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Does the Ideology of the Melting Pot Have a Future? Russian American and Russian Israeli Fiction of the 21st Century: Comparative Analysis

Czy koncepcja „tygla narodów” ma przyszłość?

Proza rosyjsko-amerykańska i rosyjsko-izraelska XXI stulecia: analiza porównawcza

Streszczenie: Artykuł zawiera porównanie koncepcji twórczych amerykańskich i izraelskich pisarzy rosyjskojęzycznych. Jego autorka poddaje analizie hybrydyczność egzystencji twórcy poza krajem urodzenia. Chociaż literatura amerykańska stworzona przez imigrantów z byłego ZSRR w pierwszej dekadzie obecnego wieku zasadza się na odrzuceniu przez twórców wszelkich definicji klasyfikujących i istnieniu w przestrzeni pośredniej, to skierowana jest do czytelników anglojęzycznych. Tymczasem rosyjskojęzyczni pisarze Izraela chociaż akcentują swoją społeczną przynależność do tego kraju, to kierują swoją twórczość do czytelnika rosyjskojęzycznego, mieszkańca zarówno rosyjskojęzycznej diaspory, jak i Federacji Rosyjskiej. Zaledwie niewielka część rosyjskojęzycznych twórców izraelskich, którzy przedkładają odbiorcom hebrajskojęzycznych nad rosyjskojęzycznych, buduje swoją narrację na tych samych zasadach nieprzynależności, co rosyjskojęzyczni autorzy w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Autorka artykułu przekonuje, że w przeciwieństwie do forowanej w XX wieku koncepcji „tygla narodów”, w czasach współczesnych o sukcesie prozy imigrantów decydują teksty korzystające z literacko-kulturowej hybrydyczności.

Słowa kluczowe: translingwistyka, tożsamość hybrydowa, imigracja, żydostwo, proza

Есть ли будущее у идеологии «плавильного котла»?

Русско-американская и русско-израильская проза XXI века: сравнительный анализ

Резюме: В статье сравниваются творческие идеологии американских и израильских русскоязычных авторов. Статья анализирует гибридность существования автора вне страны рождения. Американская литература, написанная выходцами из бывшего СССР в 2000–ые годы, основана на непринадлежности авторов к тому или иному определению и существует в промежуточном пространстве, однако рассчитана на англоязычную аудиторию. В то же время, русскоязычные авторы Израиля подчеркивают свою социальную принадлежность этой стране; однако ориентируют свои произведения на русскоязычного читателя, находящегося как в русскоязычной диаспоре, так и в России. Ирония заключается в том, что тот небольшой процент русскоговорящих израильских авторов, которые предпочитают иврито-говорящую аудиторию русско-говорящей, выстраивает свой нарратив на тех же принципах непринадлежности, на которых строят его англоязычные русскоговорящие авторы. Статья пытается доказать, что в контрасте

с идеологией плавильного котла, распространенной в 20 веке, в современном мире текст, построенный на литературной и культурной гибридности, определяет успех иммигрантской прозы.

Ключевые слова: транслингвализм, гибридная идентичность, иммиграция, еврейство, проза

The end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s marked a large exodus of Russian Jews from the USSR. More than two million Soviet Jews left the country, heading firstly to USA, and then primarily to Israel. Last few years marked a quarter of a century anniversary for the so-called “great emigration”. Most Jews who have been leaving the dissolving empire were quite similar — they mostly belonged to the Soviet technical intelligentsia and assimilated urban middle class, and, as such, possessed similar social characteristics. However, over the passing years those who landed in Israel and those who resided in the USA have been more and more deviating from each other; they more and more develop different self-identities, different social self-coherence, different attitudes, and statuses, as well as different ways in which and how they define their own place in the new country. In this paper, I would discuss two different types of literature produced in the last decade, American-Russian immigrant literature and Israeli-Russian immigrant literature, concentrating primarily on the issue of self-identity.

Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish immigrants came in large enough numbers to constitute specific hyphenated identities within the immigrant mosaics of their new places of residence, giving rise to such designations of identity as Russian American or Russian Israeli. The most common themes that characterize their writing: a perpetual dialogue between the present and the past and between Russia and the new country of origin, correspond to the identity conflict through the revelation of this dual self-identity. A common theme that often unites most of the works written by immigrant writers is the experience of being seen and treated as the “other”; however, while sometimes the author laments an inability to fit into a foreign context, quite often the “otherness” becomes a device that is used deliberately, used to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. While in Russian émigré literature of the earlier twentieth century the exile and “the otherness” was indeed justified as a temporary expedient forced on writers by political circumstances, modern Russian immigrant narratives often transform this motif into a literary trope, an element justified not by political or social circumstances but rather by the needs for a special literary technique, a staple of a particular genre¹.

¹ For a comprehensive study of the subject, see A. Wanner, *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, IL, 2011.

American literature of the 2000s introduced a relatively large number of authors who have been born in USSR, came to US in the early 1990s, mostly still as children but, in some cases, already as young adults, and in about a decade have been able to successfully share their “Russian” immigrant experience in English for the English-speaking audience². Immigrant experience has been always a prevailing topic in the American fiction, yet, while in the past American society welcomed the idea of “a melting pot”, American intellectual establishment recently embraces a new trend: the strongly growing interest towards the multi-cultural diversity and multi-ethnic literary and cultural voices. Immigrant experiences had always been present in American literature but in the last decades American literary establishment more and more welcomes the multicultural writers that write in English about their ethnic heritage and immigrant experience. In both the readers’ and the critics’ view, such texts, either Indian, or Asian, or Russian — Jewish, allow outsiders to have a glimpse into a different cultural world that exists not in a faraway foreign country but basically a block away. As Andrian Wanner has noted, “Ironically, under the existing multicultural rubric, personal hardship appears to be advantageous for an author, since it facilitates inclusion into artistic canons reserved for oppressed and victimized minorities”³. Wanner also claims that “the Russian newcomers proved to be a godsend: as refugees from a grim and distant place, less “assimilated”, less “white”, as to speak they seemed better positioned than their gentrified American cousins to claim a Jewish share of the multicultural bonanza”⁴.

