

Russian Jews in Search of The Jewish State

Anna Isakova

Over the past decade, approximately 800,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union have come to Israel, where they have joined nearly 200,000 Russian-speaking Jews who immigrated during the 1970s and early 1980s. All told, roughly one-sixth of Israel's population speaks Russian today. For most of these immigrants, Russian remains their principal language of day-to-day life—their language of journalism, commerce and culture. An entire Russian-speaking world has been created in Israel, yet few people outside of that world have any idea what it contains.

Russian-speaking Israelis live, for the most part, in a cultural bubble that allows outside influences to enter, but does not enable these immigrants to participate meaningfully in the cultural life of the country in which they have settled. This Russian subculture contains two discernible streams, whose members view themselves as having been rejected by the Israeli mainstream, and are sufficiently occupied with their own affairs that they have little interest in breaking down the enclave's walls. What may be called the "Jewish" stream consists of Russian-speaking Zionists, whose opposition to

the Soviet Union reinforced their Jewish identities, and who now seek to plant Jewish cultural roots in the land of their forefathers. The members of the “Russian” stream, on the other hand, participate in—indeed, are at the forefront of—a worldwide Russian-language culture, and are perpetuating the dissident ethos that emerged during the Soviet era. For the second group, the future seems assured: With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian dissident exile has become a Russian diaspora, whose culture interacts and flourishes in concert with that of a free Russia. As for the first group, however, continued isolation could spell its demise: There is only so long that a Zionist culture can survive without having any real interaction with the mainstream intellectual and artistic life of the Jewish state.

For Zionists, the dismantling of the walls separating Russian- and Hebrew-speaking Jews should be of special interest. At a time when many of Israel’s leading cultural figures regularly show an indifference, if not antipathy, to Zionism, and when diaspora Jewry has downgraded the cause of Israel’s survival in order to tend to its own, the creative Jewish nationalism that thrives within the Russian community is especially significant. Indeed, it may be that the future of Zionism depends on today’s Russian-speaking Israelis. But for anything to come of this possibility, a concerted effort will have to be made, by intellectuals on both sides of the divide, to breach the hardened walls.

The most striking feature of Russian-language culture in Israel is its size. The Absorption Ministry lists no fewer than six hundred professional writers, a similar number of artists and sculptors, and an equally large contingent of journalists who have arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union in the last decade alone. The number of professional musicians is even greater, and there are hundreds of movie actors, directors, producers and other film professionals, and even dozens of circus performers. Russian-language theater, too, is flourishing in Israel: In addition to the acclaimed Geshen theater group, there are many active Russian-language dramatic

groups, many of which are of a high caliber. The choreographers and dancers who came to Israel could fill more than a few ballet troupes, while the vocalists could man several opera companies.

This wealth of talent has translated into a wide array of cultural events, such as an annual songwriting festival held on the shores of the Sea of Galilee near Tiberias, at which guitar-wielding songwriters perform their works as the audience sings along. This year, the festival's organizers limited the number of participants to six thousand, in order to preserve the event's intimate atmosphere. Russian rock performers were asked not to take part; no doubt they will soon get a festival of their own.

Literary activity is also flourishing. The Russian community in Israel supports six major publishing houses, as well as countless independent publishers of individual works. Tel Aviv and Jerusalem each boast about twenty Russian-language bookstores, and almost every city in Israel has at least one Russian bookstore, as well as several Russian-language lending libraries. The activities organized under the auspices of the Russian library in Jerusalem are comparable in scope to those of Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv's main public library. Hundreds of volumes in Russian—even a Jewish encyclopedia—have been written since the first great wave of Soviet immigration in the 1970s. Dozens of academic textbooks, atlases and guidebooks, as well as translated and original literary works, have been published. In addition to music, theater and literature, there are also innumerable art exhibitions, cultural events, lectures and conferences that take place on a daily basis within the Russian enclave. Such events are well publicized by several daily national newspapers, and by numerous local papers and periodicals that serve the Russian-speaking community.

