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SOVIET JEWISHNESS AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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In 2009 Natan Sharansky, formerly an iconic Soviet refusenik and now an Israeli politician, was named chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, the wing of the Israeli government historically charged with fostering Jewish immigration to Israel, traditionally known as *aliya*. Sharansky, however, immediately reformulated the central mission of the Jewish Agency away from *aliya* and toward the strengthening of secular Jewish identity around the world. The *Forward* reported:

At the center of Sharansky's plan is the notion of peoplehood. He and a tight group of ideological allies—mostly other Russian Jews—believe that the Jewish Agency must now become a global promoter of Jewish identity, particularly among the young. Peoplehood, according to its proponents, is defined as a sense of connectivity between Jews who share a common history and fate.¹

With Sharansky's ascent to this particular position and the concurrent shift in the Jewish Agency's mission from fomenter of migration to builder of secular Jewish identity, Soviet Jews have moved to the center of conversations about Jewish identity and culture. These new developments give reason to think seriously about Soviet Jewish culture and its impact on global Jewish culture. Indeed, a growing number of books and articles on the subject indicate that there is a new body of scholarship, defined by a cultural studies approach to the Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish experience. These new studies come from varied disciplines, such as history, anthropology, film studies, and literary criticism, to name a few, but they all put culture and cultural production at the center of scholarship on Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish community and identity. We call this emerging field "Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies." This newly developing field sweeps across temporal and spatial boundaries. It encompasses Jewish experiences in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, as well as within the borders of the Former Soviet Union and outside of it, in Israel, North America, or elsewhere, wherever Soviet and post-Soviet Jews have migrated. What the subjects of all of this research have in common is the experience of having lived under the Soviet Union with its radical experiments in Jewish identity and culture.

Scholars working in this emerging field generally do not look at Soviet and post-Soviet Jews through the more traditional lenses of vanishing diasporas,

Soviet anti-Semitism, and the disappearance of Yiddish and Hebrew cultures. Rather than approaching the Jewish experience of Soviet Jews with presumptions of what it means to be Jewish, and whether in fact Soviet Jews measure up, this scholarship asks what it means to be Jewish in a Soviet and post-Soviet context. In what ways is Jewishness performed and represented? By taking a birds-eye, interdisciplinary view, we want to redefine the field of Soviet Jewish Studies, and to use particular examples of the new research to suggest what a cultural studies approach reveals about Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish culture. We will demonstrate first that scholars of Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies have focused on new forms of Jewish practice that have sometimes supplanted traditional religious practices. Secondly, we show that this body of scholarship in Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies complicates the idea that twentieth century Jewish history is a history of assimilation, a movement downward from authentic Jewish practice rooted in Jewish languages to the end of a distinctive Jewish life. Most importantly, this new scholarship takes a global rather than national perspective, since post-Soviet Jewry is one of the most transnational in contemporary Jewish life. Thus, in a post-Soviet, post-Zionist, post-assimilationist moment in global Jewish culture, this group of Jews with their unique cultural history may be placed at the center, not periphery, of the global Jewish experience. Therefore, the body of scholarship forming Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies has much to offer to scholars in Jewish and Russian Studies, as well as Diaspora Studies.

"Non-Jewish Jews?" The Search for the Practices that Define Soviet and Post-Soviet Jews

In some ways, Jewish identity in the Soviet Union was very much fixed. Jews were identified first by their passports, which clearly defined their ethnicity (*natsional'nost'* in Russian) as Jewish. Even today, with that rubric in passports gone, experience suggests that Russian Jews are seen by others and see themselves as ethnically, even biologically, different. Allegedly, they can be identified by their body type, noses, gait, hair, and skin color. As Soviet literary representations and testimonials show, Jewishness is deeply embodied. Although the idea of an embodied Jewish identity has been well researched in the German and Central European context, this is a very recent line of research in the Russian context. For example, an analysis of the emerging body of Soviet Jewish Holocaust survivor testimony shows that survivors often describe their experiences as having been defined by their bodies.²

However sociologists working on post-Soviet Jewish identity have begun breaking down this fixed notion of a biologically and ethnically defined Jewish identity. Larissa Remennick has demonstrated that although Jewishness was essentialized in passports and in the perception of the Jewish body, Soviet Jews also had specific (albeit not religious) practices as Jews. As Remennick has argued, these specifically Soviet Jewish practices include: "cultivation of intellectualism, respect of hard effort and know-how in one's line of work,

strength of family networks, in-group solidarity, moderation in their lifestyle, quiet negation or sheer manipulation of the Soviet system."³ Among Soviet Jews raised in the secular Yiddish school system in the 1920s and 1930s, historian Anna Shternshis has shown that social relations, more than religious beliefs, defined Jewishness.⁴

