In Memoriam

Stephen Cohen at the Harriman Institute Oral History panel, October 2018.

Stephen F. Cohen (1938–2020)

Eminent historian, distinguished alumnus of the Russian Institute ('69), and member of the Harriman Institute's National Advisory Council, Stephen Cohen died at his home on Manhattan's Upper West Side, on September 18, 2020. He was 81.

Cohen came to Columbia University and the Russian Institute for his Ph.D., after earning his master's degree in Russian studies at Indiana University. In his interview for the Harriman Institute's Oral History Project, Cohen recalls his time at the Russian Institute:

> But about those years—and remember, I entered all this with the mind and eyes, despite having been to Russia and being semiworldly, of a young person who'd grown up in Kentucky. . . . I don't know exactly how Columbia gathered these people, but the happenstance of this array of scholars, personalities, and autobiographies was just perfect for me. Boy, I really was lucky. . . . And then of course there were the events. . . . They were bringing in for seminars, and as visiting scholars, authors of the books I was reading.

Reflecting on his time at the Russian Institute for the Institute's 50th anniversary book, Cohen writes: "I recall, above all, and value even more as the years pass, the wonderfully eclectic collection of senior scholars gathered at the Institute in the '60s—all of them devoted in their own ways to understanding and teaching about Russia, none of them instilling any orthodoxy in the students, and few of them afflicted by the cold-war passions of the time. I know of no academic institution that could have been a better place to study, then or now."

Professor emeritus of politics at Princeton University and professor emeritus of Russian studies and history at New York University, Cohen was the author or editor of 10 influential books, a frequent contributor to the *Nation*, and a CBS-TV commentator. His first book, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938*, the first full-scale biography of the Soviet leader, had its beginnings as Cohen's Columbia dissertation; the book was published by Knopf in 1973 and named a finalist for the National Book Award. The

Russian translation of Cohen's *Bukharin*, published by a small independent press in Ann Arbor, ended up in President Mikhail Gorbachev's hands, which led to an invitation to speak on Red Square on May Day 1989. Inclined to turn down the invitation, Cohen was urged by his Russian friends to accept, as he recounts in the oral history interview: "'This is your *sud'ba*,'—your fate, your destiny."

By this point Gorbachev had befriended Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel, his wife and intellectual partner, now currently editorial director of the *Nation*. Tellingly vanden Heuvel recounts "meeting" Cohen through his essay "Bolshevism and Stalinism" (1977) and his Bukharin biography, which, she writes, "challeng[ed] prevailing interpretations of Soviet history, and was to me, and many, a model of how biography should be written: engaged and sympathetically critical." In that same personal reminiscence, vanden Heuvel recalls the years the couple shared in Moscow beginning in 1980; the friendship with Bukharin's widow, Anna Larina, "matriarch of [Cohen's] second family"; and that their "marriage coincided with *perestroika*" (see vanden Heuvel's "*Moi Stiv* (My Steve)" on the *Nation's* website). Vanden Heuvel's essay ends with the letter of condolence on the death of her husband from Mikhail Gorbachev, in which he writes: "Steve was a brilliant historian and a man of democratic convictions. He loved Russia, the Russian intelligentsia, and believed in our country's future. I always considered Steve and you my true friends."

Other important books include *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (Oxford University Press, 1985); *Sovieticus: American Perceptions and Soviet Realities* (Norton, 1985); *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers*, written together with vanden Heuvel (Norton, 1989); *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (Norton, 2000); and *The Victims Return: Survivors of the Gulag after Stalin* (2010). His most recent book, *War with Russia? From Putin & Ukraine to Trump & Russiagate*, was published in 2019.

Cohen was the recipient of numerous fellowships and honors: John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (two); ACLS Grant (three); Rockefeller Foundation Humanitarian Fellowship; NEH Fellowship; Newspaper Guild Page One Award for Column Writing; Olive Branch Award for Magazine Writing; Indiana University Annual Distinguished Alumni Award, and the Harriman Institute Alumnus of the Year Award.