The volume of Russian-language cultural activity in Israel is far greater than most Israelis imagine; yet size alone does not begin to capture the Russian bubble's unique cultural makeup—that of an immigrant people, caught between their Russian and Jewish heritages, and between these traditions and their Israeli surroundings. To understand the inner workings of the Russian bubble one must look at the community's origins—what these immigrants were looking for, and what they found, when they arrived in Israel.

The Russian-speaking community in Israel came in two waves, corresponding to the two periods in which emigration from the Soviet Union was possible: First, in the 1970s, under Premier Leonid Brezhnev, when the Soviets allowed the rate of Jewish emigration to reach as high as 50,000 per year; and during the 1990s, in a far greater wave which began shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues to this day. Despite the time lag between the two waves, these immigrants quickly became integrated on a cultural level: They now take part in the same cultural frameworks, professional organizations and political parties. Moreover, both groups maintain a link to current Russian culture. Integration has increased over time, as more of the immigrants from the 1970s who once avoided Russian-language activities have begun to take part, and as the newer immigrants have joined established institutions such as the Russian-language press, which was founded in the 1970s.

When Jews began to arrive from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, many Israelis expected them to play an active role in the Labor Zionist movement, whose social and intellectual roots went back to Russia, and which had drawn on the teachings of Marx, as well as of Russian Labor Zionists such as Ber Borochov and A.D. Gordon. The revolutionary romanticism on which many Israelis were raised had not yet faded, it was thought, despite the disastrous legacy of Communism.

These expectations were quickly dashed, to the disappointment of many kibbutznikim and socialists, and of the Israeli Left in general. No less disappointed was Israeli academia, grounded as it was in socialist ideas. Disappointed, too, were those Israeli cultural figures who advocated socialist Realism, and that portion of the Israeli public that grew up with the Soviet ethos, the songs of the Red Army Choir and literary works such as Alexander Bek's *Volokolamsk Highway*. The Israelis quickly learned that not only was their own "Russian" culture alien to the new immigrants; it was an object of loathing: Marx was anything but a hero to the new immigrants, who had been the subject of attempts to put his teachings into practice. Bek, the Red Army

Choir and other symbols were reviled for the artificial pathos that the official Soviet culture promoted. The immigrants read the works of anti-Soviet dissidents like Alexander Solzhenitzyn and Varlam Shalamov, writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov and Andrei Platonov, and the poet Joseph Brodsky, who rebelled against Soviet esthetics; and listened to singers such as Vladimir Wissotsky and Bulat Okudzhava, who disseminated their songs of freedom on homemade cassettes. Their heroes were the dissidents who dared oppose the “Evil Empire”—as they called their country of birth, years before Ronald Reagan’s famous speech.

It was not only the ideology of socialism prevailing in Israel that the new immigrants despised. They also rejected its esthetic code, which had had a significant impact on Israeli arts. In the eyes of the Russian-speaking intellectuals who came to Israel, anything reminiscent of Soviet culture was not worthy of being taken seriously. The only cultural debate in which they participated that related in any way to the Soviet Union pitted anti-Soviet culture and what we may call a non-Soviet, Russian culture, which simply paid no heed to the Soviet experience. In this contest, the second view eventually gained the upper hand.

For Russian intellectuals, no value was higher than freedom of expression and the independent application of the individual’s creative powers. They reacted to Israeli intellectuals—whom they saw as employing art in the service of left-wing ideology—in much the same way as they had reacted to their old enemies in the Soviet establishment. Thus it should be no surprise that in the 1970s, the encounter between the Israeli cultural elite and the new immigrant intellectuals quickly foundered. A wedge was driven between the immigrants and the native Israelis, and the first walls of the Russian enclave were erected.

