

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Aliyah and Identity in Israeli-Russian Literature

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The recipe of the Russian literary Israeli cocktail is this: we take the national Jewish temperament, add a large measure of Soviet mentality, dump into the thick of it a full spoon of zesty immigrant problems, a pinch of normal human vanity, half a cup of the existential prophetic itch, then pour in, without measure, sincere love for the Russian word and culture, heat it up in the scorching Jerusalem sun, shake well, and empty this mixture into various large and small forms...

Dina Rubina, 1999¹

The break-up of the Soviet Union was perhaps the most important event to shake the Jewish world since the creation of the State of Israel, and has dramatically shaped Israel's demography, politics and culture. In what has come to be referred to as the Great Aliyah,² the 1990s saw over a million Russian-speaking migrants flood into Israel, boosting the Jewish State's population by over 20% and paradoxically providing perhaps the greatest challenge yet to Israel's ambition to facilitate an 'ingathering of exiles'. Indeed in the context of Israeli history, rooted in the pioneering spirit of the near-mythological early Zionist waves of migration, the Great Aliyah of Russian Jewry marks a significant turning point. The Hebrew word Aliyah, used here to refer to Jewish migration to Israel, is an inherently ideological concept, literally meaning an 'ascent' to a higher (and hence superior) place, and as such migrants were traditionally expected to relinquish their former cultural identities in favour of absorption into the Hebrew-speaking, Jewish and Zionist dominant culture. This expectation began with the early European Jewish settlers, many of them actually from Russia, who overwhelmingly rejected the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Diaspora and sought to reinvent themselves as strong Hebrews, fashioning what they deemed to be a native Israeli identity rooted in agriculture, secularism and socialist ideals. Every wave of Aliyah since has been encouraged to participate in and strengthen the Israeli national project by adopting the cultural norms of their new homeland, an important part of the Zionist concept of 'negating the Diaspora'.³ This was especially damaging for the Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews, who migrated from other parts of the Middle East and North Africa largely in the 1950s. The Mizrahi/Sephardi Aliyah was pressured to relinquish its links to the Arabic culture and language almost immediately, viewed as belonging to Israel's enemies, and suffered marginalisation and discrimination in the process.⁴

However, by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Israel had already absorbed migrants from a wide variety of backgrounds, and had matured into a confident modern state with its own distinct identity, supported by now deep-rooted nationalist myths and narratives. Unlike previous waves of Aliyah, the migrants of the Great Aliyah were overwhelmingly secular, many ignorant of even the most basic tenets of Judaism, and migrated largely due to economic and social

¹ Maxim D. Shrayer, *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature, Volume II* (New York: M.E.Sharpe, 2007) 1169.

² Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2007) 56.

³ Nathan Rotenstreich, *Zionism Past and Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) 87.

⁴ Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 140.

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Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

factors. Their reluctance to go through the Zionist transformation functioned in stark contrast to the grand narrative of a Jewish homecoming which had been at the core of Zionist thought since the movement's inception. Their arrival marked the point when Israel found itself, perhaps unwillingly, adopting a multicultural model, an important social and ideological shift which has also been evidenced in the most recent wave of Aliyah to Israel from Ethiopia. In defying pressures to assimilate, migrants of the Great Aliyah used the strength of their demography to build a Russian-language cultural enclave in Israel, asserting their unique identity at the expense of a speedier integration into the Israeli mainstream.⁵

As is the experience of many migrant groups, the Great Aliyah of the 1990s was initially characterised by the trauma of social displacement. Compounding this, the labour and housing markets could not cope with the sudden increase in demand, and many government agencies and services were overwhelmed. The new migrants faced a plethora of challenges, involving everything from financial pressures to military conscription to difficulties in understanding Hebrew and adapting to cultural norms. Typically new immigrants to Israel found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and this lack of status reinforced the pressure to assimilate into the Israeli cultural mainstream. However, as Jews of European origin had historically occupied a culturally superior position in Israel over Jews of Middle-Eastern origin, bearers of Russian culture, with its prestigious traditions of literature, music and the arts, were able to subvert this long-standing imbalance, and instead assert their Russian cultural credentials. Many migrants of the Great Aliyah regarded Russian language and culture as being more sophisticated than the local Israeli culture, and their Russian heritage was hence repositioned as a valuable asset which they were reluctant to forsake. Resisting the pressure to adopt Hebrew as a literary language in the spirit of the early Zionists, Israeli-Russian migrants of the 1990s instead developed a vibrant Russian-language literary scene which reflected their unique transnational identity.