The previous generation of Russian immigrants welcomed the idea of becoming truly Americans. The immigrants strived to leave Russia behind as soon as possible. They spoke English with their children and regularly expressed in public the sentiment that they kept forgetting their native language. However in reality most immigrants could not stop still feeling alienated from their new motherland, both culturally and linguistically, as much as they felt ashamed of their dual identity that they tried to hide it as much as possible. Russian immigrant writers who came to the USA in 1970s and 1980s wrote mostly exclusively in Russian, claiming that

² See: A. Glazer, *Introduction: Russian American Fiction*, “Slavic and East European Journal” 2011.

³ A. Wanner, *Triple Identities. Russian-Speaking Jews as German, American and Israeli Authors*, in: Z. Gitelman (ed.), *The New Jewish Diaspora. Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel and Germany*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2016, pp. 286–298, p. 290.

⁴ A. Wanner, *Russian Jews and American Writers: A New Paradigm for Jewish Multiculturalism*, “Melus” 2012, vol. 37, no. 2, Oxford University Press, pp. 157–176, 157–158.

it is nearly impossible and largely unnatural for a writer to write in a non-native language. With a few exceptions of Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky, Russian-born American authors wrote primarily for Russian-speaking immigrant audience. None of these works could be openly published in USSR, the country of the language in which they have been produced, so till late 1980s this literature existed either in Russian-speaking diaspora abroad or reached Russia through very limited *samizdat* underground copying. While some of these works have been translated into English and, as such, reached relative popularity, as, for example, Sergei Dovlatov's stories, very few works of Russian-Jewish immigrant fiction were produced originally in English.

This situation unexpectedly and quite abruptly changed in the early years of the 21st century. In 2002 a young Russian-born American Jewish author Gary Shteyngart published a novel *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. This novel initiated an ongoing bloom of Russian American and Russian Canadian immigrant literature in English and created a new genre of what one can call *translingual Russian diaspora fiction*. Linguistically and to a large extent, socially, the generation that came to write in the 2000s is fully absorbed and integrated into "American" society; yet at the same time not only it has fully embraced its "otherness", but succeeded to use it as a successful literary device. These relatively young authors have been able to recreate and popularize their unique immigrant experiences in the so-called "Russian American literature", a narrative, now well established in American literary world, that presents Russian and Russian Jewish immigrant personal experience to *an outsider*, that is, to the English-speaking American audience. As Yelena Furman has noted:

Contemporary Russian American fiction came into being in roughly 2002, with the publication of Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. Texts by other writers soon followed, and the ever-expanding field currently includes Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, David Bezmozgis, Ellen Litman, Sana Krasikov, Mark Budman, Irina Reyn, Anya Ulinich, and Olga Grushin. With the exception of Grushin, who is not Jewish and came to the U.S. to study, the others came as part of either the Third or Fourth Wave. To be sure, not all of the above-mentioned writers come from Russia: David Bezmozgis is from Latvia, while Sana Krasikov, who came as part of the Fourth Wave when these were already independent countries, was born in Ukraine and lived in Georgia. Nevertheless, even when (post) Soviet Jews lived in places other than Russia, Russian was still their native language and primary cultural identification, and thus the term "Russian American" applies to these writers as well⁵.

⁵ Y. Furman, *Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts: Embracing the Hyphen in Russian American Fiction*, "Slavic and East European Journal" 2011, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 19–37, p. 20.

In their majority, most contemporary Russian American writers can be most succinctly characterized as Russian speaking Jewish immigrants who live in North America and write in English. The extent to which each of these writers identify with each of three facets of their identity, Russian, North American and Jewish, varies by individual writer.⁶ Yet in all of them these three features became fully hybridized, because each, as Yelena Furman notes, “carries traces of the others”, and because all of them use English language as the only way to convey the complications of their hybrid identities to the readers. All authors introduced above purposely create their texts in such a way that they represent an immigrant narrative oriented towards a non-immigrant American audience. Paradoxically, that is exactly this literary trope of representing oneself as “the other” and the constant emphasis on the narrator’s and author’s inability able to belong anywhere, that for all these writers has become their entrance ticket into American literary establishment. Most of the forementioned authors have contracts with most prestigious American publishing houses, publish in major literary magazines, and practically all debut books of most Russian American authors have been honored with prestigious awards⁷.

As mentioned above, most Russian immigrants in USA are not ethnically Russian; they are primarily Russian Jews, born in the URRS. However, there is always an observable tendency for Russian Jews to be viewed simply as “Russian” after immigration. Partially, this results from the fact that American culture does not tend to make the distinction between ethnic Russians and Russian-born minorities, determining the immigrant identity on the grounds of native language spoken. Most younger Americans of post-Soviet era also do not broadly understand the difference between Russia and USSR, therefore transforming everyone born in the ex-USSR into “Russians.” Given that Jews were never considered Russian in the Soviet Union, a writer Lara Vapnyar notes the irony of this transformation, “In the United States, I was finally granted the identity I had been denied my whole life. Here I became a Russian”⁸. However, it would be a mistake to describe such transformation as a sole result of Americans’ inability to make this distinction. When talking about themselves, Russian Jews often do not make such a distinction either, using the two

⁶ Ibidem, p. 26.

⁷ A. Wanner, *Russian Jews and American Writers...*, pp. 157–176, p. 158.