Even today, the Israeli cultural establishment is still influenced to a great degree by the esthetics of politicized art. Yet this by itself cannot explain why the cultural divide between Russian- and Hebrew-speakers in Israel has widened over the past generation, especially as Israeli popular culture has become less socialist, to the point that today it can be characterized as post-modern,

even nihilist in nature. Rather, the alienation persists because, in the eyes of the immigrants, mainstream Israeli culture is actively resistant to influence from other traditions, including Jewish tradition. “Hebrew culture” is seen by the immigrants as obsessively doctrinaire: First it tried to create the new, socialist Jew, devoid of any connection to his recent past; and now it relates to cultural myths only in order to shatter them. The immigrants have discovered that not only does Hebrew culture mean a rejection of the rich Russian heritage—which some are willing to accept as the price of absorption—but it also means a rejection of the Jewish heritage. And they cannot fathom the demand to unload their Jewish cultural baggage, after they have fought all their lives for the right to carry it.

For its part, the Hebrew-language cultural establishment has taken little notice of the immigrants since the initial disappointment. Russian Jews in Israel live, work, fight in wars and vote in elections as Israelis, yet the products of their creative spirit remain unknown to the general public. Over the past decade, the constant growth in demand for Russian-language culture has produced many new outlets for cultural expression in the immigrants’ native language. Thus, if in the 1970s the new immigrants made some effort to remove the barriers to entry into Israeli society, in the 1990s they feel little need to do so. The Russian bubble has become a permanent fixture of the Israeli landscape.

From the beginning, there have been two cultural streams within the Russian-speaking community in Israel. On the one hand, many artists and intellectuals have focused their efforts principally on developing Jewish themes; on the other, many have made a name for themselves within an international Russian diaspora, which has been a natural extension of their dissident activities prior to immigration.

In Israel, the term “Silent Jewry” (*yahadut hadmama*) was commonly used to describe the Soviet Jews, referring to Jewish voices silenced by the Communist regime; Jewish identity, it was widely believed, had been

virtually erased during the years of Soviet rule. Today this expression is frequently recalled among former-Soviet immigrants, few of whom accept it as a reasonable depiction of what took place during the long decades of Communist oppression. Most Soviet Jews preserved important aspects of their Jewish identity over the years: They kept family trees, knew the origin of their names and, to a lesser degree, were aware of the great and ancient Jewish culture that had preceded Hitler and Stalin. The Russian-Jewish culture that had developed in remote areas beyond Leningrad and Moscow, to say nothing of the areas of dense Jewish population in the time of the Czars, was wiped out after World War II; yet it enjoyed a revival during the 1960s, when the writings of Sholom Aleichem, Y.L. Peretz and other Jewish writers were translated and published in Russian. At the same time, after years of effort by the Soviet government to downplay the Holocaust, Soviet Jews began finding ways to express the memories they had retained of their Jewish heritage. It is true that their compositions were limited to *samizdat*, the underground press, but this medium quickly filled with poetry and prose on Jewish themes. As a result, only the most isolated Jews were completely cut off from their national roots.

Of course, this does not mean that Soviet Jews received anything that could be called a comprehensive Jewish education. Jewish history was not taught in schools, and few families celebrated Jewish holidays. There were some who managed to live a traditional lifestyle, but these were the exception. Those who came to Israel in the 1970s had, for a generation, been almost completely unexposed to Jewish living. Their grandparents had been well-versed in Jewish tradition, their parents had chosen assimilation as the safest option, while they, the children, chose to initiate a return to the fold, building on memories of their grandparents.

The immigrants of the 1990s are somewhat different in this regard. For many of them, not one but two generations have passed since the Soviets made it impossible to live as a Jew. Moreover, most of the leading figures of the Jewish revival of the 1960s left the Soviet Union in the 1970s, leaving the Jewish community behind to initiate a revival of its own. Over the years, the flow of information from Israel grew through private communications,

Jewish groups such as Habad became active in the Soviet Union, refuseniks studied and taught Hebrew and disseminated original and translated materials sent back by the immigrants of the 1970s. Thus when Russian-Jewish intellectuals arrived in Israel in the 1990s, they possessed a greater base of Jewish knowledge, if not identity, than had those who immigrated two decades earlier.