To say that Cohen's impact on the field was "significant" would be an understatement—he was an extraordinarily influential Russian/Soviet historian, a thoughtful and enthusiastic mentor to graduate students, and a generous supporter of the Russian studies field across the academy—including at both Indiana University and Columbia as well as at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. His passion for improving U.S.-Russian understanding and striving to improve the quality of debate and analysis in the United States has inspired countless observers.

Top: Cohen with Catharine Nepomnyashchy at the Russian Samovar, where he received the Institute's distinguished alumni award (2002); *bottom*: with his wife, Katrina vanden Heuvel, at the Russian Samovar.

Jamey Gambrell with her daughter, Callie.

Jamey Gambrell (1954–2020)

By Michael Greenberg and Bela Shayevich

Jamey Gambrell, the unrivaled Russian translator of our time, died of cancer in Manhattan on February 15, 2020. She had only recently returned to New York City, after spending several years in Austin, Texas. Known particularly for her translations of Vladimir Sorokin and Tatyana Tolstaya, Gambrell could certainly make "Russian writing sing, in English," as the *New York Times* obituary put it (March 10, 2020). Gambrell received her M.A. in Russian literature from the Columbia Slavic Department, and in 2002–3 she was a visiting scholar at the Harriman Institute.

On February 19, 2021, the Harriman Institute hosted a Zoom memorial tribute to Gambrell with speakers chosen to address different aspects and periods of her career. The texts by Michael Greenberg and Bela Shayevich that follow are presented here as a partial snapshot of the event, "Remembering Jamey Gambrell."

A video recording of the event is available on the Harriman website.

MICHAEL GREENBERG

Jamey and I met in 1968 as students at Elisabeth Irwin High School on Charlton Street in downtown Manhattan. Elisabeth Irwin was still a lefty "red diaper" school in those days, for the children of McCarthy-era blacklisted professionals, though neither Jamey's nor my parents were especially radical or politically active. She was a sixth-generation Texan—her family had settled in the Hill Country in the 1850s—which, along with her modest, reflective nature, made her exotic to us New Yorkers. We spent those years romping around Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side like minor outlaws, friends for life.

What really connected us was our love of literature, which, in adolescence, carried the power of a religious passion. Jamey's gift for language, her drive to communicate, to *connect*, were remarkable. She had an intuitive understanding of the very structure of language, how far words and meaning could be pushed without the foundation that supports their coherence falling apart. She was simultaneously precise and experimental, rigorous and imaginatively unbound, which gave her

translations their special quality. More than once she held me mesmerized explaining the various meanings of this or that Russian expression. They were glimmers of another culture, another way of thinking that she had mastered.

Jamey had been a student and friend of Joseph Brodsky, and the immersive delight she took in translating his poems for the one-man show *Brodsky/Baryshnikov* that ran in 2016 at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York was infectious. I went to one of the performances, Jamey sitting uneasily beside me editing her translations even as they were being projected onstage.

Robert Silvers adored her for these very qualities. He lit up at the sight of her and was always trying to coax her into writing more frequently for the *Review*. The pieces that she did write, from inside those chaotic post-Soviet days, as the oligarchs emerged and Russian society reconfigured, were brilliant.

The warm, sometimes desperate company of Russian émigrés and artists suited her, especially the nights of marathon conversation. In the 1970s and '80s, at her cavernous loft on Great Jones Street, anyone was likely to show up, in unpredictable states of ecstasy or torment, knowing that Jamey would let them in. Her place was a refuge. Russian artists and writers newly arrived in New York mixed with New Yorkers from the downtown art scene, producing a fruitful (and unquantifiable) pollination of sensibilities and ideas. Her passing marks the loss of an irrecoverable consciousness and world.

Michael Greenberg, a frequent contributor to the New York Review of Books, *is the author of* Hurry Down Sunshine *and* Beg, Borrow, Steal: A Writer's Life.

BELA SHAYEVICH

I still can't believe that Jamey taught at Columbia the year I was there, one of the most brilliant strokes of luck I've been struck with. I already knew her work because when I decided to become a translator, I too had wanted to translate the most exciting and appealing contemporary Russian author, Vladimir Sorokin, until I saw how she'd done it. Jamey was a real translator: fluent in multiple languages and literatures, a brilliant poetic interpreter, fully immersed—possessed by the living idiom, living in it, moving through that other world with her tongue. And a wild wit in English, clever and garrulous—nothing more devilish or laborious than translating wordplay steeped in allusion and radical changes in voice, and yet: Jamey could play and play. Everyone knows that this is why she was the best: at her best, she was fluid and light, floating the dense and obtuse right over the fence where it lands with a thud: Russian literature. Swift, smooth, and musical.