⁸ Y. Furman, *Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts...*, p. 22.

terms almost interchangeably⁹. Also, while most of Russian-born immigrants possess very strong Jewish national feelings and strongly support Israel, they mostly completely lack religious Jewish identity, originally coming from fully assimilated Soviet urban background and have virtually no or very little connection with broad American Jewish communities that mostly exclusively operate on the grounds of Reform or Conservative religious temples. As a result, while in US being a Jew is usually perceived as a religious affiliation, being a Russian Jew is viewed by Americans more like an ethnic minority, with its unique cultural and social characteristics that distinguish it. Yelena Furman believes that this fluidity, however, in no way reflects any weakening of this group's Jewish identification. As she says,

On the contrary, becoming Russian is very much a linguistic rather than cultural gesture; culturally, they identify themselves specifically as Russian Jews. However, the problem lies in the difference how Russian and American perceive the Jewish identity. Given that the Soviet state forbade any religious or cultural Jewish practices and thus Soviet, and later Russian, Jews were overwhelmingly assimilated into Soviet/Russian society, the Jewish identification of (post) Soviet immigrants is of a decidedly secular variety without much awareness or observance of traditional Jewish customs¹⁰.

The Jewish component of the hybrid identity of Russian American immigrant literature is probably the most complicated out of three discussed above. Except for one author, Maxim Shrayer, who identifies himself as a traditional Jew, most Russian-Jewish American authors despite sharing a strong ethnic Jewish pride at the same time present Jewish religious practices in a negative light. Their attitude to Judaism ranges from indifference and discomfort to an open hostility. Shterygart commented in his interview with Natasha Grinberg that he was taught to be proud to be Jewish but some of the worst experiences of his life “were the eight years of the Hebrew school” (Steyngart, *Can't Live Long Without Writing*)¹¹. The description of Jewish services and religious organizations in Russian American authors is savagely satirical and grotesque. As such, the Russian American Jewish authors very much represent Soviet Jewry as a whole, whose claim of Jewishness, as Wanner points out, was attested solely by the nationality paragraph in a Soviet passport

⁹ As widely known, a “Russian” restaurant or a “Russian” food store in the USA usually contains very little of authentic Russian food, while mostly selling ethnic foods from all over ex-USSR, such as Ukrainian borscht, Armenian dolma, Georgian kebabs and chicken tabaka, and Moldavian polenta, as well as East European Jewish food.

¹⁰ Y. Furman, *Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts*. . . , p. 25.

¹¹ http://www.webdelsof.com/Literary_Dialogues/interview-wds-shteyngart.htm [1.11.2021].

and emotional state of the cultural pride, largely as a reaction to this culture being suppressed¹². Discussing her relationship to Judaism, one of the younger American Russian writers, Anna Ulinich, says, "Ethnically, I'm a Jew (as was stated in my parents' Soviet passports). I was also raised culturally Soviet, with minimal exposure to the Jewish tradition [...] I'm also an atheist"¹³. Another author, Lara Vapnyar, expresses a similar sentiment when she admits her "perfect lack of knowledge of Jewish history" and her recognition "that with my atheist upbringing, I would never be able to accept any kind of religion, including Judaism"¹⁴.

Gary Shteygart in his memoir *Little Failure* describes how he suffers in the Jewish Day School in which his parents have enrolled him. As an adult, he comes back to the school, and understands what he did not understand before,

This is a community. This people know each other, understand each other, come to age with each other. Mom baking *rugeleh* in advanced baking ovens, Dads talking mileage on their new Lincolns, the drowsy, hypnotic hum of rabbis on Saturday mornings. What happened here, was nobody's fault. We Soviet Jews were simply invited to the wrong party. And then we were scared to leave because did not know who we are¹⁵.

As a result of their status of Russian Jews living in America and writing in English, the post-Soviet immigrants have acquired a triple identity rather than binary, typical of most diaspora Jews¹⁶. While for those writers who immigrated at a young age, such as Shteyngart, Bezmozgis, Reyn, and Krasikov the transition to English was natural, for others, like Lara Vapnyar, who came to the USA in her late twenties, it was not that easy. Vapnyar characterizes her own coming to English as a bumpy yet logical outcome of constant contact with this language:

I write in English, which might seem a conscious decision to write with an American audience in mind. But the choice of the language wasn't that simple or that conscious. By the time I approached writing, I had been reading in English a lot, and whenever I thought about creating something of my own, I caught myself putting my images into words of the English language. I felt most comfortable when writing in English, even though I had to struggle with grammar and vocabulary¹⁷.

¹² A. Wanner, *Russian Jews and American Writers*... pp. 157–176, p. 161.

¹³ A. Ulinich, *Fear and Citizenship: A Conversation with Novelist Anya Ulinich*, "World Literature Today" 2009, vol. 83, no. 6, pp. 14–16.

¹⁴ L. Vapnyar, *The Writer as Tour Guide*, in: A.H. Rosenfeld (ed.), *The Writer Uprooted: Contemporary Jewish Exile Literature*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IL 2008, pp. 92–109.

¹⁵ G. Shteyngart, *Little Failure*, Random House, New York 2014, p. 214.

¹⁶ A. Wanner, *Triple Identities*... p. 164.

¹⁷ L. Vapnyar, *The Writer as Tour Guide*... p. 105.