As in other multicultural societies, globalisation and the technology revolution have also played a crucial role in the development of the Russian cultural and literary scene in Israel. Improvements in communication technologies and transport infrastructure have enabled transnational migrant communities to maintain strong linguistic, cultural and familial links with their former homelands, which for Israeli-Russians has made the notion of giving up their ties to the Diaspora not only impractical, but also undesirable. The emerging phenomenon of transnationalism has in many ways further reinforced the migrant's position on the cultural periphery, straddling the divide between identity constructs and blurring the once-sharp dichotomy which existed between home country and host country.⁶ This process has led to the development of hybrid identities which transcend the boundaries between cultures, or serve to fuse norms and traditions to create new referents of identity; trends which feature prominently in the new genre of Israeli-Russian literature which developed out of the Great Aliyah.

Israel is home to over 300 Russian language book and music stores, several radio and television stations and a media scene which publishes in excess of 20 newspapers and

⁵ Remennick 58.

⁶ Francoise Kral, *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 39.

magazines, focusing on academic or literary topics as well as Israeli current affairs.⁷ *Vesti*, the leading Russian-Israeli daily, in its heyday boasted a readership of 65% of the million-strong Israeli-Russian community.⁸ Hundreds of new books are published in Russian each year in Israel, however due to lack of interest very few are ever translated into Hebrew, and Russian-Israeli literature receives very little critical attention outside Russian-speaking circles.

Despite this, the Israeli-Russian literary scene is important in that it reflects the unique position of the first immigrant group in Israel to openly reject the Zionist pressure to assimilate and to seek a fusion, rather than a replacement, of cultures. ‘Under the auspices of the veteran Israeli society’s lack of interest and under the cover of foreignness,’⁹ Israeli-Russian writers, spurred on by the freedoms brought about by escaping Soviet censorship, have produced a diverse and experimental body of literature. Similar to the emerging genre of transnational literature worldwide, much of Israeli-Russian literature is centred on the travails of immigration, and explores themes such as multiculturalism, bilingualism, displacement and belonging. This exploration of the immigrant experience is however firmly positioned within an Israeli geographical, cultural and/or historical context, and in this sense is an inherently Israeli literary genre. However due to its linguistic separation from the cultural mainstream, Russian-language Israeli writing is set apart stylistically from the Hebrew literary canon, drawing its influences instead from Russia. Similarly, Hebrew-language literature written by Russian émigrés also often exhibits features distinctive to Russian literary sensibilities, such as allusions to the Russian classics.

In an effort to examine Israeli-Russian literature in depth this paper will limit itself to an analysis of the work of two prominent Israeli-Russian writers; Dina Rubina, who publishes in Russian, and Ola Groisman, who publishes in Hebrew. Both writers use literature to explore their own personal experiences of immigration to Israel, but an examination of their work can also shine light on the wider challenges involved in understanding and interpreting identity in an era of transnationalism.

A New Israeli Literature

Dina Rubina was born in Tashkent in present-day Uzbekistan, and is probably the most prominent Israeli-Russian writer of the Great Aliyah. Rubina immigrated to Israel in 1990, was able to overcome a difficult period of transition, and began to write novels in Russian about her new homeland. Rubina’s best-known publication in Israel is her 1996 novel *Here Comes the Messiah!* (‘*Vot Idet Messiya!*’), which charts the lives of an array of Israeli-Russian characters as they navigate their way through a multi-ethnic and multilingual Israeli society, often grappling humorously with issues of cultural and religious identity.

