

CHAPTER 4

The Aristocrat and Her Handmaid: Russian-Israeli Literature and the Question of Language

It's true, there's no shortage of reasons to travel to Paris, but as fate would have it, two weeks ago I started to write my great Israeli novel.

And I'd already completed the first chapter, in which the hero, who turned his back on his faith, discovers that his father, who banished him, has died from cancer on the Memorial Day of Fallen Soldiers. And then the travel agency called me to say that the tickets were ready. If that is the case, I said to myself, on the banks of the Seine I am sentenced to write the second chapter, which takes place in a crowded cemetery.¹

These opening lines of a story by Alex Epstein, known for his extremely short stories, humorously and critically present the imagined challenges entailed in writing an “Israeli novel.” Packed into the summary of his planned novel are typical elements of Israeli hegemonic novels written between the 1970s and the 2000s by authors such as A. B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, and others. Epstein combines the theme of the intergenerational crisis between the parents’ generation—the great Zionist ideologists—and the generation of their children, who chiefly wanted to elevate their own prosperity with a national allegory where private and national bereavement are interlaced. In Epstein’s fantasized “Israeli novel” the son engages with the memory of his dead father, whose loss and the procession to the cemetery are linked to *Yom Ha-zikaron* (the Memorial Day for Israel’s fallen soldiers), that is to an event which cloaks death with a range of ideological significances.

Alex Epstein was born in Leningrad in 1971 and immigrated to Israel in 1980. He is among the prominent authors from the former Soviet Union (FSU) who write in Hebrew. Epstein writes very short stories, sometimes comprising just

a few words or several lines, describing events on the interface between everyday life and fantastic, weird, and inexplicable events. Despite the declaration at the beginning of this story, Epstein's works rule out any possibility that he will indeed ever write the "Israeli novel." In this story, the journey to France deliberately distances the author (and the story) from the Zionist space, leaving us with only the narrator's witticism as he fantasizes about what constitutes Israeli writing and simultaneously abandons it, preferring another narrative that tracks the fate of a Russian-born Jewish chess player whose book he stumbles upon in France.

If one can indeed use Epstein's phrase—"Israeli novel"—then Israeli literature is something that can be categorized and defined; this of course is not the case. The phrase "Israeli novel" is ironic, meant to emphasize the marginality of authors who deliberately choose different aesthetic paths. As stated above, Epstein will never write an "Israeli novel," and neither will other poets and novelists who were raised in the USSR and in the FSU and were exposed to diverse literary traditions. These authors not only avoid proposing an "Israel novel" but also any form of "Russian novel" or "Russian-Israeli novel." The contribution of the literature by former Russians in Israel is not easy to categorize or calculate. This chapter focuses on a few literary directions that former Russians have chosen.

Following an introduction on the nature of the intercultural dialogue between the Israeli and the Russian culture, I present a detailed analysis of the Israeli-Russian literary scene. In this discussion I explore the nature of Israeli literature written in the Russian language. Israeli literature written in Russian has gained worldwide recognition and enjoys a rich relationship in other Russian-speaking communities across the world, but since it generally has not been translated into Hebrew, it remains unknown to Hebrew readers.

Later in the chapter, I focus on the case of Geshet—an Israeli-Russian theater that suggests an interesting model of inter-culturalism. The final part of the chapter analyzes major novels and poetry written in Hebrew by authors who immigrated as children or teenagers from the FSU: Boris Zaidman and Ola Groisman, with their discussions of memory; Alona Kimhi's combination of the hybrid and the grotesque; Sivan Baskin's return to structured poetry; and Alex Epstein's cosmic nomadism.

Introduction

The two waves of immigration from the former Soviet Union, in the 1970s and 1990s, created one of the largest ethnic groups ever to arrive in the state of Israel. It has introduced the Russian language into every area of life in the country, and has taught veteran Israelis a thought-provoking lesson in multiculturalism.

Between 1972 and 1979 over 250,000 people, the vast proportion of whom originated in the USSR, immigrated to Israel. Prolonged struggles by Jews seeking to leave the country and immigrate to Israel, spurred by ideology and led by charismatic leaders, created protests within and outside the USSR, which

finally brought a relatively small wave of immigration to Israel. These immigrants, raised on the Russian culture, literature, and art, fashioned the institutional and cultural infrastructure of the Russian-speaking community in Israel that would thrive with the later wave of immigrants.