Vapnyar's move was fraught with complications. As she mentions, one reviewer, in a rather simplistic assessment of cultural authenticity, remarked that she "is the most authentically Russian member of the club for the simple reason that her spoken English is still somewhat wobbly"¹⁸. Indeed, Vapnyar's writing style, criticized as "emphatically plain, nearly featureless", has been attributed to her non-native-ness in English¹⁹. Yet this simplicity in writing in English should be seen as a particular feature that is actually symbolic of a hybridized linguistic and cultural identity. For example, Vapnyar views herself as engaged in a particular kind of English-language writing that represents a specifically immigrant subjectivity, "I would even say that I write in *American*, which for me was the language of immigrants"²⁰. The idea of a "language of immigrants" is manifest in the kind of English in which most Russian American texts are written. As Furman notes,

Despite being grammatically and lexically polished, Russian American works demonstrate that translanguaging is never complete; in the movement from one language to another. The English of Russian American fiction, including in works by writers who came at a young age, is laced through with Russian echoes; it is an English with a light yet unmistakable Russian accent. This hybridization occurs through the inclusion of Russian words and phrases in the text. While most writers transliterate the Russian elements, some put them includes in Cyrillic, and often even without translation to stress the feeling of foreignness²¹.

Yet, in spite of their intentional move to write in English, the desire for assimilation, so primary for earlier East European immigrants, is noticeably absent among the Russian American writers, who instead emphasize their difference(s): whereas they continually refer to themselves as Russian, Russian-Jewish, and/or immigrant in their essays, interviews, and blogs, there does not seem to be a single reference to themselves as American, except in a couple of cases where this term is specifically qualified by references to simultaneously being Russian. Paradoxically, being Russian is present in their works much more than being Jewish. As forementioned, as soon as they left Russia, Soviet Jews in America became "Russians" labeled as such by non-immigrant population. It was their native culture and mostly their native language, Russian, that "defined" the Russian Jews in US, not their ethnicity; and for most publishers their paradigmatic and exotic

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Y. Furman, *Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts*: . . . , p. 29.

“Russianness” has been a better market tool for the Russian-Jewish authors than their “Jewishness”. The cover of Bezmozgis’ collection of short stories depicts a *matryoshka* doll, Shteryngart’s *Absurdistan* has on the cover an onion-shaped dome. Ulinich’ *Petropolis* has Moscow Kremlin on its cover. The critics also highlight and praise the Russian style of the Russian American fiction. As one review proclaimed, Shteryngart’s novels “should be read with a glass of black tea in hand and a cube of sugar between the teeth”²². Russianness also trumps Jewishness in most of these authors not only in their publishing marketing but in most of their own public interviews or social media outlets. Shteyngart, for example, publicly admitted many times that he never considers himself an American but rather a global writer, and first and foremost, a Russian²³.

Lara Vapnyar has recently said in her interview that, “America is a country of immigrants, and there is a multitude of books written by immigrants in America — so some of these immigrant writers happen to be Russian. And maybe Americans are attracted to us as a group”²⁴. The older concept that no writer can write successfully in his or her non-native language became virtually not existent in the twenty-first century, which suddenly seemed to welcome English voices with heavy accents. As Furman says, “Russian American writers exemplify a wider tendency characteristic of contemporary literature: literary translingualism, the phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one”²⁵. Russian American fiction represents a new and welcomed addition to that trend and marks a new era in Russian immigrant narrative: a totally new type of texts, which belong to the 21st century of cross-borders and multiculturalism, a sustained category of contemporary literature that adds Russian immigrant voices to the mosaic of literary and cultural hybridity.

To summarize, we can say that most Russian American immigrants of the 1970s–1980s possessed a dual, not a triple, hybrid identity. While these newcomers seemingly, at least in public, constantly tried to denounce their Russianness while highlighting their Jewishness and a desire to be Americanized, most of the Russian immigrants, despite their attempts to assimilate, culturally and

²² Quoted in: *ibidem*, p. 34.

²³ <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/gary-shteyngart-why-go-to-russia-im-living-in-my-own-russia> [30.08.2021].

²⁴ L. Vapnyar, *The Writer as Tour Guide*. . . , p. 104.

²⁵ Y. Furman, *Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts*. . . , p. 31.

linguistically still existed primarily within the boundaries of the Russian community. As a result, most famous Russian American fiction produced during this period, written by such authors as Vasily Aksyonov, Sergei Dovlatov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Eduard Limonov as well as others, belongs exclusively to Russian and not by any means American literary canon. It is not accidental that most famous of these authors returned to Russia soon after the break of the Iron Curtain since their primary audience was there²⁶. By contrast, the new Russian-Jewish American immigrant writers of the 21st century fully embraced their hybridity because they realized that the only natural way *to belong in the society*, was to write, to speak about themselves, to explain themselves in the language of that society, that is, in English. On the other hand, we should note that, by contrast with the writers of the previous generation, the reception of these new authors in their country of birth has been indifferent at the best and hostile at the worst. The commodity of being “a Russian” that worked so well in their new place of residence, turned against them in their native land. The forfeiture of the mother tongue that required a translation back to the native culture never allowed them to qualify as “genuine Russians” in their native land²⁷. Therefore, we can conclude that the primarily feature that defines the contemporary generation of Russian American writers is best summed up the of “assimilated otherness” feeling at home in a culture while simultaneously remaining foreign to it — which applies to both their relationship with USA and with Russia.

Surprisingly, in Israel, the situation is quite opposite. By contrast with the new generation of Russian American writers, it seems that contemporary Russian Israeli authors are similarly ashamed of possessing the so-called *dual* or *split identity* as was the previous generation of immigrants. Most of them claim on public, as seen from multiple interview and private conversations, that they do not feel “being the others” in their new land of residence and that they are not interested by any means in exploring the issue of identity conflict. On the contrary, they passionately identify themselves as “Israelis”. Therefore, it comes ironic that after more than thirty years of *Big Alyah*, Israeli Russian immigrant narrative,

²⁶ It is worth noting that, by contrast with the earlier generations, those successful contemporary Russian American authors who continue to write in Russian and publish in Russia usually avoid using American or immigrant themes. An example of such writing is a finalist for Russian Booker Prize, a popular writer Yelena Katishonok, who, in spite of the fact that she permanently resides in Boston, MA, builds her plots around and places her characters in Latvia, where she lived prior to her immigration while her post-immigration experiences is completely missing from her literary works.