In *Here Comes the Messiah!* Rubina explores the predicament of the Israeli-Russian intellectual elite as they attempt to assimilate into mainstream Israeli society whilst retaining their Russian cultural identity. Set in an early 1990s post-Intifada Israel, the novel charts the fate of two female protagonists whose stories converge in the final chapter when the son of the first, the autobiographical Writer N, accidentally shoots dead Ziama, the second protagonist, when

⁷ Remennick 111.

⁸ Eliezer Ben-Rafael, *Building a Diaspora: Russian Jews in Israel, Germany and the USA* (Leiden: Brill, 2006) 227

⁹ Masha Zur Glozman, ‘The Million Russians that Changed Israel to its Core’ *Haaretz*, 4 January 2013.

aiming for a Palestinian terrorist. Rubina's novel is constructed around 'a series of sentimental, hilarious and sometimes absurd episodes that portray the reality and dreams of the Great Aliyah,'¹⁰ and works to shatter pre-immigration myths such as that of the Zionist homecoming.

Ola Groisman was born in Moscow, and immigrated to Israel as a child in 1972. Groisman published her first novel in 2009, titled *A Suitcase on Snow* ('Mizvada al Hasheleg'), which became an Israeli bestseller. Despite Russian being her mother-tongue, Groisman writes in Hebrew, and like Rubina focuses on issues of identity and belonging in her exploration of the Russian-Israeli immigrant experience. *A Suitcase on Snow* tells the story of Lana, a young Israeli who returns to Russia for the first time since her Aliyah, and embarks on a journey in search of her roots, and with it her identity. Despite Groisman's arriving in Israel before the wave of post-Soviet immigration, it is impossible to separate her work from the context of the Great Aliyah. Groisman herself acknowledges the immense societal pressures which encouraged her to assimilate from an early age, and initially bought into the Zionist ethos which still prevailed in Israel of the 1970s.¹¹ Groisman was only able to reconsider her identity and reconnect with her Russian roots in the wake of the almost million-strong Great Aliyah of the 1990s, which opened the floodgates for the acceptance and celebration of Russian culture in Israel, even if largely restricted to within the community itself. In this sense, the Great Aliyah of the 1990s also facilitated the emergence of Hebrew language Israeli-Russian literature.

In contrast to Rubina's more sweeping treatment of Israeli-Russian society and group identity, Groisman's novel explores the immigrant experience on a personal level from a position of emotion and introspection. Groisman's protagonist Lana struggles to fit in and connect to the people around her, and has a troubled relationship with her mother in particular, prompting her to seek psychological treatment. In line with traditional Zionist discourse, upon immigrating to Israel Lana's parents refuse to speak about their past, and Lana grew up not knowing about her childhood in the Soviet Union, completely disconnected from and unaware of her extended family who still lived there. Twenty years after her Aliyah Lana is sent to Moscow to retrieve her grandfather's ashes, and begins to uncover the secrets of her family history, beginning with the discovery of her grandmother's diary. Lana slowly comes to terms with her roots in the country of her birth, and is able to re-examine her identity as someone who is both local and foreign, with a conflicting sense of belonging both in Russia and in Israel.

Rubina and Groisman's writings make an interesting contrast, and are in many ways complimentary. Rubina writes in Russian, however her narratives are largely set in Israel, and deal with broad Israeli issues and themes. Groisman on the other hand writes in Hebrew and her novel is largely set in Russia, against a backdrop of the country's struggles in the post-Soviet era. Rubina strives to present a panoramic snapshot of Israeli-Russian society, whereas Groisman's novel is more focused on the experiences of the individual. Both Rubina and Groisman identify as Israelis, and their writing functions as a window into a new and flourishing literary subculture which acts as a bridge between two radically different cultural and literary traditions.

¹⁰ Mikhail Krutikov, 'Constructing Jewish Identity in Contemporary Russian Fiction,' ed. Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Life after the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) 26.

¹¹ From my own correspondence with Ola Groisman, 19 April 2013.

