

They sold their shadows

One of Russia's lesser-known poets worked as an actor, a waiter, a soldier and a military officer in the years after the Bolshevik Revolution and the First World War. Alexander Voloshin (1884–1960) was a natural candidate for footloose America, where everyone comes from somewhere else and everyone scrambles to find a foothold.

Voloshin should be better known, and perhaps he will be with the publication in English of *Sidetracked: Exile in Hollywood*, the rhyming mock epic from 1953 that is his masterpiece. Even Russian readers are unfamiliar with him. The arc of his peripatetic life placed him far away from his peers in St Petersburg, the city where literary reputations were made. He has been in the shadows ever since.

That's about to change. In *Sidetracked*, brilliantly translated by the accomplished Ukrainian-American poet, writer and translator Boris Dralyuk, Voloshin attempts to come to grips with the sweep of the twentieth century, from the Revolution to Pearl Harbor. Like Alexander Pushkin, Voloshin is composing a novella in verse, with *Eugene Onegin* in the next room.

He was born in Kyiv, on the Dnieper River. Dralyuk was born a century later in Odesa, less than 300 miles away. They team together (one posthumously) for *Sidetracked*. Both emigrated to the US, so we know them as Americans, too.

Millions fled the collapsing Russian Empire and settled in continental Europe, Asia, New York and San Francisco. Only about 5,000 migrated to Los Angeles, the land of broken dreams. Voloshin was one of them. He worked as a movie "extra" in Hollywood (where Dralyuk also grew up), telephoning Central Casting as often as every fifteen minutes to check if there was work for him. *Sidetracked* abounds with contemporary references to the times: "Look, 'Lindbergh's taken to the air' / and 'Mrs. Simpson cracks a smile ...'".

These tumbledown émigrés who had "sold their shadows", as Dralyuk writes, offered themselves up to the movie studios of southern California, or opened restaurants with names like the Volga Boat, the Russian Bear and the Double

Headed Eagle. The cliché of down-and-out refugees from Europe, juxtaposed with the high culture of the rich, was a staple of American films.

Voloshin ended his days as a taxi driver for the Yellow Cab Co. in Los Angeles, but kept his sense of humour to the end.

No matter where you turn your eyes – things waiting to be satirized.

This is the book that will make his reputation in the West.

Notes

The article seems to suggest, cryptically, that those "heroes" or divinely-gifted men – "guardians" – selected during WWI-II sold their spirit to live in this reality. The article does not capture whether war and events forced their hand.