²⁷ A. Wanner, *Triple Identities*..., p. 286.

oriented towards the larger, non-Russian population in the country's official language, Hebrew, has never been yet produced. Immigrant literature in Israel, including works written by relatively young authors that came to Israel as children, exists primarily in its own environment and is written mostly exclusively in Russian. The contacts between Russian-speaking authors and Hebrew literary world are basically non-existent. Israeli Russian writers in Israel produce their own literary journals and almanacs and organize conferences and workshops that very rarely if ever cross the boundaries of their own Russian-speaking community²⁸.

Similarly to American Russian authors, Israeli Russian immigrant writers of 1970s and 1980s could publish their works in Russia only through illegal *samizdat* channels. However, by contrast with the previous generation of immigrants, the new generation of Israeli immigrant authors broadly publish and advertise their works in Russia. Most of these authors attempt to engage Russian audiences either inside Russia or in world-wide Russian-speaking diasporas — all to various levels of success. By contrast with Russian translations of Russian American English literature, that mostly always fail to gain large reader's interest, quite a few Russian Israeli authors who permanently live in Israel have been able to become quite popular in Russia. Among those one should especially note Dina Rubina, yet also Elena Minkin Taycher, Dennis Sobolev, and, to a lesser extent, others.

Being the most famous Russian Israeli author outside of Israel, Dina Rubina probably exemplifies the development of Israeli immigrant literature of the last twenty years in its best²⁹. Rubina's first novel, *Here comes the Messiah*, published back in late 1990s, presented a carnivalesque picture of the immigrant world. In this novel Rubina follows an already established literary tradition in which emigration symbolizes death: one life-circle comes to its end, being replaced by a new life — life after death. However, in her consequent works Rubina less and less speaks about her experience as an immigrant and more and more about her being a Russian Israeli, an Israeli citizen and a patriot, whose connection with the ex-country remains purely linguistic. However, while socially and politically Rubina associates herself only with Israel,

²⁸ It is worth noting here that a recent international conference on Russian Israeli literature organized and sponsored by Bar Ilan University used Russian and English only as working languages with Hebrew not included at all, although it was evident that for majority of Russian Israeli participants using English was difficult and unnatural and many of them spoke it with a heavy Hebrew or Russian accent.

²⁹ For more on Dina Rubina, see: *Some Thoughts on Russian-Language Israeli Fiction: Introducing Dina Rubina*, "Prooftexts" 2008, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 197–231.

she continues to write in Russian and her primary publishers and probably also audiences are in Russia. Rubina is a Russian writer and although she lives in Israel, she does not build her present literary career on an immigrant identity. The concept of “the otherness” that very much was dominating in her first novel has not been removed from her writing, yet it ceased to be limited to immigrant experience only. Her characters live in various countries, travel, return, meet by chance, yet they certainly have overcome the boundaries of immigrant literature. Even though all of them are rather cosmopolitan and often feel lost between their past and present (as well as geographically between Prague, Jerusalem, Moscow or Toledo), all of them still always know that their only true home is now Israel.

At the same time when her ex- compatriots were finding their place in American literature, Rubina secured her place in Russian. There are a few reasons why Rubina has been able to achieve such high popularity. Her style very well fits into the so-called “female novel” popular in late 1990s and early 2000s. It has elements of mystery, great plot development and strong characters and although Israel was present in most of her works of that time, most of the plot happens in ex-USSR, in Odessa, Central Asia or Western Ukraine, as well as in Spain of Prague, with the use of Israel served more like an exotic local color. There have been also social reasons. Rubina emigrated from USSR already as an established writer, and in the early 2000s she spent quite a few years working at an Israeli organization in Moscow. The stay in the country’s capital had arguably allowed her to re-boot old connection and establish new in publishing houses and media. She has been also extensively travelling not only around Russia and ex-USSR but also in Germany, US, Canada, and basically any country that has Russian-speaking Jewish population to promote herself and her books. Russian-speaking diaspora is very supportive of Israel, and Rubina in a way took an advantage of this sentiment that gradually established her image as a kind of symbol, representative of new “Russian Zionism”. By many Russian-speaking diaspora Jews Rubina is regarded as a new type of a Jewish patriot of the 21st century, a cultural figure that proves that individual’s social and linguistic identities do not necessarily correspond to each other: a person can socially and politically fully associate oneself with a country of residence and citizenship, yet linguistically and culturally still comfortably belong onto the reality of one’s native language.

Rubina was followed by another female author, who recently secured a place in Russian literature, Elena Minkin-Taycher. Just

as Rubina, Minkin-Taycher creates novels primarily for middle-aged female audiences and similarly incorporates her immigrant experience into her work only to a limit, combining it with the Jewish family sagas and, in her recent work, such popular topics as the ban on adoption of Russian children abroad. By contrast with Rubina, Minkin-Taycher started to write already in her late 40s and writing is more a hobby for her. She is a full-time primary care doctor. However, she has contract with the popular publishing house *Vremya* that publishes, sells, and promotes her books that recently have been long listed for some well-known Russian literary prizes.