The Israeli-Russian Identity Paradox

One of the core themes of immigrant literature is an engagement with the immigrant's position on the periphery between identities, torn between identification with traditional norms and a process of adaptation, referred to by Kral as a form of 'forced amnesia of the homeland.'¹² This issue is especially complex in the case of Israeli-Russian immigrants, because as Jews many were already to a certain extent perceived as being outside the dominant identity construct of their Soviet 'homeland.' Immigration to Israel made many Israeli-Russians aware of their inherent Russianness for the first time, just as it also caused them to re-examine their Jewish identities. Ironically, denied official identification as ethnic Russians in the Soviet Union, Jewish immigrants of the Great Aliyah were only able to realise their Russianness in Israel.¹³ This inversion of ethnic identities, coupled with the aforementioned demise of Zionist notions of assimilation, meant that the Israeli-Russian faced being seen as an eternal other on the fringes of the mainstream, whether as a Jew in Russia or as a Russian in Israel.

Both Rubina and Groisman's work explores the Israeli-Russian immigrant's struggle to come to terms with this identity paradox in different ways. Nakhimovsky writes that 'Jews have always been suspect as the bearers of Russian culture,' particularly in light of the central role the Russian literary canon has had in 'defining the Russian soul.'¹⁴ Rubina's decision to write about Jews in the Russian language hence almost automatically forces her to re-evaluate what it means to be a Jew and a Russian, and whether both identities are compatible or mutually-exclusive. Several of Rubina's characters in *Here Comes the Messiah!* grapple with this identity-bind. Rubina's narrator describes the protagonist Ziama, 'like every member of the Russian intelligentsia,' as 'suffering from a split personality'¹⁵ as she attempts to juggle her role as the editor of a Russian-language periodical with her newly-realised identity as a political Zionist, living in a volatile West Bank settlement. Inverting the typical immigrant-host nation relationship, Ziama brags that she has 'already absorbed both this country and its population', emphasising that Ziama is absorbing her new homeland on her own terms, which include a reluctance to relinquish Russian cultural norms. Ziama is intent on resisting the traditional Zionist expectation that new migrants will willingly let go of their former cultural identities in favour of absorption into the dominant Hebrew culture. She is not averse to becoming Israeli, and indeed reinvents herself as a West Bank settler, choosing to live in a caravan in the Judean desert due to her political convictions. However she is reluctant to go through the Zionist transformation completely, clinging to her love of Russian culture and literature, and continuing to associate mostly in Israeli-Russian immigrant circles.

Groisman's protagonist Lana is faced with similar conflicts of identity, and at first attempts to assimilate entirely into Israeli society, making an active effort to banish any vestiges of her former self. Lana Hebraises her name, changing it to Ilana, after a school teacher told her that with a Russian name 'you can never be a real Israeli.'¹⁶ Lana describes her confusion upon

¹² Kral 7.

¹³ Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 37.

¹⁴ Nakhimovsky x.

¹⁵ Dina Rubina, *Here Comes the Messiah!* (Brookline: Zephyr, 1995) 12.

¹⁶ Ola Groisman, *Mizvada al hasheleg* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2009) 58. All translations are my own.

arriving in Russia and hearing people refer to her by her birth name: ‘The name Lana sounds both foreign and familiar at the same time... tears flow from my eyes... am I mourning my lost name?’ Although she makes an effort to be seen as a ‘real Israeli’ Lana cannot seem to entirely shake off her Russianness, and despite ‘trying so hard to fit in’ she found herself ‘exiled to a group of Russians’ during her military service, whom she ironically struggles to connect with due to their speaking Russian and drinking vodka.¹⁷ Lana appears to embody this identity paradox which characterises the Israeli-Russian enclave, however in contrast to Rubina’s Ziama, who tries to find the middle-ground between her two cultures, Lana resists her roots and attempts to wholly assimilate into the Israeli mainstream. This is a painful process which is ultimately unsuccessful, symbolised by her later embrace of her original Russian name. In my own correspondence with Groisman the author admits that *A Suitcase on Snow* is ‘emotionally autobiographical,’ and that the pressure Lana felt to assimilate reflected her own experience: ‘Most of us changed our names, made Hebrew our main language and embraced Israeli culture to the full’.¹⁸ Groisman notes that this resulted in a feeling that she had been ‘uprooted’, and that like her protagonist Lana, it was a return to Russia some years later which enabled her to ‘reconnect to (her) childhood’ and through it, her ‘lost’ Russian identity.¹⁹