Elena Nosenko also breaks down any notion of fixed Jewish identity in her research on so-called "half-Jews." In the Soviet era, racially-determined ethnicity coupled with intermarriage produced scores of such "halves" — people with one Jewish parent who had to make a choice as to how to identify. Nosenko asks what Jewishness means to so-called "half-Jews," and how they express it.⁵ She finds that though all of her subjects are "halves," and therefore share in the same biological Jewish destiny, their attitudes range from full identification with a Jewish religious identity to complete indifference and rejection. This is a paradox: on the one hand, the mere categories of "half" and "quarter-" Jew are racial, and are only possible due to a definition of Jewishness by blood. On the other hand, the way these "halves" treat their "Jewish blood" is a matter of personal choice. They pick and choose elements of being Jewish that fit them, and custom-build their Jewish, partly-Jewish, or non-Jewish identities. In other words, these Russian "halves" de-essentialize their biologically-determined identities.

The scholarly search for the practices that define Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish identity has also been taken up by historians. In his highly polemical and widely-read book *The Jewish Century*, Yuri Slezkine argues that Soviet Jewish social and cultural practices have little to do with a particular connection to Judaism and everything to do with Jews' "mercurial" status in Russian society. By "mercurial" Slezkine means "urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible."⁶ According to Slezkine, one of the key practices of Soviet Jews was "Pushkin's Faith," defined as their identification with great Russian writers and poets, and an admiration of high literary culture.⁷ Thus, in this scholarly approach, Soviet Jews emerge as "non-Jewish Jews," those who abandoned particular Jewish practices and instead searched for universal solutions to the world's problems. The expression "non-Jewish Jews" was originally coined by Isaac Deutscher, who included among their ranks Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Sigmund Freud, and others—the same type of Jews who appear in Slezkine's book.⁸

This separation of Jewish identity from religious practices led to the observance of other religious practices among Soviet and post-Soviet Jews, from widespread orthodox Christianity to Buddhism and Krishnaism, and even esoteric cults. Judith Kornblatt has analyzed why and how some Jews, especially artists and intellectuals, converted to Christianity in the 1960s through 1980s. Jewishness for them was not a religion, and they did not see this conversion as a rejection of Jewishness. In fact, in the words of the ideologue of this movement, priest and converted Jew Aleksandr Men, they felt "doubly chosen" as ethnic Jews and religious Christians.⁹

These secular ethnic Jews also had a distinct culinary culture, as several scholars have recently shown. Although Jewish culinary history is an estab-

lished area of inquiry in scholarship on American Jewish culture, this is a new line of inquiry for Soviet Jewish Studies.¹⁰ Shternshis opens her book on Soviet Jewish identities with an anecdote about one of her respondents preparing “kosher pork.” Stunned, Shternshis asks this old Jewish woman how pork can be kosher, to which her respondent explains that it is her own special Jewish recipe that makes it kosher. For her, the idea of kosher pork was not an oxymoron. The fact of its preparation by a Jewish woman, and hence of being embedded in Jewish social relations, is what made the most taboo meat kosher. Although demonstrating the irrelevance of kashrut, this anecdote shows that food played an important role in defining Jewishness to the “non-Jewish Jewish” woman in Shternshis’ study.

Several works by Alice Nakhimovsky also show the deep connections between Jewish food and Soviet Jewish identities.¹¹ Thus, during the Soviet era, when all things Jewish were kept quiet, food remained an important marker and practice of Jewishness. Paradoxically, even though ritual foods were divorced from their traditional symbolism and moved entirely into the private sphere, they became imbued with new meaning. For instance, matzo was not used as a part of Passover celebrations. Instead, it was kept at home in secrecy, year-round, to mark one’s Jewishness. Matzo lost its role as a ritual food and became an “identity food.” In the era of Soviet shortages, Jewish food was procured with great difficulty and cooked in secrecy, demonstrating the remarkable commitment of its cooks and consumers to their ethnic roots. Nakhimovsky also notes that eating Jewishly often went hand-in-hand with other private or hidden activities, such as speaking Yiddish or singing Jewish songs.¹²

In addition, Nakhimovsky’s analysis of the few existing Russian Jewish cookbooks reveals a contradictory but symptomatic picture: driven by the impetus to educate their readers in things Jewish, such cookbooks include chapters on the laws of kashrut.¹³ Yet, the recipes include non-kosher ingredients and preparations, showing that laws of the kashrut have little effect on actual Jewish practice in Russia. Similar contradictions are revealed in explorations of Russian Jewish émigré cuisines in the United States and Israel.¹⁴ Thus, Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies scholarship shows that although Soviet Jews were secularized and therefore divorced from traditional religious practices, they developed their own forms of Jewish practices that revolved around domestic rather than communal practices, and particular social patterns.

