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Book Explores Diversity of Jewish-Russian Literature

A distinctive Jewish-Russian culture has been part of the ferment and flourishing of world culture for more than 200 years. Now Prof. Maxim D. Shrayer (Slavic and Eastern Languages), founding co-director of the Jewish Studies Program at Boston College and a leading authority on Jewish-Russian literature, introduces readers for the first time to the full range of the Jewish-Russian literary canon.

An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry gathers stories, excerpts from novels, essays, memoirs, and poems by more than 130 Jewish writers from 1801 to 2001 of the past two centuries who worked in the Russian language. This definitive two-volume anthology features writers — some of world renown, others less widely known — of the tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet periods, both in Russia and in the great emigrations, representing styles and artistic movements from Romantic to Postmodern.

Most of the works appear here for the first time in English or in new translations. Shrayer wrote a book-length introduction, as well as all the individual introductory essays and commentary to all the texts. He translated and co-translated about one third of the materials in his anthology, and also worked with a stellar team of some 40 literary translators from the US and Great Britain.

The selections were chosen by Shrayer both for their literary quality and because they illuminate



Maxim D. Shrayer

questions of Jewish history, status, and identity. The anthologized authors include such famous Jewish-Russian writers as Isaac Babel, Ilya Ehrenburg, Vassily Grossman and Osip Mandelstam, but also many great writers who have yet to be discovered in English translation.

Each author is profiled in an essay describing the personal, cultural and historical context in which he or she worked, and individual works and groups of works are head-noted to provide further context. Furnished with a comprehensive general introduction, *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature* not only showcases a wide range of individual works but also offers an encyclopedic survey of Jewish-Russian culture.

Shrayer experienced the suppression of this dual cultural

identity while growing up a refusenik in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, where his parents' outspoken celebration of their Jewish heritage cost them their careers and brought them to the attention of the KGB. After moving to the United States in 1987, Shrayer made it his mission to promote Jewish-Russian writers as a way of preserving their contributions to Jewish culture, honoring their place in Russian and world literature, and appreciating their exploration and expression of the dilemma of dual identity.

According to Shrayer, the anthology is so extensive and wide-ranging that it doubles as a history of Jewish-Russian literature and an encyclopedia of Jewish culture in the Russian language and in the Russian lands.

"From the beginning, I knew I wanted this anthology to be broad in scope and broad-minded in its selection criteria, inclusive, comprehensive and historically complete — which means from the partitions of Poland to end of the 20th century [1801-2001] — and also to cover both writing

in Russia/USSR and in emigration, including North America and Israel," explains Shrayer. "By the end of my period of research and selection I must have read and considered works by 300 authors, from some very famous to some very unknown or forgotten.

"This anthology is both a labor of love and a fruit of many years of research. Its publication — after eight years of writing, editing, and translating — marks the most important moment in my career. I hope very much that my anthology will introduce readers the world over to the treasures of Jewish-Russian literary culture."

Cultural and literary historian Sander L. Gilman of Emory University deems Shrayer's book "a must for every school or Temple, academic or major public library"

"Every major writer known or considered, condemned or praised as Jewish is included," said Gilman, adding that the translations "are more than readable: they are literary in the best sense as they present a portrait of the cultural legacy and conflicted identity of the Jews of Russia, who...are re-making the culture and literature of the next wave of the Jewish Diaspora."

—Office of Public Affairs