Soviet Jews came from various social and cultural locations: the European republics—Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus; regions that had been annexed to the USSR after World War II, particularly the Baltic States—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; and the southern republics of the Caucasus and the Central Asian republics—the Georgians, Bukharans, and the Mountain Jews. From 1968 to 1990, most of the immigrants came from the European republics. A substantial proportion of the immigrants had an academic education and strong employment potential.² In fact, from 1974 to 1982, close to 50% of the immigrants had an academic education; many were scientists or worked in liberal and technical professions (while the corresponding percentage of academic backgrounds in the general Israeli population ranged, at that time, from 20% to 29%).

With the rapid unraveling of the Communist regime in 1989, immigration from the USSR intensified. This immigration wave was different from the previous one in its numbers, demographic composition, and people's motivation to leave for Israel. From 1990 to 1998, over 750,000 people left the FSU and came to Israel, significantly increasing the country's population. They were older than those who had arrived in the 1970s and 1980s, and there were more non-Jewish spouses among them and more single-parent families. Their motivation was generally pragmatic, fueled not by ideology but by concerns over political, social, and economic crises in post-communist Russia.

The Jewish community in the FSU was virtually obliterated after the massive immigration to Israel. Following this immigration, Russian Jews constituted 12% of the entire population of Israel. Though it is a highly heterogeneous group, its members were soon crystallized into a distinct category in Israeli society—"the Russians." The tremendous number of Russian speakers created a critical mass of consumers for Russian culture, and fashioned an extensive market for local and imported products. As the global borders opened up, among them FSU's cultural and physical borders, Russian communities (not only Jewish ones) in North America and Western Europe found ways of creating a new intercontinental ethnic concept of Russianness.³

"Russian" immigrants, as other immigration groups, have suffered cultural and economic difficulties in the new country. However, in comparison to other ethnic groups, the "Russian" immigrants demonstrated impressive abilities to assimilate into Israeli society, in contexts like finding work, acquiring the language, and purchasing goods. In a relatively short time, they managed to enter Israel's middle class. And yet, their integration into Israeli society was not accompanied by full adoption of Hebrew and Israeli culture; instead of losing their culture of origin, they continue to nurture the Russian language and culture, creating a sort of sub-Russian culture in Israel. Due to the changes that Israeli society

had undergone, the FSU immigrants who came to Israel in the 1990s were not subjected to the melting-pot policy, but to the “direct absorption” policy. That is, instead of receiving direct services like absorption centers, protected housing, or workfare, they were given a lump sum, mortgages, and loans that allowed them to live where they chose and to consume the goods they preferred. As Baruch Kimmerling has suggested, it may have been “precisely their instrumental adaptation that contributed to the ‘Russians’ ability for cultural and emotional self-differentiation in Israel,”⁴ because only with these conditions could a group dedicate its resources to developing a distinctive culture. Unlike the other cultural groups that I explore in this book, Russian speakers in Israel made a point of defining themselves as Russian or Jewish,⁵ and still do so, displaying no spontaneous patriotism toward the state or military service.⁶

The Russian speakers’ culture—education, politics, media, literature, and theater—is flourishing in Israel. A survey conducted in 2002 among former citizens of the FSU elicited that over 95% of the immigrants thought it important for their children and grandchildren to know the Russian language and culture.

The immigration from the FSU created a demographic change in Israel, which influenced the fragile balance of the various ethnic and cultural groups. Social mobility was taking hold at the time among the Mizrahim, who had achieved a kind of “demographic majority.” They were threatened by the new immigrants who were mostly Ashkenazim, with higher education and strong employment potential. Concerns grew that the national resources, some of which should have targeted improving the conditions of the Mizrahim and running affirmative action programs for their benefit, would be channeled to absorbing the newcomers. Arab citizens were threatened by the immigrants’ political-electoral power. These immigrants also posed a threat to the religious establishments, since most of the new arrivals were secular, and many had non-Jewish spouses. Moreover, the immigrants’ tendency to hold right-wing-nationalist opinions was deemed a threat by sections of the Ashkenazi elite and the left-tending secular Ashkenazi middle class. And lastly, the fact that Russian community in Israel had integrated better than any other previous group of immigrants while still maintaining its inner “Russian” unity, and without adopting an absolute patriotism, fueled the anger towards them among many groups in Israel.

Dual Colonialism, or: Who’s in Charge of the Cultural Ghetto?