Rubina charts Israeli-Russians’ efforts to understand and interact with the cultural life of their adopted homeland by peppering her narrative with short anecdotes and asides, recounting stories of culture-clash or culture-shock ranging from the hilarious to the absurd. Various characters struggle to comprehend the behaviour of the locals, who are often described as ‘aborigines,’²⁰ a term which both implies cultural primitivism and cements Israelis’ status as natives vis-a-vis newer immigrants. For example, Rubina’s autobiographical character Writer N frequently struggles with her neighbours’ nonchalant attitude to Israel’s security situation, exclaiming: ‘How, surrounded by mortal danger, could they crack seeds, gobble pita and scratch their hairy bellies?!’²¹ In a similar vein, Groisman emphasises the richness of Russian culture and the value Russian immigrants place on education and knowledge, in contrast to the local Israeli population. Lana fondly describes the ‘books covering the walls of my parent’s flat in Haifa’²² and reacts with shock when one day, upon returning from the army, she finds her parents in the process of throwing them out. These books come to symbolise Lana’s family’s slow detachment from Russian culture; when Lana protests, her mother quips, ‘What would you need this for? You don’t even read in Russian.’ Lana’s decision to hold on to some of the books, despite never reading them, represents her inability to truly let go of the Russian part of her identity, despite outwardly assuming the role of the Israeli Ilana. Lana arranged them on shelves in her flat in Tel Aviv ‘with ceremony’ and would ‘stop to caress them’ whenever she passed near, lamenting the rich cultural heritage largely lost to her in seeking to replace her Russian identity with an Israeli one.

Rubina’s sharp-tongued narrator often takes aim at elements within the Israeli-Russian community who have the opposite problem – those who fail to assimilate whatsoever, preferring

¹⁷ Groisman 189.

¹⁸ Correspondence with Ola Groisman 19 April 2013.

¹⁹ Correspondence with Ola Groisman 19 April 2013.

²⁰ Rubina, *Messiah* 289.

²¹ Rubina, *Messiah* 122-3.

²² Groisman 155.

to remain completely Russian. One character, Agrippa, an Israeli-Russian tour guide, is filled with rage when guiding a group of pensioners around the historic quarter of Safed:

‘And now he intended to beat them up the way they should be for everything: for the fact that they didn’t know their own history and their own great religion ... For their Great Fatherland War, in which they participated, for all of Israel’s wars, in which they had NOT participated, for the fact that they hadn’t dragged their asses here in ’48, or in the 60s, or in ’73. For the fact that they barged in here now- the ambitious riff-raff, for pensions, apartment subsidies and free excursions.’²³

These accusations are often levelled at immigrants of the Great Aliyah by native-born citizens who bemoan the Israeli-Russian community’s lack of Zionist zeal and knowledge of Judaism, and their perceived resistance to assimilation. Rubina’s transformation of this external critique into an internal one alerts us to a duality of identity within the community, which identifies itself with Israeli concerns and seeks to align its national identity with that of Israel in spite of its continuing affiliation with Russian cultural practice.

The issue of rootedness and historical ties to the land as a marker of identity, with a lack of connectedness to national history seen as a barrier to belonging, also features in *A Suitcase on Snow*. Lana experiences flashbacks to her time at school throughout the novel, cataloguing her struggle to adapt to the unfamiliar nationalism of her new home: ‘The Memorial Day ceremony at school. They read out the names. Tali cries. Her uncle was killed in one of the wars, and I feel nothing. Nobody in my family has ever been tragically killed or wounded in a war.’²⁴ Lana later partially solves this problem by becoming attached to the memory of Eyal, a boy in her school who went on to be killed in the Lebanon war. Lana only shared a fleeting encounter with Eyal, fittingly whilst waiting to read aloud a Rachel poem at a school assembly (this choice of Zionist literary hero further emphasising her desire to become ‘a real Israeli’). Eyal, being ‘the only person I have known who has died’, came to give Lana the sense of rootedness which she lacked; ‘Every Memorial Day I felt the palms of his hands on my back all over again,’ recalling the time when Eyal helped her overcome her stage fright by pushing her into the auditorium.²⁵