Mediating Jews: How Literary and Cultural Studies Scholars Look for the Jewishness of Soviet and Post-Soviet Jewish Culture

The traditional adage is that Jews are “people of the book”: Jews relied on texts, rather than nation-states, territories, or even common folk cultures to unify themselves across the globe. Soviet and post-Soviet Jews are emblematic of a shift in the twentieth century from being “people of the book” to what Olga Gershenson calls “people of the media,” those who produce, develop,

and disseminate both the medium itself and the content of the media for themselves and for others.¹⁵ Scholars from such disciplines as literary studies, film studies, and history have begun to investigate what Jewishness looked like in early Soviet culture, which has been understood until recently as having little to do with Jewishness.

In the early Soviet period, alongside Russian culture, the state created secular Yiddish institutions that fostered a specifically Jewish Soviet culture supposedly divorced from religious Jewish practice. Through the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet Union was the only country in the world with state-sponsored Yiddish language schools, newspapers, theaters, writers’ groups, town councils, and even courts. As scholars such as David Shneer and Gennady Estraiikh have shown, Jews who produced this secular Jewish culture were deeply invested in reimagining the Jewish future, one without religion but one with Jews and secular Jewish culture.¹⁶

In addition, as new research is showing, Jews were active producers, creators, and commissars of mainstream Russian-language Soviet culture from the 1920s until the present. Scholars are now starting to ask the same questions of Soviet photography, film, and culture that have been asked of the Hollywood film industry, the American musical, and German literature and film. This new scholarship shows that Jews were ever-present in the Soviet cultural apparatus. From the Kaufman brothers, including the famous Dziga Vertov, to photographers like Semyon Fridlyand, Georgy Zelma, and Evgenii Khaldei, Jews from the provinces who moved to Moscow were the ones producing edifying images of the Soviet empire from the earliest moments after the Russian Revolution.¹⁷

Some scholars go beyond the simple social historical fact that Jews made up many in the Soviet intelligentsia. They show that the fact that Jews were Soviet culture-makers shaped the kinds of mainstream culture produced. For



Figure 1: Photograph by Evgenii Khaldei, “Soviet Jewish poet Evgenii Dolmatovskiy Reads Poetry to the Troops at the Reichstag,” May 1945.

example, when looking at World War II, several scholars such as Ilya Altman, Olga Gershenson, Maxim Shrayer, and David Shneer have shown that from editorial staffs of newspapers and radio announcers to military journalists and photographers, Soviet Jews mediated the war, Nazi atrocities, and the Holocaust for the Soviet population. More importantly, research shows that their Jewishness mattered.¹⁸ The writer Vasily Grossman published the powerful “Ukraine without Jews” in the Soviet Yiddish newspaper in late 1943, and wrote the first-ever literary treatment of a death camp in the fall of 1944.¹⁹ Another writer, Ilya Ehrenburg, became one of the most important spokespersons of Soviet Jewry to the world during the war. He published poems with Jewish imagery such as “Rachels, Hayims, and Leahs wander...,” and “Babi Yar.” Ehrenburg was also one of the editors of the famous *Black Book* that documented Nazi atrocities against Jews on Soviet soil.²⁰ A. Sof’in, Roman Karmen, and Viktor Shtatland shot the first ever documentary about a death camp, *Maidanek: Cemetery of Europe*, in 1944.²¹ In 1945, Mark Donskoy directed *The Unvanquished*, the first film to dramatize the mass execution in Babi Yar.²² Playwright and performer Aleksandr Galich traversed the fronts performing for the troops. He put these encounters on the front and his Jewish experiences into a play, “Sailor’s Rest” (*Matrosskaya Tishina*). It features both the “old Jew,” a shtetl Jew executed by the Nazis, — and the “new Jew,” a Russified, educated, and talented transplant to Moscow, who subsequently dies heroically in battle. The play was banned in 1958 for its affirmation of Jewish heroism.²³

After the war, Stalin’s anti-cosmopolitan campaign of 1948 to 1953 attempted to eliminate Jews as the cultural producers of Soviet society and silence things Jewish. Even in this period, Jews and Jewishness were ever-present in the Soviet media, but they became coded. Perhaps as a result of this coding, scholars have generally neglected the Jewishness of post-Stalinist Soviet culture. Gershenson’s work on Holocaust film has mined such important work as Mikhail Romm’s remarkable 1965 documentary *Ordinary Fascism*, which explores the social and cultural roots of fascism (ostensibly in Germany, but it draws parallels with Stalinist Russia.) Through sophisticated editing of visual images and the soundtrack, Romm is able to convey the brutality of fascism against Jews, while only mentioning the word “Jew” twice during the two-and-a-half hour film. For instance, the voiceover narration describes Nazi repressions against “the German people and the intelligentsia,” while the camera pans over a vandalized store front with a Jewish star and Hebrew letters. Thus, the message is coded—but clear.²⁴