Most of the state’s inhabitants, myself included, do not regard the dominant Hebrew culture as their representative culture and do not wish to operate within its orbit or to be amongst its active consumers. Most of my liberal Israeli friends belong to this very culture and have no wish to discuss this issue with me. They do agree that culture is a salad that should be made up of all the cultural parts in this country. Up to this point, I am in agreement with them. But they also see no wrong in having a cook prepare this salad

and they assign this role to themselves. From this point our paths part. As soon as the cook shows up, freedom comes to an end, and so does productive activity. As a rule, the debate is doomed at the point in which it reaches the cook's arrival. It should be remembered that the "ghetto" is always built on both sides of the surrounding wall—the isolationists use those who had been isolated.⁷

Anna Isakova was born in 1944 and immigrated to Israel in 1971. She is a physician, journalist, and an Israeli author writing in Russian. In the above quotation, Isakova comments on the patronizing attitude of Israeli culture towards its immigrants. Everyone apparently accepts the "salad" metaphor for describing the mixed cultures in Israel, but the identity of the cook is not part of this consensus. When the cook appears, as a representative of the hegemony, cultural freedom is blocked. This is the point in which she claims that what is called the "Russian ghetto" was not built solely by Russian-speaking immigrants—the ghetto wall has two sides, the Israeli and the Russian.

The tension between "the veterans" and "the immigrants" has been at work throughout the history of the State of Israel. The former are people born in Israel, the offspring of parents or grandparents who were once immigrants, usually with European origins, while the latter are recently arrived immigrants. The iconic "Lul" (Chicken Coop) TV sketch, filmed in the 1970s, presents a parody on the issue of immigration to Israel.⁸ Arik Einstein and Uri Zohar demonstrate how previous waves of immigrants receive the new ones with a chilly welcome. First we see the Arabs, watching the Russian immigrants of the late nineteenth century, and later the Russians—who now feel Israelis—looking at the new arrivals, and so on. Each time a ship comes into the port of Jaffa, the veterans observe the newcomers superciliously, imitating their accents and deriding their culture. The next time a ship docks with a cargo of new immigrants, the previous group—once foreign and different—is now part of the "veterans" scornfully watching the new arrivals.

This dynamic has been aptly summarized in the phrase "Israelis love aliyah but detest olim."⁹ It reflects a dynamic of paternalism and cultural colonialism. New immigrants are forced to fall in line with norms stipulated by the Zionist hegemony that creates a glass ceiling for them; they are marked as "the desert generation" and thus can never really become "one of us." In the Bible, the journey to the Land of Israel took 40 years, and two generations, based on God's imperative that only a new generation who has never known Egyptian slavery, would be able to build a new nation. The concept of "desert generation" applies here too, since only later generations who have gradually internalized the desired order can become an integral part of Israeli society.

This picture undergoes an interesting transformation when it comes to FSU immigrants. They refuse to play the preordained colonial game and reject the "desert generation" identity. Their rejection stands in contrast to their

ancestors, who left Russia and arrived in the Land of Israel in the late nineteenth century, 100 years before them. Those immigrants threw off their Russian identity in their dream of establishing a new local culture, while singing and dancing Hebraized Russian songs as well as designing and implementing the collective kibbutz model. The 1970s and the 1990s immigrants, who came to an established country, refused to leave behind them their cultural capital for the sake of local Israeli culture.

As we have seen, in the 1950s the relationship between veteran Israelis and the Mizrahim could be understood through the postcolonial structure between the West, represented by the veteran Israelis, and the East, whose representatives were migrants brought from Arabic-speaking countries. This form of relationship is also evidenced in the case of Ethiopian immigrants, as we shall see in the next chapter. However, the relationships between long-settled Israelis and recent immigrants from the FSU cannot be phrased along this East-West binary and the postcolonialist model, since Russia is not a typical East, and both Russia and Israel are not definitively West in this equation.