Yet all the Russian Israeli authors who gained their fame in Russia are virtually unknown in non-Russian speaking Israel. It is sadly ironic that the writer who symbolizes Israeli literature for probably every Russian speaking immigrant in the world is virtually unknown outside of the Russian community in the country that she constantly calls her home and so strongly and broadly popularizes around the world. Translated into more than 30 languages, Rubina has been translated into Hebrew only once, and the translation was a short story, dated back from early 1990s and fully unnoticed by Hebrew critics or readers. In a private conversation Elena Minkin-Taycher has recently commented on her own unsuccessful experience with trying to enter Hebrew speaking literary establishment:

I am sure that novels and stories about us, Russian Israelis, written by us, would be interesting to the native Israelis. Just as I am interested in books and films about people that come from Iraq, Morocco, or Tunisia. We live together, but we know little about each other and that is very wrong and stupid. And yet no one has ever heard the name of Dina Rubina or other great Israeli Russian-speaking writers. Absurdity, isn't it? This is a very sensitive issue for all Russian-speaking writers. The country's policy is such that immigrant books are not encouraged. It is believed that those who know Russian will read in Russian, and those who know French will read in French. Russian classics has been widely translated in Hebrew and well known. Yet the authors of Russian *alya*, the authors who live and write in Israel here and now, are seen as non-existent, not interesting, not worth reading at all. The officials say that non-Russian speaking audiences are not interested in the lives of Russian Jews³⁰.

Most of the Russian Israeli literature exists only in its own cultural world and very rarely crosses into the world of Hebrew

³⁰ Minkin-Taycher, in a private interview with the author. See also: "Существует мнение, что в 90-х годах русских не просто не любили, но отношение было на грани дискриминации. Затем было ответное отторжение. Насколько я знаю, русскоязычные не так чтобы интересуются современной литературой на иврите и израильским лит. процессом. Читают на русском и английском, в основном. Но может, я и ошибаюсь. В Америке зачастую русскоязычная эмиграция читает на английском и, соответственно, пишет. Ну а молодое поколение следует традициям".

literary magazines or publishing houses. This sadly applies not only to the elder authors but even to those who immigrated to Israel as children. Younger writers continue to write in Russian, although for many of them Hebrew is the primary language they use at work or even in everyday life, especially in communication with their own children. There are probably a few reasons for such situation. Firstly, by contrast with contemporary US, Israel still very strongly strives to be a homogenous society, a Jewish state where the goal of any immigrant is to “absorb” into its new country and where being “the other” is not welcome. By contrast with American rising interest in multiculturalism, Israeli culture still does not support and quite discriminates the concept of hybrid identity, forcing instead an idea that all immigrants come as Jews and should eventually become Israelis. It is interesting to note that the concept of the “other” is actually quite popular in Hebrew literature; yet in Israeli mentality *the other* is always the Palestinian Arab, not a “culturally different” Jew.

The irony of the situation is even more sad if we take into consideration that most of the Russian Israeli literature is very patriotic. Most Russian Israeli authors similarly to Rubina and Taycher deliberately emphasize their feeling of belonging in Israel and an ability to overcome their and their characters’ initial immigrant alienation. Yet at the same time, while their works are regularly at the top of the reader’s lists in Russia, while they are nominated or Russian literary prizes and are praised by acclaimed critics in Moscow, in Israel their works exist only in its own Russian ghetto and converse only with their fellow Russians. To add even more absurdity, such strong patriotism might be surprisingly the major reason that alienates Russian Israeli literature from Hebrew-speaking elite. Israel as a country is very strongly divided politically. Most of the Russian immigrants support right-wing conservatives; most of the Israeli intellectuals traditionally belong to the liberal *left*. Hebrew intelligentsia often regards Russian Israelis as aggressive, non-tolerant, racist, and militaristic. By contrast, many Russian Israelis believe that Hebrew intellectuals are naïve. Minkin-Taycher describes her political conflict with Israeli elite as follows:

I think the secret is that we are talking about people who were born in Israel, or at least grew up in Israel. They have lost objective reality. They live in an ivory tower. These are good people, but they have a feeling of a big people and a big country. A false feeling, unfortunately. And we, all the others, feel like small nations, minorities. Therefore, we are accustomed to keep the defense, in contrast to them, who grew up here and live in a kind of illusory world³¹.

³¹ Ibidem.

Israel, by contrast with USA, is a unique country when it comes to immigration from Russia. The proportion of Russian speaking population is very large. Probably due to such high intensity, over the years Russians in Israel have stopped to be regarded as an ethnic minority. Rather they are viewed as a social class. Such views have some unique consequences. Just as in USA, Russian Jews in Israel have seemingly lost their “Jewishness” in the eyes of the natives and finally obtained an identity they had never been fully granted in their country of birth: they are perceived simply as “Russians”. Yet there are very strong differences between the way how English-speaking Americans and Hebrew-speaking Israelis understand the term “the Russians”. “Russians” in Israel seemingly have a much stronger social impact on the society that they do in the USA. The term *Russian street* that does not exist in the USA plays a significant role in the Israeli society. Russian-speaking community has their own political party and a few representatives from other parties in Senate, large newspapers and well trafficked news websites, a major radio station, and several TV stations. While some of them are sponsored by private funds, the larger media channels, such as Radio REKA or the TV channel 9, are funded by the Israeli government. Yet while most “Russians” has long been well absorbed into the Israeli society, they are still considered different by Hebrew Israelis, sometimes even after twenty or thirty years that they arrived. In every election the major political parties fight for *Russian* votes, creating campaigns that are targeted and designed particularly for Russian-speaking audience in general rather than exclusively for newly arriving immigrants from the ex-USSR. These campaigns do not only use Russian language but also specifically Russian and often Soviet cultural stereotypes³². Moreover, the Russians themselves similarly consider themselves linguistically and culturally different, despite all their strong feelings of political *patriotic* sense of belonging. Many Russian Israelis also believe that in majority the intellectual potential of the immigration of the 1990s has never been fully fulfilled. Many people have left the country a few years after the initial repatriation, and many of those who stayed have not been able to rise back to the social status they had back in USSR.

³² For example, the recent campaign of Beni Ganz used a famous song from a cult Russian movie “The Irony of Fate” to create an advertisement song for his party *Kahol Lavan*. The song lyrics “If You Do not Have an Aunt” have been changed to “If You Do Not Have a Home,” implying it would be *Kahol Lavan* that would build affordable apartments for low-income Russian population (such as young families or seniors) and new Russian immigrants.