‘Burdened by a Moderate Load of Russian Culture’

Language is a central component of identity, and the struggle to adapt to a new language is one of the most prominent themes in immigrant literature. Despite Rubina’s decision to continue writing in Russian, in *Here Comes the Messiah!* there is considerable interaction between the Russian and Hebrew languages. Rubina often relies on word-play and linguistic parallelism to transform Hebrew slang and particularistic Israeli concepts into Russian. For example:

‘Angel-of-Paradise turned out to live in the same *shchuna* (the Hebrew word for ‘neighbourhood’) as Rabinovich, and very close to him at that. (Of course, *shkhuna* in Russian means ‘schooner,’ so it’s tempting to compare the Machaneh Rusi *shchuna* with a

²³ Rubina, *Messiah* 242.

²⁴ Groisman 47.

²⁵ Groisman 23.

shkhuna, a genuine sort of buccaneer's schooner, sailing before the mountain the way a prow's carved siren sails before a ship, parting the water with her wooden breasts.)²⁶

Rubina's Hebrewisms add an element of authenticity to her narrative, but often also function as insider jokes, comprehensible only to her fellow Israeli-Russian readers who are proficient in both languages. These insider jokes act as 'cues to intercultural and transnational in-betweenness,'²⁷ and shed some light on the nature of identity structures in the Israeli-Russian immigrant community. For example, Rubina's narrator introduces a new *rakezet* (Hebrew for 'co-ordinator') of Russian cultural activities, but intentionally confuses this title with the Russian word *koza* (a female goat), enabling her to mock this character's silliness with a wink to her Russian readers who also understand Hebrew.²⁸ The majority of Rubina's Russian-speaking readership, who reside outside of Israel, would miss this subtle word-play. Rubina's Hebrew-enriched Russian dialogues reflect real linguistic developments on the Israeli-Russian street, with the Russian language itself going through a process of adaptation in Israel, incorporating many Hebrew words into its vernacular which reflect a distinctly Israeli reality.

In clinging to the language of pre-immigration but setting her narratives in a post-immigration context, Rubina suggests that the maintenance of language is a crucial component to identity, and key to a promotion of Israeli-Russian culture. Nearly all the characters in *Here Comes the Messiah!* are engaged in some sort of Russian-language literary or artistic activity. However, they all speak Hebrew and most operate as regular Israelis socially and in the workplace. The motif of the parents' struggle to teach their children Russian often features in Rubina's novels and short stories, as do characters who struggle to speak their native Russian correctly, with Rubina in one short story bemoaning the 'sickly émigré transfigurations' which characterise the 'partial losing of one's native language'.²⁹ Rubina often employs linguistic errors for comic effect, however it is clear that buried within her satire is a critique of her fellow compatriots, who she perceives as quick to forsake their cultural and linguistic origins.

Groisman is an example of an Israeli-Russian of the younger generation targeted by Rubina, who feels more comfortable in Hebrew than in her mother-tongue, as reflected in her choice to write in Hebrew. Having mastered it from a young age, her character Lana appears to feel at home in Hebrew, however her continued struggle to fit in, despite changing her name and speaking without an accent, illustrates that for Groisman the idea of language as an indicator of identity is only part of the picture. In contrast to some of Rubina's characters, whose poor grasp of Hebrew often leads to humorous cultural misunderstandings, Groisman's Lana has become so integrated that she is not entirely comfortable speaking Russian, and has not learnt to read the language. Despite attempting to pass herself off as a local in the city of her birth, she comes across to most Muscovites as a tourist:

²⁶ Rubina, *Messiah* 77.

²⁷ Adrian Wanner, *Out of Russia; Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011) 14.

²⁸ Anna P. Ronell 'Some Thoughts on Russian-Language Israeli Fiction,' *Prooftexts* 28:2 (2008) 224.