From the point of view of Western Europe, Russia was never perceived as Western, yet it also had a glorious tradition of colonialism. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire assumed control of Siberia and Asia, as far as the Far East. Exploring the ties between Russian literature and colonialism, Ewa Thompson stresses the abnormality of Russians in the colonial context. The imperialist outlook generally addresses the colonies as far-away regions, often across an ocean. In the Russian case, the colonies were attached to Russian soil, and the transition from Russia to the Soviet Union entailed geographical expansion, wars, and occupations. This form differed from prominent Western colonies, such as the British or French colonies. Because of Russia's proximity to its colonies, the buffer-zone between them was unclear, as were relations between center and periphery.¹⁰ The Russian case, Thompson maintains, is evidence that we cannot understand the whole history via the West's hegemonic control of the rest of the world:

The world has never been divided into two neat compartments, West and non-West. The bilateral vision disregards the fact that Russia engaged in a massive effort to manufacture a history, one that stands in partial opposition to the history created by the West on the one hand, and on the other to the history sustained by the efforts of those whom Russia had colonized. Entering Western discourse through a side door, as it were, reinforced Russia's invisibility as a third voice. Russia has sometimes been perceived as a "country cousin of the West."¹¹

Bearing that lack of clarity in mind, it is interesting to examine the place of the Jews in the Soviet Union. While Jews shared the Russian cultural consciousness, they were also victims of antisemitism; and thus doubts were always cast on their Westernness, as Maria Yelenevskaya and Larissa Remennick have argued.¹² To defend themselves and prove their loyalty, they excelled principally in the

intellectual sphere, and many of them were active members of the intelligentsia, as Elazar Leshem indicates:

In the early days of the Soviet regime they had extremely strong representation in the shaping the Soviet political culture . . . the Jewish migrants . . . had suffered persecution by the Soviet regime, but at the same time had contributed disproportionately to the formation of Russian art, culture, and science.¹³

Since they were involved in forming the Russian intelligentsia, the Russian Jews became vigorous ambassadors of the imperialist-colonialist culture. Even when they left for Israel, those attitudes persisted among them. Once in Israel, members of the intelligentsia were amazed to discern the Mizrahi and Arab foundations of Israeli culture, and developed a patronizing, colonialist approach to them.

Israeli culture and society, strongly rooted in Russian and Eastern European cultures, aspired to become an island of Westernness. As soon as the state was founded, the Jews assumed the colonizing role towards the indigenous Palestinians, and later towards the Mizrahim and Ethiopians. Like Russia, Israel is also a cross-road between East and West. Thus, while its citizens often believe that Israel has achieved its goal of becoming “a Western island in the Middle East,” many Russian immigrants, who expected to find a Western state, perceive Israeli culture in general and its Mizrahi aspects in particular as proof of failure. In their role of shoring up Westernness, they believe they should combat that failure, as Larissa Remennick comments, “Many ‘Russians’ . . . believe that their cultural heritage, . . . associate[d] with the European tradition, is superior to that of their Israeli peers, whom they often describe as ‘wild,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘violent,’ and ‘Asian.’”¹⁴ Dmitry Shumsky argues that the “intellectual immigrant positions himself as part of the Europe-centric foundations of Israeli society, and sees himself as helping Israel to overcome Mizrahiness.”¹⁵ Immigrants from the FSU may feel superior to Israeli society to the extent that they adopt a colonial role and perceive themselves as rescuing it from the East. However, as immigrants who are not a part of the hegemonic cultural core, they are also subject to oppression and counter-colonialism.

Since the FSU immigrants came from a Western nation, and share this culture with Israel’s elite class, their absorption process was extremely different from that of the Mizrahim. Isakova maintains that the immigrants themselves believed that “the Jewish state’s Russian roots could provide a basis for integrating Russian immigrants into Israeli culture.”¹⁶ It turned out, however, that preserving the Russian culture set off harsh criticism—within the establishment and outside it. The core of this criticism lay in the choice to retain the Russian language, as Remennick indicates:

The “Hebrew vs. Russian” dilemma has yet another interface with the core values concept. In the Israeli context, languages have ideological baggage that stretches far beyond their instrumental role as tools of communication

and social adjustment. In a society built almost entirely of immigrants from all over the world, the universal use of Hebrew dignifies Israeli statehood and is an important icon of national consciousness.¹⁷

Language is the border demarcating the Israeli pluralistic outlook: as long as immigrants accept Hebrew, they can enter the gates of Israeli culture. Rinat Golan and Malka Muchnik believe that one of the differences between pluralism and multiculturalism lies in this sphere. For pluralists, the cultural space is composed of the major language, with other languages recognized alongside it. Only the multicultural model allows bilingualism and encourages use of both languages in tandem.¹⁸ Israeli society cannot pass this multiculturalist test. So while for the immigrants, as Ben-Raphael states, “Israeli language and culture are still seen as of lesser prestige than the Russian language and culture, which remain foci of commitment and ethnic solidarity,”¹⁹ for veteran Israelis, clinging to the Russian mother tongue implies opting for disengagement.