Another difference comes from the fact that Russian Jews in Israel have been noted for their lack of devotion towards Jewish religious traditions and Jewish culture. Just as the USA, many Russians did not adopt to most Israeli state practices, especially when it comes to religion. Yet by contrast with the USA, Israeli society does not separate religion from the state. As previously mentioned, the lack of involvement into Jewish tradition in Russian Jews does not, by any means, reflect any weakening of this group's Jewish identification; culturally, they very much identify themselves as Jews. However, the problem lies in the difference how *Russians* and native Israelis perceive the Jewish identity. Most of Russian Israelis have strong national Jewish feelings but no religious feelings, and, therefore, have trouble with such issues as limited availability of kosher foods, and limited transport on Saturdays that they see as a lack of democratic freedoms. As a result, many Israelis regard Russians as false Jews, who have no connection to Judaism and left Russia for Israel simply in the search of a better life³³. The trafficking of women from ex-USSR to Israel and specific social circumstances of early 1990s also resulted in a situation when, while in the USA a *Russian Jew* usually represents education and culture, in Israel the stereotypes of "Russians" are often associated with crime and prostitution.

During the years of the Cold War the Russians often appear on American screens or have been mentioned in American literature, even though those appearances usually were strongly stereotypical. However, in recent years one would very rarely see a *Russian* either in American movies or in literature besides the works of Russian American authors. Nowadays in USA it is mostly exclusively *Russians* who speak about themselves. By contrast, in Israel *Russians* quite often are shown in Israeli popular culture and on TV. Yet it is usually Hebrew-speaking Israelis that depict and play them, with very limited incorporation of Russian born authors themselves, and, as a result, this depiction is still full of stereotypes. During the last decades on Israeli TV there have been quite a few series and films that talk about Russian Israelis, and mostly all of indeed them regard Russians as a particular

³³ Recently a large conflict arose from the fact that Russians in Israel keep celebrating New Year, the Soviet holiday of *Novy God*. The opponents of the celebrations argue that the holiday is Christian and its popularity among Russian Jews only proves that "they are not real Jews". The year 2019 posed an extra hurdle for acceptance: There is a late Soviet tradition of including the relevant animal from the Chinese zodiac in *Novy God* decorations, and 2019 happened to be the year of the pig — a reviled animal in Judaism whose meat is forbidden — meaning that the celebrations included an abundance of *non-kosher* ceramic pigs, cuddly pig toys and piggy banks placed usually under or on the tree. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/30/world/middleeast/israel-novy-god-ashdod.html> [20.09.2021].

social group, not an ethnic minority. Usually in those films *Russim* are juxtaposed not against another ethnic group, like French or Ephiopian immigrants, but against another social group, usually against Ultra-Orthodox Jews, who mostly always regard *Russians* as *goym*, non-Jews and heretics³⁴.

As of now, there are yet no Russian Israeli authors who would arrive after 1990 and would be able to produce a successful *Russian* immigrant narrative in Hebrew³⁵. However, it would not be true to say that no such authors have been published in Hebrew at all. Recently a few Russian-speaking authors have been finally able to cross the cultural bridge. Among those, the two names that seem the most representative are Leonid Levinzon and Leonid Pekarovsky. By contrast with American Russian authors, these two writers are not young at all, and their work has been translated into Hebrew, not originally written in it, very much like the work of those American Russians from the 1980s who has been able to cross the bridge to another culture but not the bridge to another language. Both authors have received some critical attention from Hebrew literary sources and even some fame. What makes this attention and fame strongly ironic is the fact that the writers who have received a new literary life in Hebrew are not the ones who are famous among Russian-speaking audiences but those who are virtually not known at all among Russian readers, either in Israel or in diaspora. What makes the irony even stronger, is the fact that the tone and the message of the works that have been translated and well received by Hebrew audiences are very much anti- and anti-patriotic. Rather, just like American Russian authors, these writers stress the inability of their characters to integrate into and belong to into society as well as their strong disillusionment with Israeli Zionism.

Leonid Levinzon's novel *Pushkin's Children* was originally self-published by the author in 600 copies and is virtually unknown

³⁴ For example, see Israeli TV series *A Touch Away* produced in 2006. An online reviewer says on the series, "The series focuses on two families whose lives fatefully intersect in an apartment complex in the Orthodox neighborhood of Bnei Brak in Tel Aviv. The Bermans are a strictly religious (Haredi) family whose daughter Rochele (Gaya Traub) is about to enter into an arranged marriage with a wealthy young bridegroom. But sparks fly when a newly arrived, thoroughly secular family from Russia — including vivacious actress Marina (the incomparable Evgenia Dodina) and her handsome eldest son Zorik — takes over a neighboring apartment. The forbidden love that soon buds between the two young neighbors, and the secrets that each family must hide, threaten the families' deeply rooted cultural assumptions and challenge individual family members' beliefs. *A Touch Away*, cleverly scripted and well cast, never fails to entertain, but manages also to be a realistic reflection of the ongoing social challenges facing today's increasingly diverse Israeli society". <https://jfi.org/watch-online/jfi-on-demand/a-touch-away> [30.09.2021].

³⁵ It is important to note that we are speaking explicitly of the authors who would arrive to Israel after 1990s, not the writers who belong to the earlier generations.

in Russian-speaking audience. However, Levinzon paid for the translation and published the novel in Hebrew on his own account. It did not sell very well at first but then suddenly received a very strong review in a major literary Hebrew magazine and became quite popular. The reviewer claimed that the novel “passionately and joyfully crosses the depressing realist tradition of contemporary Hebrew literature, moving to fantasy in creative liberation yet also constantly demonstrating joy in stereotypical and even racist shortcuts beyond the rules of political correctness”³⁶. He continued to say that “the characters operate on the margins of the miserable and frenzied state, in a confined enclave of language and food, literature and poetry, clothes and jokes — all Russian”³⁷.

