Shrayers is briefly threatened by seriously divergent historical experiences of WWII, when Jüri unselfconsciously recalls parts of the war under German occupation as a largely ‘normal’ time for him as a young man, when it could never have been that for Jews in Estonia (or German-occupied parts of the Soviet Union). The friendship between the families, however, survives this uneasy moment.

There is an interesting parallel to this tension in a passage in Tumarkin’s *Otherland*, where she and Billie are brought by her mother’s friend Ira to Babi Yar, the site of the Nazi massacre of the Jews of Kiev. Billie finds the place with its trees, grass and seeming serenity ‘beautiful’. Maria is horrified by her daughter’s response, which seems to her to dishonour the memory of the victims. Yet when Ira – who is not Jewish – says “Billie is right ... It is beautiful here. What is it that you want?” (Tumarkin 2010: 256), after at first feeling wounded, Maria comes to a perception that combines those of Billie and Ira with her own: ‘Green grass comes back. Birds return .... Billie was right. Babi Yar is beautiful *and* all those other things’ (Tumarkin 2010: 259).

To return to Shrayer’s account of his family’s periodical movement from their oppressive situation as refuseniks in Moscow to their vacations in Estonia, a particularly powerful statement by Shrayer on the subject is the following: “I remember thinking, as we crossed the rolling Valdai Hills, that we would always live in Russia, that every summer I would be going to Pärnu, that my future children would grow up in a country that would be fundamentally unchanged and would always hold its Jews as captive aliens” (Shrayer 2013: 127). 1970s and ‘80s Estonia was, then, a temporary and cherished reprieve from life in Moscow, time out from being a refusenik.

A key scene in *Leaving Russia* is one where, as a nineteen-year-old student during a fieldwork expedition to the Caucasus as part of his Soil Sciences degree, Maxim sings a song in Hebrew for his fellow students. Maxim is the only Jewish member of the group, which includes ethnic Russians, Cossacks, Central Asians and others. A classmate plays the guitar around a campfire at night when Maxim suddenly feels prompted to take up the guitar himself:

“I can’t quite explain what force pushed me to pick up the guitar and to accompany myself, as I started singing: “Oseh shalom bimromav / Ya’aseh shalom, ya’aseh shalom /Shalom aleinu v’al kol Yisrael...” I had picked up the lyrics and melody from my visits to the Moscow Synagogue. I knew, only vaguely, that the song was about praying and asking G-d ... to make peace for us. .... ‘Us’ stood for Jews, and I sang a Jewish prayer to a group of my non-Jewish expedition mates under the glowing sky of the steppe ...

‘Could you translate, good pal?’ asked none other than Sergei Khudoleyev, scion of a Cossack family.

‘This is in Hebrew, the ancient Jewish tongue,’ I replied.

‘I got that, but what is it about?’ Khudoleyev pressed on.

‘It’s about a longing for one’s homeland,’ I answered, a bit curtly.

The eyes of Inna Tolpeshta, a Ukrainian woman who hailed from Moldova, suddenly welled up with tears. No more questions followed. ... I was shocked how it had all come out and how the expedition director never reprimanded me for spreading “Zionist propaganda.” (Shrayer 2013: 186)

Maxim expects an anti-Semitic response to his song yet, movingly, instead, he experiences a soulful connection with the others – they ask him to translate the Hebrew, the Ukrainian Moldovan woman cries, missing her homeland. There is here an unexpected moment of *obsbchenie*, of *dushevnyi kontakt* within this *kompaniia*, although not named as such in the text. This is an important moment in the narrative, and an example of something I’ve been exploring in this paper, how a way of being with others in Russian can counter consciousness of one’s Jewishness (or other ethnicity) as a marker of exclusion from perceived Russianness. The passage suggests how the concept of *dusba* makes possible a particular human connection which is - in some contexts, with some people - open to anyone, ethnically Russian or not, provided they speak Russian and are inhabiting the moment with other Russian speakers. This does not imply a utopian vision of Russian culture, as such instances are hemmed in on all sides by oppressive experiences – Soviet authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, or as in Pesmen’s examples regarding Chechen or Chukchi people, other forms of racism. But the moments of closeness are, according to each of the authors discussed here, real.

## Conclusion

In *The Freedom of the Migrant* (2003), Flusser comes closest to leaving room for an enduring attachment to aspects of one's pre-migration culture that is not merely atavistic when he writes, contrasting immigrants with refugees: "The refugee, who is cocooned in the old contingency, is closed to the new. He can neither contribute anything to it nor take anything from it. The immigrant, on the other hand, is partially opened to the new contingency, precisely at those points where the old contingency has been ironically rejected. At these points he is able to assimilate the new contingency and assimilate himself into it. And *at those points where he chooses to retain pieces of his old contingency, he is able to act on the new one as well.*" (Flusser 2003: 23, my italics)

In light of Rainer Guldin's recent essay on Flusser's early writings on landscape and exile (2014), I see the reference to refugees being 'cocooned in the old contingency' as a deeply personal one to Flusser's own years of alienation and longing for Europe as a postwar refugee in Brazil, before he was able to contribute to Brazilian intellectual life through his work in Portuguese. The acknowledgement that an immigrant might *choose* 'to retain pieces of his old contingency' begins to move beyond the essays' equation of 'heimweh' with prejudice. I would argue that Tumarkin, in particular, in her unashamed embrace of *obshchenie* with *druz'ia* and of 'big emotions' through her writing 'acts on' her Australian cultural environment, extending it by stretching what is acceptable emotional expression in written English (cf. also Besemeres 2014). Shroyer likewise extends American understandings of the significance of *druz'ia* and *kompaniia* in the oppressive experience of Soviet Jewish refuseniks. In a more sceptical vein, Pesmen insightfully examines specific instances of talk about *dusha* among Russian speakers, and highlights the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity within such talk. Finally, Shteyngart's idiosyncratic use of Russian words in his writing in English about his relationship to his parents reveals the value his writing attaches to ways of relating that are possible in Russian.

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