Israel and the Russian Diaspora

Recent research among newly formed ethnic minorities in Europe and North America has shown that the pace of their integration is largely determined by the social capital they are endowed with, most importantly education, professional experience, and proficiency in the host language. These personal resources allow recent migrants to develop bicultural-bilingual identity—and lifestyle over time, combining features of their home and host cultures. The pace of integration is also determined by the attitudes and policies towards immigrants adopted by the host society; these can result in consensus, tension, or conflict. In response to exclusion and discrimination, immigrant communities may develop *reactive ethnicity* syndrome. That is, refusing to integrate even at the cost of marginalization and lost opportunities for upward social mobility.²⁰

In the 1970s and later, in the 1990s, thousands of Russian-speaking authors, artists, sculptors, and musicians came to Israel, and started engaging in a wide range of cultural activities. In finding their cultural-artistic way they could, according to Isakova, follow two possible trajectories.²¹ One is what she terms “the Jewish stream,” assimilating smoothly into Israeli life and ultimately seeking full integration. The other is “the Russian stream,” becoming part of the Russian diaspora. The second stream assumes that Russian culture can live and thrive outside Russia. Both streams function in parallel, nourished by demographic and historical changes.

While I agree with Isakova’s definition of the two streams, I believe that they do not provide separate trajectories, but are in fact intertwined. Immigrants who preserve Russian culture and aspire to become part of the Russian diaspora also nurture expectations, hope, and desire to be accepted into Israeli society and culture, and vice versa.

Under Soviet rule in the 1970s, when Judaism was an underground practice and the Iron Curtain precluded free communication between those who left the USSR and those who remained, immigrating to Israel implied a total severance from Russian culture. By the 1990s, things changed radically: immigrants could foster strong continuing ties with Russia and with other immigrants, many of whom had departed the Soviet Union for the United States, Germany, and other countries.

Discussing the term *transnationalism*, Remennick contends that historical research studies reveal that ethnic groups do not sever their ties with the country of origin. In the past, however, the ties were mostly limited to nostalgia, reminiscences, and culture. Today, people can live, in practice, between countries, with a free two-way flow of information. In these circumstances, there is no need to pledge loyalty to a single nation or culture. On the contrary, people choose to define themselves as transnationals, dividing their self-definition between their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities and the host country.²²

This is a particularly relevant for the Russian-Jewish diaspora. Over recent decades, Soviet and post-Soviet Jews have left en masse for several countries—a million to Israel, 600 thousand to the United States, 200 thousand to Germany, and others to Australia, the UK, and Sweden. An estimated 300 thousand to 1.2 million Jews remain in Russia. This mass exit of Russian Jews raises the question of belonging, as Olga Gershenson and David Shneer note. Post-Soviet Jews, who often maintain multiple passports, multiple homes, and multiple languages, make us rethink the meaning of homeland and exile: are they part of a traditional Jewish diaspora or a new Russian diaspora?

The Russian-Jewish diaspora both influences and is influenced by its living space, be it the United States or Israel. Yet the power of the Russian-Jewish culture binds together Russian Jews around the world, through an assortment of technological means and the internet, creating a virtual international community. A Russian-Israeli author can now publish his or her work, in his or her mother tongue, in Moscow, the US, Europe, or Australia. With the size of the Russian reading audience, authors can reach several million readers. And indeed, many Russian-Israeli authors gained success over the world and few have won major prizes in Russia. Numerous Russian-language periodicals are published in Israel, though their chief readership is in other countries. An international conference on Russian literature was held in Jerusalem in the late 1990s, attracting many Russian intellectuals, Jewish and non-Jewish, from across the world. The conference halls were packed with participants from abroad, as well as Russian-speaking Israelis.

The undeniable success of the Russian-speaking cultural group cannot diminish the sense of alienation prevailing between that community and veteran Israelis. As Isakova stated, the wall around the Russian ghetto grows higher on both sides, with Russians and Israelis taking turns in adding the bricks. Alienation leads to distance; and the wider Israeli society views Russian-Israeli literature writing as

marginal.²³ Only the Hebrew University has a division of Russian Studies, part of its Department of German, Russian, and East European Studies, and Israeli society does not acknowledge or admire Russian authors. The case of the poet Ilya Bokstein, described below, is but one example.