The most amazing success story of all Russian-Israeli writers is probably the story of Leonid Pekarovsky. Pekarovsky is sixty-four and has never published a story in a Russian publishing house or magazine. In his nearly thirty years in Israel, he worked as a street janitor, a cemetery laborer, and then for many years till present as a security guard at the parking lot of a Daihatsu dealership in Tel Aviv. He started writing in his early sixties, while working night shifts, and after writing twelve stories, paid for the translation of three, and send these translated stories directly to the editor in chief of “Ha-Aretz”, the primary intellectual Israeli newspaper. Surprisingly all three were immediately accepted and published. Soon the same newspaper published the remaining ten stories, and Pekarovsky received an offer from a major publishing house for a collection of these stories. The collection appeared under a title, *Broom and Other Stories* less than a year after and earned raving reviews. The collection starts as following:

Once upon a time, in a certain kingdom in a certain Middle East democracy, there was a guard. The guard sat for many days in a booth that was located in the southern part of a beautiful Mediterranean city, in a parking lot made of concrete. The guard did not like the booth: It evoked solitary confinement in a prison... Occasionally the guard asked an elegant, elderly woman who was his Fortuna: Why did you have to put me in a booth? The woman made no reply, only smiled mysteriously. After all, the guard was not born for the booth. He felt that he possessed prodigious abilities and powers. He knew that the democratic state would gain if it utilized those powers and abilities. But the democratic state had no need either for the guard or for his powers and abilities³⁸.

Pekarovsky constantly stresses in his stories the inability of his protagonists to succeed in their new country. One of his charac-

³⁶ <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/prose/.premium-1.4381984> [29.09.2021].

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ <http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/tag/leonid-pekarovsky/> [29.09.2021].

ters says: "I have a doctoral degree and invested great effort in studying the history of the Renaissance in northern Europe. To be precise, my specific interest is the aesthetics of Albrecht Durer, the mysterious genius of the twilight years of medieval Germany. Now I am cleaning the streets of Tel Aviv. There is no shortage of garbage, thank God. Plenty of garbage means that I can earn my bread"³⁹. Yet, this lack of successful patriotic, fully integrated people, is exactly what has made Pekarovsky received so positively in Hebrew literary establishment. As one of his reviewers says, "What makes his work so great is that they allow us to hear the voices of ordinary people, whose voice is so rarely heard in contemporary Hebrew literature. Garage mechanics, prostitutes, hardscrabble immigrants, small-time bosses who tyrannize even smaller-time underlings; Bat Yam, south Tel Aviv, dark hovels and obscure alleys of life"⁴⁰. The reviewer concludes by saying, "What sets his stories apart is that they are a fusion between the sublime and the low. Like the great Russian works. They start from something banal and then assume metaphysical dimensions. It's a unique thing, and he turned it into art"⁴¹.

We can suggest that, when it comes to Russian literature in Israel, one witnesses a unique phenomenon. The authors who deliberately try to reject their immigrant self-identity, replace it with the feeling of belonging and support and promote the idea of the melting pot, in real life are not able to succeed to overcome the boundaries of their linguistical ghetto, and keep remaining alienated from the literary establishment of their new country. These authors, who are regarded in the Russian-speaking world as the symbols of Russian Israeli literature, such as Dina Rubina, are basically unknown in Hebrew-speaking Israel. By contrast, those authors who deliberately use their "otherness" as a trope, and keep exploiting all stereotypes associated with immigrant life, such as a lack of status, linguistic and cultural alienation, etc., have been able to succeed as Israeli authors. One interviewer asked Pekarovsky about his relations with Russian society. To that question he replied:

They are not pleased. I succeeded and broke the glass ceiling. Anyone with talent, and above all luck, can do it. But they do not offer praise, [and say] 'Why him? Who is he, anyway?' They are not familiar with modern Israeli culture, don't know Hebrew, don't know intellectuals, don't want to read Amos Oz and others, exist within ghetto psychology. They think they are first in the

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ <https://www.haaretz.com/premium--1.5166447> [29.09.2021].

⁴¹ Ibidem.

world. But you shouldn't care what they think: Israelis are intellectuals and are talented. I also do not know enough Hebrew. I know that I will never be Israeli. This is impossible. Actually, I even do not want to be Israeli. I accepted Israel and I love it. But I am "the other". And I want Israelis to know about me and that I love and respect them⁴².

To summarize, I believe that in the USA the young generation of Russian American writers, including those who left at a young age, is best summed up as the generation of "assimilated otherness" that feels at home in a culture while simultaneously remaining foreign to it. By contrast with Russian American writers, the new generation of Israeli immigrants has not able or has not been interested in to producing such narrative. Despite their strong national feelings and relative social success, Russians in Israel still have not been able or have no desire to integrate into the literary society. Surprisingly, although Israel state ideology still supports the idea of the melting pot, we can see that when it comes to cultural success, when applied to a real-life situation, this idea fails. American literary audience and Israeli literary audiences are surprisingly looking in immigrant fiction for the same thing: the otherness. Levinzon and Pekarovsky have succeeded exactly because they were able to play with their otherness, to exploit, exaggerate and sometimes even subvert their immigrant *existence* rather than to overcome it, as most other Russian Israeli writers attempt to do in their works. Surprisingly it seems that new reality of the 21st century has created a cultural phenomenon not existent in our culture before: the more you feel alienated, actually the more you truly belong.

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⁴² Ibidem. For more on Pekarovsky and Russian-Hebrew writing in Israel see Andrian Wanner, *Russian Speaking Immigrants as German, American and Israeli Authors*.

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