And Jews were not just the “people of the visual media.” Soviet sound from the interwar era through the post-Stalinist period included many Jews. From classical musicians like David Oistrakh and Elizaveta Gilels to Yuri Levitan’s ubiquitous voice on the radio during the war, Jews were involved in both the production of sound and its dissemination. But the point is not to revel in Jewish triumphalism by showing off how many Jews made music. Rather, scholars are starting to show how Jewish sound makers thematized Jewishness in their Soviet cultural work. For example, Leonid Utesov argued that Odessa Jews invented jazz. Cultural historian Robert Rothstein has examined

Soviet music production on the specific backdrop of Jewish history.²⁵ This is a line of scholarly inquiry that, in the American context, produced such important work as Michael Alexander’s *Jazz Age Jews* and Andrea Most’s *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*. Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies is only just beginning to explore the place and meaning of Jews in Soviet performative culture.

Importantly, and perhaps ironically, Soviet Jews were also producing sound in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s — what Elie Wiesel called the era of the “Jews of silence” — when even the word “Jew” itself was “somewhere between a dirty word and a state secret.”²⁶ There is still little scholarship on the Jewish singer-songwriters Alexander Galich, Yuz Aleshkovsky, and Arkadiy Severny, who used new recording technology in the 1960s and 1970s to spread their subversive songs. Musically, some of these songs drew on the klezmer tradition, and the lyrics reflected such Jewish themes as the Holocaust, emigration, and Soviet anti-Semitism. Following in their footsteps, in 1982 and 1983, in the era of the refuseniks, singer-songwriter Alexander Rosenbaum wrote a cycle of songs reimagining Isaac Babel’s “Odessa Stories.” Rosenbaum’s songs were populated with Jewish gangsters — virtual incarnations of Babel’s paradigmatic Jewish gangster, Benya Krik. In the 1980s, Rosenbaum’s characters mesmerized Jewish intellectuals in their kitchens. This song cycle, sung in a Jewish voice, gave an alternative to the silencing of things Jewish. Rosenbaum’s songs and, more importantly, their circulation and reception, are still awaiting scholarly attention.

Another way that Jews functioned as people of the media was as the go-betweens, the mediators, between the many ethnicities that made up the Soviet empire. In Soviet studies more generally, scholarship on empire and nationalities has proliferated in the last fifteen years with widely celebrated works by Yuri Slezkine, Terry Martin, Francine Hirsch, and others.²⁷ Similarly, Soviet Jewish colonization—in the form of Jewish territory in the Soviet far east in Birobidzhan, and Jewish agricultural colonies scattered throughout Ukraine, Belorussia, and Crimea—has also received great scholarly attention in the past ten years.²⁸

It is therefore surprising that there has been little work on the fact that Jews were often the ones studying, negotiating, and envisioning the Soviet empire. Literary scholar Harriet Murav’s book on twentieth century Soviet Jewish literature has a chapter devoted to the “Jew as translator.”²⁹ She and others are starting to show that Jewish writers served as the literal translators of literature and culture between the “metropole” in Moscow and the “colonies” in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Far East. Jewish filmmakers captured images of the taming of the Taiga, and photographers took pictures of Central Asian nomads learning to read. These filmmakers and photographers, along with their more scholarly Soviet colleagues in anthropology and geography, were charged with the ominous and politically-motivated task of documenting the ethnic and physical diversity of the Soviet Union. Although the subjects may look different in terms of skin color, dress and culture, according to Soviet ideology they were all part of the “brotherhood of nations.” Jewish

photographers thus portrayed the Soviet empire as a place that, on the one hand, celebrated diversity and folk cultures and, on the other hand, brought European learning and socialism to the “backward” peoples of the empire.³⁰

This photographic tension in the work of “the people of the media” reflects the Soviet Union’s own ambivalent stance as an empire, a socialist paradise that tried to both celebrate diverse cultures and demand modernization. And this ambivalent empire photography may also have reflected Jews’ — and Jewish photographers’ — paradoxical social and cultural position. Soviet Jews shared ambivalent Soviet cultural attitudes, ranging from a colonial attitude to the people of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Far East (which Russia colonized and the Soviet Union continued to rule) to the strong sense of inferiority vis-à-vis Europe or “the West.”³¹

Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies reveals that Jews, in general, and as “people of the media,” in particular, occupied a paradoxical position, what Larissa Remennick calls “discriminated elites.”³² Jews were subject to discrimination, but also capable of incredible social success. Simultaneously deprived and privileged, they occupied an in-between space in Soviet society. As cultural producers, they were privileged in a society that took its culture very seriously, alternately venerating poets and arresting books. But Jews were also deprived because to get to the position of cultural producers, they had to go to great lengths, being not simply good but better than any competing non-Jew. And, of course, they had to keep quiet about their Jewishness, code their messages very carefully, or operate underground.