Ilya Bokstein was born in 1937 and immigrated to Israel in 1972. He was a mystic and an extremely idiosyncratic avant-garde poet, whom the Russian literati considered a genius. Until his death in 1999, he had lived alone for years in a public-housing apartment in Jaffa. After his death, relatives sought legal permission to enter his apartment and save his archive, aware of the many literary treasures he left behind, but after a few months of legal procedures they discovered that the Amidar housing authority had evacuated the apartment and thrown out its contents. His friends tried to retrieve the lost material, digging by hand through piles of garbage, but in vain. Efraim Bauch, chairperson of the Russian Authors Association, comments on this affair:

It is a tragic lack of understanding. For the thirty years I've lived here I have tried to publish, print, and hold conferences. Each group is uninterested in the other one, because of arrogance, ignorance, or lack of interest. My conclusion is that there is no way out. Our generation, who write in Russian, will disappear without leaving any impact. Perhaps there is some hope for the next generation.²⁴

Is Russian culture in Israel living on borrowed time? How can we describe its success and what is the nature of its relationships to both Russian and Israeli cultures?

Israeli Literature Written in Russian

Yuli (Julius Yehudah) Margolin was born in the town of Pinsk in 1900. His education was based on the Russian culture, while he later attended the University of Berlin, where he received a doctoral degree in philosophy. Margolin and his family lived in Poland for several years, where he met Zeev Jabotinsky, joined the Beitar movement, and became a Zionist. He came to Palestine in 1936, but while visiting Lodz in 1939 to arrange some affairs, the outbreak of the war forced him to flee East towards the Soviet Union. As a Western Jew with Polish citizenship and a Mandatory certificate, he was suspected of belonging to the opposition, and was arrested in his birthplace and sentenced to five years imprisonment in a labor camp. Later he was deported to "Square 48," one of the camps of the White Sea–Baltic Canal complex. In his book *Puteshestvie v stranu ze-ka* (Journey to the Ze-Ka Land/Journey to the Prisoners' Land) Margolin depicts his five year imprisonment. This is one of the first and the most horrifying books to describe the Soviet labor camps. "Ze-Ka" (or Z/K) is a Russian abbreviation for *Zaklyuchennyi*, or "inmates," a term which originally referred to prison laborers who built the White Sea Canal in the early 1930s. Later it referred to a region that does not

feature on any map, a dreadful frozen realm where prisoners became numbers, ghost, slaves of the Stalinist Empire.²⁵ A frail professor, Margolin somehow survived the appalling cold, the dangerous society of prisoners ready to slit throats for food, and the hard labor. On his release, following interminable bureaucratic efforts, he was able to return to Palestine. In less than a year, over the course of 1947, he wrote a book in which he aimed to capture a scrap of history, to commemorate in writing his comrades who did not survive, and to jolt ideological belief out of its passivity. His book is a literary achievement, as Maxim Shrayer notes in *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature*: “One of the principal factors that distinguished Margolin’s book was that its author achieved the double perspective of an outsider looking in and an insider looking out.”²⁶

Margolin’s broad cultural background, his Russian upbringing, and his Western education in Germany, compounded by his affinity to Zionism and his later life in Israel, represent the diverse cultural identity that typifies literary authors who write in Russian in Israel. Margolin—a Russian-born Jew with a German (Western European) education—lived in Tel Aviv where he wrote a Russian novel about the Gulag’s horrors. The book was written in Russian, and was partly translated to French in 1949. Many chapters were not translated, particularly the first ones describing the tribulations of the Jews in Eastern Poland. Three years later it was published in Russian, still in an abridged version, by the renowned Chekhov Publishing House in New York. It was only in 2012 that the entire book was published, in French. Excerpts were translated into Hebrew in 1976 and 1997, apparently due to the influx of Soviet Jews who were aware of the work’s importance.

In the late 1940s, when it was written, no one in Palestine paid attention to Margolin’s work, or was willing to criticize the socialist USSR, or to acknowledge the terrible fate of Jews trapped in the camps. Palestine’s literary milieu was still entrenched in the socialist novel genre and continued to glorify this type of Soviet literature.²⁷

Margolin felt isolated, and wrote in the book’s afterword that

this book was written despite the clear objections of those around me, and were it not for my personal experience and the persuasive powers I acquired over the five years in the camp, I might have submitted to the pervading hypnosis, resembling that of other collaborators with the conspiracy of silence.²⁸

Margolin worked in Israel as a freelance journalist writing in Russian for the foreign press—Russian, European, and American newspapers. He published several short stories in Russian concerning the history of the Jews, as well as *A Jewish Tale* (1960), a book focusing on the life of Yisrael (Srolik) Epstain, who was a Zionist activist. On his death in 1971, only a handful of people knew about his writings. His oeuvre was unknown and unattainable to Hebrew speakers, as it still is today. Margolin’s case shows that the phenomenon of authors living in Israel and writing in Russian has existed for decades. However, it intensified

with the waves of immigration from the FSU and today the Israeli-Russian literary community is flourishing.