²⁹ Dina Rubina 'Marked by Carnival,' ed. Miriam Ben-Yoseph and Deborah Nodler Rosen, *Where We Find Ourselves: Jewish Women Around the World Write about Home* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009) 70.

I raise my hand and a small red car immediately stops alongside me, battered and scratched and covered in layers of mud like all the cars in Moscow. I open the door and stick my head inside the car. ‘Can you take me to Red Square?’ I ask in Russian, hoping that my Israeli accent isn’t too obvious. ‘Five dollars,’ said the driver, revealing a gold front tooth. The price is inflated, of course he immediately recognised me as a tourist.’³⁰

It is clear that a re-embrace of the Russian language is part of the journey which Lana undergoes during her visit to Russia, and for the first time she begins to accept herself as a person whose identity is split between two cultures. In ‘mourning her lost name’ Lana is also able to rediscover her mother-tongue. At the beginning of her trip Lana felt overwhelmed by having to speak so much Russian, however by the end she found the language came to her just as naturally as Hebrew. For example, in recalling the *patigusi*, or stretching exercises, which her father would make her perform in the morning as a child, Lana struggles to find a Hebrew equivalent: ‘How the hell do you translate *patigusi* into Hebrew? Maybe *metikhusi*?’³¹ This is, of course, a play on words, as Lana is combining *patigusi* with the Hebrew word for stretches, *metikhot*. However, the word *patigusi* itself is Russian slang, and derives from *patyagivat* which is the true equivalent of *metikhot*. Such language games recall Rubina’s Hebrew-infused Russian, and further underscore the importance of the dynamic of language in immigrant self-expression. Despite Lana’s proficiency in and preference for Hebrew, she cannot escape the idea that some things are better expressed in her native tongue- one of the subtle messages of Rubina’s narrative focus on the Israeli-Russian literary community.

Rubina’s writing is rich in intertextual references to Russian literary classics. In recalling Russian greats, such as Tolstoy, Chekov, and Bulgakov, Rubina imbues her prose with a measure of prestige and authenticity. Through this she is able to boast of her knowledge of the Russian literary tradition, often through subtle allusions which add layers of meaning to her narrative discernible only to those readers who are also familiar with the Russian classics. For example, in her short story *Our Chinese Business*, Rubina describes the editors of a community news bulletin in a West Bank settlement, who concoct the names of residents writing-in questions for the leaflet’s Q&A column. Referencing key protagonists in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*: ‘Samuel Vronsky posed questions to Solomon Levin, and Esther Karenina objected to them both. It passed unnoticed.’³² In Rubina’s story *Marked by Carnival*, a humorous exchange occurs between a Yemenite policeman and an Israeli-Russian teen who is brought in for questioning about the whereabouts of a ‘hardened dissident’ by the name of Lensky. The teenager is described as being ‘burdened by a moderate load of Russian culture’ and in thinking the policeman is referring to the protagonist of one of Pushkin’s famous poems, informs him that Lensky was murdered by the villain Onegin. The policeman, ‘not burdened by any load of Russian culture whatsoever,’³³ promptly starts a murder investigation! Rubina’s reference to Russian culture here as a ‘burden’ is clearly tongue-in-cheek, as a survey of her writings leaves the reader in no doubt as to the esteem to which she holds Russian culture. The simple Yemenite

³⁰ Groisman 26.

³¹ Groisman 15.

³² Dina Rubina, ‘Our Chinese Business’ *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* (2003) <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/03/rubina.shtml> [Accessed 1 January 2013].

³³ Rubina, *Carnival* 68-9.

policeman is unable to identify Rubina's elevated literary references, and is also unable to understand or share in the insider-joke being made at his expense. Indeed, it is to his detriment that he is not 'burdened' with Russian culture, which is the message Rubina is using humour to subtly convey.