Accented Jews: Complicating the Assimilation Model of Soviet Jewry

Although in the Soviet era most Jews spoke Russian, for centuries they also had their own vernacular language and culture — Yiddish. The 1897 Russian census showed that 97 percent of Jews named Yiddish their native language. But from the late nineteenth century on, urban Jews began claiming space in Russian-language culture, and with it, the Russian language. By 1926, 72% of Soviet Jews were native Yiddish speakers, a decrease of 25%, demonstrating that Soviet Jewry was gravitating towards Russian language and culture. Despite the increasing presence of Jews in Russian culture, Yiddish retained a noticeable presence. Even as late as 1959, 18% of Jews still claimed Yiddish as their native language.³³ The fact that one in every six Jews claimed Yiddish long after Stalin’s death belies the death of Yiddish in Soviet culture.

Much has been written about Soviet Yiddish theater, literature, music, and the press in the 1920s and 1930s, and its violent destruction 1948 to 1952.³⁴ But less has been written about the fact that state-sponsored Yiddish culture, however marginalized, continued to be produced and consumed in the post-Stalinist Soviet period. Birobidzhan, the Jewish autonomous region with Yiddish as one of its official languages, was still on the map. *Sovetish Heymland*, a Yiddish journal, appeared in 1959. And even in the midst of Brezhnev’s suffocated era, the theater performer Yuri Sherling founded KEMT, a Yiddish musical theater.

Although officially housed in Birobidzhan, KEMT toured all over the USSR, especially in the places that retained large Jewish populations. The young actors, who didn’t speak Yiddish, received language coaching from those of the former State Yiddish Theater (GOSET) cast who were still professionally active at the time. The theater even recorded a Yiddish musical, *Black Harness to a White Horse*, which was officially released and distributed. Studying the history and reception of this eccentric and remarkable theater



Figure 2: Playbill of *Black Harness to a White Horse*, a Yiddish musical that premiered in 1978 in Birobidzhan.

provides insights into the ways in which Jewishness was understood and performed in the Soviet cultural scene of the 1970s and 1980s.³⁵ The history of KEMT also paints a more nuanced version of the traditional narrative which discusses the movement of Soviet Jews from authentic Jewish expression to assimilation, from Yiddish to Russian, from Judaism to atheism. It shows the persistence of Yiddish culture, both as a vernacular and a post-vernacular means of identification.

The paradigm of “accented Jews” that we are suggesting here complicates Slezkine’s thesis of “Pushkin’s Faith,” which presumes a shift from Jewish to non-Jewish culture. Recent scholarship shows that even those Jews distant from Yiddish and the culture of the shtetl identified themselves, and were identified by others, through their post-Yiddish cultural heritage. Part of this heritage is “speaking Jewishly” in Russian. Linguist Anna Verschik identifies a Jewish Russian ethnolect, defined as a variant of “language that marks speakers as members of ethnic group.”³⁶ Verschik shows that this Jewish Russian ethnolect “functions as a linguistic repertoire that Russian Jews can draw on to joke, to show in-group solidarity, and to present a recognizable linguistic portrayal of another Jew.”³⁷

This new line of inquiry into the significance of language in the construction of Jewish identity shows that the adoption of Russian has not meant the abandonment of Jewish cultural markers. “Speaking Jewishly” in Russian is marked on the phonetic, lexical, phraseological, syntactic, and pragmatic levels. On the level of phonetics, one of the significant features used to stereotype Jews is that Jews cannot properly pronounce the rolled Russian “r” (i.e. they substitute the Russian dental “r” with the Yiddish uvular “r”). In a 1996 Gesh-er theater production based on Babel’s stories, a character recited Pushkin’s poem as part of his high school entrance examination. The Gesh-er actor used

the Yiddish “r,” even though there is no mention of that in Babel’s original. This suggests that even today, when the vast majority of Russian Jews are not native Yiddish speakers and do not speak Russian with a Yiddish accent, the perception of them doing so persists.

Verschik identifies numerous examples of the lexical and phraseological features of Russian Jewish discourse. Anecdotally, even the refined Moscow-St. Petersburg intelligentsia might use Yiddish words such as *haloymes* (“fantasies” or “illusions”), *mayse* (“tall tale”), *shikse* (derogatory term for non-Jewish woman), and expressions such as *goyishe kop* (meaning, literally, “gentile head,” and “idiot,” figuratively) in in-group interactions. Verschik notes that these expressions function as markers of Jewishness. Today, few people speak in Jewish Russian ethnolect at all times; rather, they choose to tune in and out of it as they see fit. As one of Verschik’s informants puts it, “I can speak as Russians in Moscow do...But I don’t want to; I wish to speak as a Jew.”³⁸

On the level of syntax and morphology, speaking Jewishly in Russian was expressed through a variety of irregular conjugations and constructions, earning such speech a reputation of being, as Rothstein suggests, a “barbarization of the Russian language.”³⁹ On the pragmatic (performative) level, speaking Jewishly in Russian has the same features as “Jewish” American English.⁴⁰ These include verbosity, interruption and overlap speaking, questions as a response to questions, and, of course, humor. Like in English, speaking Jewishly in Russian is not only “barbaric,” it is also very funny, and like in the United States, is also used often by Jewish comedians and performers. However, unlike Jewish English, Jewish Russian is still a new and understudied field.