Russian literature and culture had a major role in the formation of Israeli culture. The great founders of Hebrew literature in the twentieth century—Shaul Tchernichovsky, Avraham Shlonsky, Lea Goldberg, Natan Alterman, Alexander Penn, and Rachel Bluwstein—were raised on the Russian classics and influenced by Russian Modernism, though they eventually wrote in Hebrew. Both Shlonsky and Goldberg translated Russian literature into Hebrew. Alexander Penn initially wrote in Russian before making the transition to Hebrew. Zeev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionist Zionist movement, had published literary works in Russian. As stated above, the Zionist establishment deplored the idea of Israeli literature written in Russian, for ideological reasons, since it was expected that Jews who came from the diaspora should cede their culture and native language and start talking, reading, and writing solely in Hebrew. This linguistic utopia paradoxically entailed an admiration of the Soviet culture and of Stalin.²⁹

The starting point of our discussion of Israeli literature in Russian is the immigration wave of the 1970s. This wave constructed the infrastructure for Russian-language Israeli literature. As Israel Mahler ironically writes, while the Soviet authorities understood that “if not every opponent of the regime was a Zionist, in any event all Zionists oppose it. In the Soviets’ eyes, an individual who had the nerve to be born a Jew had already transgressed the accepted code.” The Russian authorities used the immigration of Jewish people to Israel to expel unwanted figures, many of whom belonged to the Russian intelligentsia.³⁰ In that era, it was understood in the USSR that art and literature were subject to disciplining. Critical texts secretly circulated through *samizdat* copies, and were occasionally smuggled to the West, though they were not always widely distributed and published. In Israel, the circumstances were different—everything could be published, assuming that funding was available.

The most important and perhaps the first example of using the opportunity to freely promote Russian literature in Israel is Venedikt Erofeev’s provocative and captivating text, *Moskva-Petushki*, which was published in Israel in 1973. Written in 1969 and circulated independently and secretly in the USSR, the book portrays, with a surrealistic and sarcastic style, a train journey taken by the protagonist, Venja, from Moscow to Petushki—a small town 125 kilometers from Moscow, where he intends to visit his lover and his son. On his journey he befriends other passengers, and their conversations and monologues expose the state’s bleak situation. Petushki is presented as a utopic place, yet the narrator does not arrive there but returns to Moscow, where he is stabbed by a gang and dies. Alcohol vapors pervade the text, which is written as an epic and describes the eternal odyssey of the drunken Russian soul.³¹ This acerbically critical work plays on aspirations for utopia, yet points at an apocalypse. The protagonist dies a pointless death, but remains as a narrator, and thus he is part of the narrative but stands beyond it too, since the story unfolds while the

narrator is in the world of the dead, aware of his fate. This simultaneously inward and outward perspective allows a reinterpretation of the text. It connects different historical and religious events that are channeled towards the apocalyptic ending, for example, the connection between Moscow and the fall of Rome. Furthermore, the protagonist's inability to reach his beloved and his son, and his inevitable return to Moscow, set off by a kind of spatial mix-up, describes a situation in which the end is unavoidable.³²

Obviously, this text could not have been published in the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s. But it was printed and published in Israel by *Ami*—a periodical founded in 1970 by Vladimir Fromer. Only three editions of *Ami* were ever printed, between 1970 and 1973, each one funded, as the editor vouchsafed,³³ by a different source. *Moskva-Petushki* was published in Russia only in 1989, and was translated into Hebrew by Nili Mirsky in 1994.