Despite choosing to write in Hebrew, and hence drawing a line between her writing and the Russian classics, a love of and respect for Russian literature nevertheless also features in Groisman's *A Suitcase on Snow*. Lana took the books she rescued from her parent's house back with her to her army base, and afterwards to her flat in Tel Aviv, where she afforded them pride of place despite never reading them. Lana describes her father 'taking pains to teach me Russian as a child, and the time when he 'pushed towards me a copy of Bulgakov's *Master and Margerita*'³⁴ in the hope that she would develop an interest in reading it. Lana's inability to read the Russian classics is contrasted to that of her friend Sonya, who she meets in Russia, and for whom reading literature is the most natural thing in the world: 'I saw her sitting on the wooden floor of the balcony, cross-legged, in one hand a cigarette and in the other an apple core, and on her lap a thick copy of one of the volumes of *War and Peace*.'³⁵

Groisman herself in our correspondence mentions her frustration that, like Lana, in Russian she 'cannot write and can read very slowly and only (when) asked to.'³⁶ Indeed because of this, Groisman considers Hebrew to be her 'mother tongue,' however mentions that she feels, 'as a Russian person' that she should still attempt to read the Russian classics, and that her father claims that Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time* has influenced her work.³⁷ This is very possible, given that both novels feature a melancholy anti-hero alienated from the social norms of their surroundings.

In referencing the Russian language and literary tradition in her novel, Groisman is staking a claim to Russian culture, regardless of her choice to write in Hebrew. In this sense, like Rubina with her tales of Israel written in Russian, Groisman is rejecting the long-established Zionist concept of negating the Diaspora. Lana has strived so hard to shed her Russian identity and assume an Israeli one; however, by the end of her stay in Moscow she remarks that when an El Al security guard asks her: 'Are you Israeli?' she 'has difficulty answering the question'.³⁸ Groisman's novel both begins and ends with an image of a suitcase in an airport – perhaps symbolising the lack of permanence and rootedness in the immigrant experience. Her character Lana comes to accept that she is a product of two cultures, and that contrary to the traditional Zionist narrative, this is a blessing rather than a curse.

The Future of Israeli-Russian Literature

The works of Dina Rubina and Ola Groisman, two prominent examples of a diverse Israeli-Russian literary scene, cannot be separated from their Russian cultural and linguistic influences, nor from their contemporary Israeli reality. Rubina's Russian language, with its Hebrew borrowings, and Groisman's rediscovery of the Russian language are testament to the

³⁴ Groisman 155.

³⁵ Groisman 169.

³⁶ Correspondence with Ola Groisman 19 April 2013.

³⁷ Correspondence with Ola Groisman 19 April 2013.

³⁸ Groisman 277-8.

increasingly hybrid linguistics of the Israeli-Russian community in Israel. However, both Rubina and Groisman's linguistic choices bear witness to an increasing sense of cultural tension over the changing role of the Russian language in Israel, in particular with regards to second generation immigrants. Several Israeli studies have established that Russian-speaking adolescents are going through a process of language shift, with Hebrew replacing Russian as the preferred language of communication, even between those with Russian in common as a mother-tongue. Niznik suggests that in spite of the successful promotion of Russian culture in Israel, the 'Three Generation Theory' is still likely to apply to the Israeli-Russian community, who by and large will cease transmitting the Russian language by the third generation after immigration.³⁹ The sheer size of the Russian cultural enclave in Israel, coupled with the rise of transnationalism, has enabled Great Aliyah writers to continue to promote the Russian-language as a post-immigration means of creative expression. However, in common with many migrant communities throughout the world, subsequent generations will more likely engage with the Hebrew culture of their immediate surroundings at the expense of the Russian culture of their parents or grandparents.

Nevertheless, Israeli-Russian immigrants' emphasis on preserving Russian culture, as well as their rejection of Zionist narratives of assimilation, have furthered the development of multiculturalism in Israel, forcing the re-evaluation of relations between minority communities and the Israeli mainstream. If given a platform, immigrant literature such as that of Rubina and Groisman could have the power to further affect the national culture, by broadening it and making it more inclusive to modern cultural and demographic realities. As assimilation gives way to multiculturalism, Israel must learn to embrace immigrant narratives, which have the potential to enrich the Israeli cultural scene for the better.

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³⁹ Marina Niznik, 'Searching for a New Identity: The Acculturation of Russian-born Adolescents in Israel,' *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism* (Somerville: Cascadilla Press, 2005) 1714.