“Speaking Jewishly” in Russian is interconnected with a particular dialect of Odessa, full of Yiddishisms and Jewish humor, which many Soviet Jews adopted as their own. The perception of Odessa as a site of Jewishness grew out of a body of folklore and literature representing it as a multilingual, carnivalesque city. Perhaps the main contribution to this perception was made by Odessa-born Isaac Babel, famous for his stories about the Revolution and Civil War. His most beloved cycle, however, was “The Odessa Stories,” which in many ways codified the city of Odessa as the cradle of accented Russian Jewishness. This imaginary Odessa was marked as Jewish space in Russian culture even in the most silenced Soviet eras, from the stand-up comedy of Mikhail Zhvanetsky to the song cycles of Rosenbaum. Historian Jarrod Tanny’s work implies that Odessan Jewishness served as a counterpoint to the “Pushkin’s faith” of the educated, Russified Jews of Moscow and Leningrad.⁴¹ Another understudied site of accented Jewishness is found in Jewish names and their transformations. Like twentieth century Jews in many parts of the world, Soviet Jews attempted to mimic the larger culture by changing their first and last names. However, this act of mimicry merely revealed their Jewish difference. Many “people of the media” played with their names as they moved from the provinces to Moscow. Grinberg turned to Markov, Zelmanovitch to Zelma, Ortenberg to Vadimov, Faynzilberg to Ilf, and Kaufman to Vertov. Others Russified their first names as well — Abram became Arkadii, Baruch became Boris, and so on. But these new, seemingly Russified names in their turn became asso-

ciated with Jewishness. So, ironically, Jewishness remained in coded form. Such perfectly Russian names as Boris, Leonid, and Mikhail often became signifiers of Jewishness as they were used as substitutes for names like Baruch, Berl, Leyb, Moyshe, or Mendl. Female names like Raya or Sofia (especially its diminutive Sonya or Sofa) became equally coded as “Jewish.”

If Raya and Sofia were Jewish codes, traditional Jewish names like Sarah or Abram were off-limits. The taboo was so strong that these names came to signify the generic Jew in jokes. Similarly, when the word “Jew” itself was a taboo, numerous euphemisms were used in both written sources and around the kitchen table, from the notorious “rootless cosmopolitans” to the playful “Italians.” Soviet Jews continued to transform their names in post-Soviet times, too, especially in emigration, when some of them adopted (or reclaimed) Jewish names. All these anecdotal data hint at the scholarly promise of the subject of names and naming practices among Soviet and post-Soviet Jews. Overall, a cultural approach to Soviet Jewish Studies reveals that, despite the move towards cultural integration, these “accented” Jews maintained a distinct linguistic and performative identity that challenges the simple assimilation model of shtetl Jews becoming generic Soviet citizens.

Transnational Jews: Moving Beyond the Nation

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Soviet and post-Soviet Jews emigrated en masse, following in the footsteps of their Yiddish-speaking predecessors one hundred years earlier. Although the statistics are contested, the recent migration has brought about one million people to Israel, 600,000 to North America, about 200,000 to Germany, and some to places like Australia, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. Similarly, the number of Jews living in Russia is contested, but is estimated at between 300,000 and 1.2 million.⁴² These statistics highlight some of the most important issues raised by transnational Soviet and post-Soviet Jews’ interaction with global Jewry. Who counts as a Jew: Halachic Jews, cultural Jews, ethnic Jews, or relatives of Jews? Who gets labeled immigrant, refugee, repatriate, tourist, or migrant worker? Post-Soviet Jews, who often maintain multiple passports, multiple homes, and multiple languages, make us re-think the meaning of homeland and exile: are they part of a traditional Jewish diaspora or a new Russian diaspora? Transnational post-Soviet Jews are rapidly becoming one of the newest and most important subjects of study as Jewish studies become more global.