Today, Jewish culture within the Russian bubble is broad and varied. One of its major creative achievements is the publication of a Russian-language Jewish encyclopedia. Combining translated articles with numerous original entries, the project continues to be an important focus of Jewish intellectual activity within the Russian community, spawning a variety of discussion groups and lectures, and focusing interest and debate on Jewish themes. Another important outlet has been the Russian-language quarterly *Twenty-Two*, published in Jerusalem since 1978. *Twenty-Two* carries academic articles and original literary works by Russians in Israel, translations from Hebrew and other languages, and reviews of new works from the former Soviet Union and the Russian diaspora. Though its importance has waned in recent years, this journal has placed Judaism and Zionism at center stage since it first appeared. By the 1990s, numerous periodicals had sprung up on Jewish topics, and the literary supplements of the daily papers are likewise rich in Jewish content. Interest in Judaism is expressed in the popularity of books such as *The Seventh Hunger* by Elli Luxemburg, and of works by Yaakov Tzigelman and many others. In poetry, Michael Gendelev wrote the popular “Ode to the Conquest of Tyre” (in the context of Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon), as well as similar works. In the plastic arts, the group Alef and the painter Michael Grobman have made names for themselves through artwork that focuses on Jewish themes. The recent rise to prominence of *Vestnik*, a journal of the Jewish University in Moscow that publishes academic research on Jewish themes, marks a revival of the Jewish spirit in Russia as well. Russian-speaking Jewry has quietly become one of the most active centers of Jewish and Zionist creativity in the world.

But if Russian-language culture in Israel has been spurned by the local elites and has had to fend for itself when addressing Jewish themes, there is one area in which Russian immigrants in Israel have been full partners in a larger project: The vast world of Russian-language culture. During the long decades of Soviet rule, Jews played a prominent role in the shaping of the anti-Soviet and non-Soviet cultures. Dissidents opposed ideological repression in the name of freedom of conscience and the right of Soviet national groups to develop their cultures freely. For some, Zionism became an important vehicle for expression, and the worlds of Zionists and dissidents in the Soviet Union sometimes became so entangled as to be indistinguishable. The same people who inveighed against the Soviet regime also weighed in on Jewish topics. For Jews who left the Soviet Union at that time, it was as important to expose the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union as it was to spread the word about the Evil Empire.

When Russian immigrants to Israel learned that the local cultural establishment was uninterested in what they had to offer, they quickly discovered a highly attractive, Russian alternative. The main conduit for such expression was Russian-language radio stations operating in the West, which had broadcast dissident truths to those caught behind the Iron Curtain. Exiled “White Russians,” anti-Bolsheviks who emigrated to the West following the Revolution or World War II, were the original force behind these activities. Gradually they were joined by Jewish émigrés from the 1970s who had difficulty finding a niche in Israel. Radio stations such as the BBC and the American-German Radio Liberty became a meeting ground in which former Soviets in Israel could participate in Russian cultural discourse. Indeed, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, these “voices”—the term used both in and out of the Soviet Union to describe the stations—were the leading intellectual forces behind the creation of a free Russian culture.

In addition, monthly and quarterly literary journals and other Russian-language publications sprung up in Europe, mostly under the leadership of the dissidents. Many of those who immigrated to Israel in the 1970s took

part, as is clear from picking up almost any issue from the 1980s. In the Spring 1982 issue of *Continent*, a thick quarterly published in Paris by the dissident Vladimir Maximov, seven of the twenty-eight contributors were Israelis. Four of the main contributors to the quarterly *Syntaxis*, which was published by the prominent dissident Andrei Sinyavsky, were living in Israel. Two Israelis were even regular contributors to *Grani*, a journal that was a stronghold of traditional, non-Jewish Russian culture. The prominence of Jewish immigrants from the 1970s in the world of Russian culture meant that those who came to Israel in the 1990s were already familiar with the cultural achievements of their predecessors through publications that had found their way to the Soviet Union from Europe, the United States and Israel.