She said a translation is the reality where the original is the dream; that when you're translating, in a dream state, things make sense in the dream logic—the logic of the original—but then, you render them into reality. I disagree. To me, her translations contain both reality and a dream.

Jamey held office hours at her apartment among her rare books and rugs and quilts and paintings, a samovar, seven-toed cats I remember as pink, and Callie belting out a *High School Musical* song from behind the closed door of her room. I was of course intimidated by all the ways Jamey was my unreachable idol and role model: all the culture she had acquired and represented with her head-spinning, melodious Russian;

Top: Gambrell with sign "Bolshevik Party on Trial!"; *bottom*: Gambrell with Vladimir Sorokin (August 1991).

her staggering roster of writers; her stature in two worlds I was so interested in entering—both art and literary—and then, of course, how she was: a strong, unapologetically independent, fiercely loving mother, who adored Callie and did everything possible for her. We would hash out my every false word, errant comma, and flopping sentence, of which there were many—or rather, which Jamey, with her characteristic generosity, dedication, and meticulousness, did not let me get away with even once. Working with her as my editor did not inspire confidence in my work, per se—but for all that, there we were in the kitchen, leaning on the stove, sharing her Marlboro Lights, ashing them into the dishes, and laughing.

As a teacher, although I would call her my mentor, although never to her face, Jamey did not wear a mask. It wasn't just her excellence and expertise and support that she taught with. Jamey shared something with me that unfairly made me feel better about how I was and am: she could be frazzled, exhausted, breathless. She'd disappear. But she never hid these things. In fact, she always stood up for her right to work at her own pace, to her own satisfaction; a vivid example of self-respect. She would not cave to external demands to do otherwise. At a critical moment in my learning, Jamey showed me that you can be excellent while also struggling—it wasn't one or the other; moreover, that you could do it with grace and immense generosity, counting just what was important, discounting the mess.

Ultimately, "success" was impossible, she assured me. I needed another job (she repeated); anything earned through translation was mostly a matter of luck; it had nothing to do with the work or what it required. The work, especially the most tedious and invisible parts, which are never paid for or taken into account by those setting our deadlines, was simply a given. In fact, for lack of other rewards, doing your best, forcing yourself through the most thankless parts, was all that we had. Slogging to your own finish line was the win.

If all she had been was an emblem of greatness—conventional achievement attained through conventional means—I may have never found courage to keep getting back up from my continuous failures. Jamey taught me how to live with myself. She was especially supportive to me when I was going through the immense task of completing the Alexievich translation for two publishers simultaneously on a crazy deadline right after she'd won the prize. A pep talk from then: "Fuck them all. Just do your best job. Your heart is in the right place. And I'm sure your words will be, too." (Look: she puts heart over skill, like skill is an afterthought.) Me, about her, from around then, too: "She is someone that I feel 100 percent safe with, who can teach me without breaking anything in me that doesn't need to be broken."

I didn't get to see Jamey before she died. Her illness was sudden. I didn't know she was sick; I hadn't seen her in two years. But the last time I saw her, funnily enough, I watched her receive the Thornton Wilder Prize for Translation and get inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Meryl Streep was there, and I think that they even handed Jamey the check for $20,000 right on stage. She was radiant—that spring, she was also translating Brodsky poems for Mikhail Baryshnikov to dance to, attending rehearsals in order to calibrate meter and words to his movements, the kind of thing that makes a translator marvel at the doors opened by her peculiar key. And the prize was like that as well—that's why it was so funny. She'd never expected it ("I almost deleted the email; I thought it was spam")—or maybe it's just funny now, to have such a "resplendent" last image when we are so sad she is gone.

Bela Shayevich received the 2017 TA First Translation Prize for her translation of Svetlana Alexievich's Second-Hand Time. *She is adjunct assistant professor of writing in the Faculty of the Arts at Columbia University.*