These transnational Jews transform themselves in the process of migration, through new employment patterns, language, and other signs of cultural integration, but also change their home and host countries. Their encounters with local Jewish communities in Israel, the U.S., and Germany are now the subject of contemporary sociological studies that are leading to changes in Jewish communal policy. Global post-Soviet Jews are simultaneously setting up traditional means of maintaining transnational communities through letter writing, remittances, newspapers, and books, as well as through the new means of

transnational media: websites, jet travel, chat rooms, and blogs. Larisa Fialkova examines how technology transforms diasporic communities of Soviet and post-Soviet Jews. She shows that Russian-language international web-portals, some Jewish, some functioning as social networking, are visited by tens of thousands of people daily, allowing members to network, date, play, and even set up real life encounters, extending their virtual communication to the real world and making their community less “imagined” and more tangible.⁴³

The members of such new communities belong sometimes both to the over-arching global Jewish community and the evolving Russian-speaking diaspora, both Jewish and non-Jewish. This takes place in an era when the Russian state has changed its policy towards emigrants, and is now seeing them as “compatriots” who are worth supporting and even luring back to Russia. Fialkova argues that this new expansive notion of Russianness “goes hand in hand with new approaches in ethnology stressing cultural identity rather than phenotype or a Russian sounding family name.” Ironically, those cultural characteristics which allow Jews to be included in the global Russian diaspora are precisely those qualities that exclude these immigrants from their new host societies.⁴⁴ If they were Jews in Russia, they became Russians in Israel, North America, and Germany.

Although it is the sheer number of Russian migrants to Israel and Germany that have transformed those Jewish communities, in the US and Canada, Russians have transformed the most cutting-edge forms of Jewish culture. The “new Jewish literature,” which might better be called the “new wave of Jewish immigrant literature,” is driven by Russian immigrants writing in English, such as Gary Shteyngart, David Bezmozgis, and Lara Vapnyar, who have been published on the pages of the most prestigious journals and magazines reaching a wide reading public beyond the Jewish world. And scholars of American Jewish literature and culture are showing that post-Soviet Jewry is transforming American Jewish literature. Thus, Adam Rovner shows how these writers are bringing back the immigrant story, and are shaking complacent American readers out of their cozy sense of being at home in America.⁴⁵

Russian Jews have transformed Israeli culture, too. “The Russians,” as they are known in Israel, became the largest ethnic minority within the country, with their own political, social, and economic agendas.⁴⁶ Predictably, tensions developed between immigrants and their hosts, revealing deep cultural gaps: the immigrants brought with them not only their non-kosher food, their language, and their Soviet holidays, but also their own understanding of national loyalty and identification, their sense of homeland, as well as their notions of what it means to be Jewish, and to be Israeli.⁴⁹ In turn, the Russian community transformed Israel as much as Israel transformed the immigrants.

Along with Hebrew, Arabic, and English, Russian became a de facto language of the Jewish state with media resources such as radio and television stations, newspapers, theaters, and film catering to this new population. In the Israeli mainstream, Russian is still marginalized, and the topic of immigration is not in fashion, but some Russian-born cultural producers became part of the Israeli cultural landscape. A number of Russian-born artists have made

successful careers in Israel. The 1990s theatrical sensation Gesher started in Israel as a marginal Russian theater company, but soon began producing plays in Hebrew to national acclaim. A number of Russian-born filmmakers make Israeli films in Russian and in Hebrew, which in turn reach global Jewish audiences (including Russian Jewish) through Jewish and international film festivals in Europe and the Americas.⁴⁸

The Israeli Russian-language channel *Israel-Plus*, as well as transnational Russian-language channels (including the film channel *Nashe Kino* and the channel RTVi, the latter produced in Russia, Israel, and the U.S.), as well as the Russian cable networks ORT and RTR cater to Russian-speakers.⁴⁹ RTVi channel is also distributed transnationally, in Russia, Israel, and the U.S. In that, Russian Israeli culture challenges our notions of cultural center and periphery.

Things have changed equally in Russia: Chanukah is now celebrated in the Kremlin, an unimaginable event until recently. Regardless of the authorities’ motivations, such a Jewish celebration at the seat of Russian power is an acknowledgement of the Russian Jewish presence in the former Soviet empire. But the overall picture is ambivalent and uneven: along with mass emigration, the diminishing Russian Jewish community has undergone a remarkable revival, with numerous Jewish cultural and religious institutions active around the country.⁵⁰ In cultural terms, this revival is expressed in an upsurge of Jewish press, literature, and even a klezmer revival movement, from alternative small-stage musicians to Las Vegas-style Yiddish music performances.⁵¹ Similarly, in the last twenty years there has been a revival of Jewish themes in cinema, with dozens of fiction and documentary films made on topics ranging from anti-Semitism and the Holocaust to emigration and intermarriage.⁵² Research shows that simultaneously with this renaissance of Jewish culture, there has been a revival of popular anti-Semitism: the image of the Jew in popular Russian literature today reflects traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes, and the media coverage of Jews in contemporary mass media is mixed at best.⁵³

The post-Soviet Jewish cultural presence is now felt in their destination countries across the globe. Wladimir Kaminer writes in German about Russian immigrants, but is translated into English and Russian. Dina Rubina, Grigory Kanovich, Igor Guberman and other writers publish in Russian in both Israel and Russia.⁵⁴ In 2008, *Zeek*, a U.S. Jewish literary magazine, dedicated an issue to transnational Russian Jewish literature that included contributions from writers, poets, and artists working in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and Israel. The traditional cultural, geographic, and national boundaries are blurred and in flux, and the study of this new, postmodern Russian Jewish diaspora has much to contribute to both Jewish and Diaspora studies.