With the fall of the Soviet empire, dissident and non-Soviet culture has become dominant in Russia as well. Russian-language culture has become an empire, as a result of Russia's new openness and the presence of large, widespread Russian-speaking communities all over the world. Today, a Russian-language writer in Israel can publish his works in their original language in the United States, Germany, England, France, Cyprus and even Australia. In 1997, Alexander Goldstein, a writer living in Tel Aviv, won the two most prestigious literary prizes in Russia. Russian-language newspapers in Israel publish articles by Jewish and non-Jewish journalists who live in Russia and in the West.

In the spring of 1998, a world conference on contemporary Russian literature was held in Jerusalem. The speakers, both Jews and non-Jews, included the foremost Russian intellectuals from around the world, from universities in the United States, Switzerland, Germany, France, Russia and Israel. The relatively small auditorium in Jerusalem overflowed with an audience eager to hear every word. To Israeli eyes, the sight was more than a little surreal. But the backdrop of Jerusalem's Old City did not seem out of place to the visiting participants: The Russian-speaking community in Israel has established itself as an integral part of worldwide Russian culture.

Two distinct paths, Jewish and Russian, lie before the Russian-speaking Jews in Israel. These two options are not seen by the immigrants as necessarily contradictory; many are active in both arenas. Still, the size and quality of the recent immigration to Israel has tipped the scales in favor of the Russian alternative. In the past, intellectuals who came to Israel placed a clear emphasis on their Jewish identity, which intensified in proportion to how long they had been in the Jewish state. Today, the size of the Russian-speaking community in Israel, and the relative ease of communication with their counterparts abroad, has strengthened the link between Russian-speaking Israelis and the Russian cultural world.

At the same time, the revival of the Jewish community in Russia and the reopening of Jewish educational institutions there have reinforced the connection to Russian culture. The possibility of being heard by both Russians and Jews in Russia—while not being heard by anyone in Hebrew-speaking Israel—works against the Israeli and Jewish identity of Russians living in Israel. They need not take part in the building of a Jewish state, or concern themselves with the troubles of the Jewish diaspora in America or elsewhere. The importance of these trends is evident: Israeli intellectuals of Russian origin once saw themselves first as Jews, and then as Israelis. Today, a great number of them see themselves principally as Russians.

If these trends persist, it is fair to say that the Jewish side of Russian immigrant culture in Israel will fade over time; indeed, this has already begun to happen. Caught between an indifferent Israeli establishment and a rejuvenated Russian civilization, Jewish thinkers and artists who want to express themselves as Jews find themselves without allies and without the heroic ethos that accompanied Zionist and Jewish activity under the Soviet regime. As long as they fail to penetrate the culture of the Jewish state, they will come to feel ineffectual, superfluous and, in the end, embittered.

It was once believed that the Jewish state's Russian roots could provide a basis for integrating Russian immigrants into Israeli culture. This belief was foolish, for it ignored the sentiments and experiences of the immigrants

themselves. But there was always another possible basis, one that was barely explored: The Jewish heritage, and the common commitment to the establishment and maintenance of a thriving Jewish state. These shared interests could serve as the impetus for joint cultural and intellectual projects, for the betterment of Jewish and Zionist culture on both sides of the divide. For this to happen, a concerted effort is required. Israeli intellectuals who are committed to fostering the country's Jewish identity must seek out the participation of Russian-speaking writers and artists, and try to understand and even participate in the culture of the Russian enclave itself. Russian cultural figures have to overcome decades of habitual avoidance of Hebrew culture—by searching for like-minded Hebrew-language groups and publications, by involving themselves more actively in Israeli public life, and by mastering the Hebrew language and expressing themselves within the Hebrew culture, as did the many waves of immigrants before them.

As the State of Israel enters its second half-century, it is precisely its Jewish character which remains undefined, and which is under constant assault from both within and without. At such a moment in history, the contribution of Israel's Russian-speaking Jewish writers and artists could be critical in determining the future of the country.

Anna Isakova's columns appear regularly in the Russian- and Hebrew-language press in Israel. She lives in Jerusalem.