If scholars of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry have started thinking very seriously about culture and identity, so too have post-Soviet Jewish writers. The novels of the American Russian Jewish writer Gary Shteyngart deal with the global Russian Jewish experience. All three novels, *The Russian Debutante’s*

Handbook (2003), *Absurdistan* (2006), and *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) feature essentially the same protagonist — an American-raised Russian Jewish son to émigré parents, forever torn between languages, cultures, and heritages.

Absurdistan details the exploits of Misha Borisovitch Vainberg, as he tries to get out of Russia, his original homeland but now his place of exile from his new home of America. Here, Shteyngart is obsessed with an embodied Jewish experience and devotes considerable space in the novel to describing the physiognomy of his main character. Vainberg is obese, with curly hair and a “Jewish nose,” showing how his Jewish biology was his Jewish destiny. Shteyngart shows that for Soviet and post-Soviet Jews, Jewishness is indelible. Vainberg’s father mocks his émigré son for thinking he could assimilate away from his biological fate: “Idiot. You’ll never be an American. You’ll always be a Jew.”⁵⁵

Vainberg’s family responds to the anti-Semitism of Brezhnev-era Russia ambivalently — on the one hand, they try to assimilate, and, on the other hand, they rebel by joining the Zionist movement. As a child, Misha wasn’t circumcised (again bringing the reader back to Vainberg’s body), because his mama “was afraid of how it would look to the district committee. ‘Too Jewish,’ they would say. ‘Zionist behavior.’”⁵⁶ But grown-up Misha ends up getting a circumcision in New York, perhaps in an attempt to assimilate into American Jewish culture. But the surgery is botched resulting in Vainberg’s endless self-mockery and serving as a further reminder of his inability to assimilate, even into an American Jewish identity. Shteyngart also undermines the idea that Soviet Jews simply worshipped Russian culture and abandoned any markers of Jewishness. As much as Vainberg quotes classic Russian writers, he mocks Russians and their culture as peasant-like and déclassé. The great capital of Russian culture, which Vainberg calls St. Leninsburg, is described as a crumbling, third-world dump. Shteyngart even makes fun of the Bronze Horseman, the equestrian statue of Peter the Great made an iconic image by Pushkin’s poem. Instead of the symbol of Russian greatness, Vainberg sees “the statue of the curly-haired asshole Peter the Great charging up a steep rock, galloping northward, abandoning the ruined city he founded for the fair shores of Finland, leaving those of us without an EU visa nothing but the tail end of his fat bronze mare.”⁵⁷ As much as Vainberg laughs at himself, his mockery of Russians and their national heroes is even harsher. Perhaps this is his way of expressing his Jewish pride.

As a transnational Jew, Vainberg confronts global Jewish diversity, which both transforms him as he simultaneously transforms America. While in Brooklyn, his encounters with Hasidic Jews reveal enormous cultural gaps:

[He] counted six tiny boys...their blond untrimmed locks making them look like infant rock stars, running around a deeply tired penguin of a woman as she pattered down the street behind a scrim of grocery bags. *What the hell kind of Jewish woman has six children?* In Russia, you had one, two, maybe three if you didn’t care for constant abortions and were very, very promiscuous.⁵⁸

The gaps in understanding what it means to be Jewish are constant reminders of internal Jewish diversity, of which now post-Soviet Jews are a part. In his novel, Shteyngart, a popular American writer published in *The*

New Yorker, emerges as a cultural translator between different kinds of Jews: between Russian Jews at home and Russian Jews “in exile,” and between Americans and new immigrants. Like many of the scholars defining the field of Soviet Jewish Cultural Studies, Shteyngart puts the embodied, accented, transnational Jew at the center of the Jewish universe.

This review essay attempts to outline an emerging field and suggest lines of inquiry for future scholarship that will reveal more about the phenomenon of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish culture and identity. Like their early twentieth century counterparts, Soviet Jews have exported a particular Jewish culture and identity around the world, and are transforming Jewishness wherever they go. However, if their Yiddish-speaking, kosher-keeping predecessors were the “too-Jewish” Jews who migrated to places where other Jews were attempting to assimilate, today’s post-Soviet Jews are generally seen as not Jewish enough.

The Canadian Soviet-born writer David Bezmozgis said, “Soviet Jewishness was unique. It can’t be replicated, which may be just as well. But I’m fascinated by it. It’s the by-product of a rich, complicated, and dramatic history.”⁵⁹ It is that story that the scholars collected here, including us, aim to tell. It is also a story that complicates the very notion of Jewish practices and challenges the assimilation model of twentieth century Russian Jewish history. And, perhaps most importantly, this story resonates with other Jewish stories around the world.

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