Ami, with its three editions and financial difficulties which led to its ultimate closure, was not an unusual phenomenon in 1970s Israel. Literature in Russian flourished in 1970s and the 1980s. In 1972 the periodical *Sion* (Zion) was founded, and *Vremia I my* (The Time and Us) was published in 1975.³⁴ In 1978, following disagreements over the nature of *Sion* regarding the Israelization process among Russian authors, the 22 periodical was launched. A group of intellectuals left *Sion* and set up a new periodical immediately after the publication of the twenty-first volume of *Sion*; thus, the breakaway periodical was entitled 22. 22 was the highest quality periodical in Israel and the worldwide Russian diaspora throughout the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Rafail Nudelman was the chief editor, replaced in 1994 by Alexander Voronel. Among the authors it published were Nina Voronel, Svetlana Shoenbrunn, Saveli Grinberg, Eli Luxenburg, Israel Shamir, and Mark Zaichik. 22 is still active today, yet most of its current subscribers are not located in Israel; 22 defines itself as the periodical of the “Jewish intelligentsia from the Soviet Union.”

In 1971, Irina Vrubel-Golubkina (born 1943) and her partner Mikhail Grobman (born 1939) arrived in Israel. The couple were part of Moscow's literary and artistic avant-garde circles. Grobman, an internationally renowned artist, was at first warmly welcomed in Israel and his works were shown at the Tel Aviv Museum.³⁵ However, he later found himself on the margins of the artistic establishment in Israel, having chosen not to comply with the trends of Israeli art. His literary works—poetry books and a diary—were published in Israel and Moscow. The Hebrew translations of his works—*Be-erets sh'horah sh'horah* (In a Black, Black Country, 2005), and his diary *Leviathan* (2009)—provide a glimpse into the life of an artist who chose not to conform to a closed, totalitarian society.

After arriving in Israel, Grobman and Vrubel-Golubkina found that their avant-garde outlook was not represented in Israeli literature and culture, and that Hebrew literature, as well as the culture in general, were still typified by an outdated view of Russian literature. Vrubel-Golubkina recalls:

One of the regrettable paradoxes of the Israeli culture is the fact that Hebrew literature and art were always detached from the Russian avant-garde culture of the twentieth century. With its many “Russian” proponents, Hebrew literature never advanced beyond the nineteenth-century Russian classics, and halted—at the latest—at the Russian symbolism of the early twentieth century. It ignored all the achievements of the literary and artistic Russian avant-garde or perhaps had never heard of them.

This anachronistic admiration was channeled to the stream of Soviet socialist realism: in distant Russia, it served the goals of the party and the regime, while in Palestine it was displayed as the peak of modern world literature. Luckily enough, the young generation of Israeli authors did not swallow the bait, and repudiated that wretched literature, preferring to look westwards. Still, no one in Israel was willing to declare outright “You’ve been fooled! There is an authentic Russian literature whose accomplishments are equal to the West’s.”³⁶

In the 1970s, Grobman and Vrubel-Golubkina were almost the sole representatives of the avant-garde in Israel, but in the late 1980s, the second wave of immigration brought a change with it. It made it possible to publish first a weekly literary magazine *Znak vremeni* (Sign of Time), and then, in 1993, at a time of transition in Russia, when the old press had collapsed but a new one had not yet coalesced, to publish *Zerkalo* (Mirror). As in the case of *Ami*, the shortfall of relevant literary platforms again resulted in the reinforcement of Russian literary circles in Israel. The cultural vacuum that had been created, as Vrubel-Golubkina maintains, “signified the moment of liberation, after which everyone could choose the literary trajectory that suited them.”³⁷ Since it is wholly in Russian, few Israelis are familiar with it, but in the 2000s two anthologies of translated texts from *Zerkalo* were published, one in 2001, the other in 2005.

Several Israeli authors writing in Russian were members of *Zerkalo*’s editorial board in the 1990s, including Alexander Barash (born 1960, immigrated 1989), Alexander Goldstein (1957/1990), and Dmitry Slivniak (1956/1988—now living in Canada). Today, however, most of the board-members are not Israelis. Currently *Zerkalo* does not depend only on its readership in Israel.³⁸ Nonetheless, questions about the nature of Israeli literature in Russian are discussed in the journal.

Alexander Goldstein, who was a member of the journal’s editorial board, is a much admired author who published four books in Russian, from 1997 to 2006. His first book *Farewell to Narcissus* won both the Russian Little Booker and the Anti-Booker prizes (1997). He was posthumously awarded the Andrey Bely Prize—one of Russian literature’s most prestigious awards—for his last book *Tranquil Fields* (2006). Goldstein addressed the question of the identity of the Israeli author writing in Russian:

Who are we anyway? We are not Israeli authors, but not really Russian authors. It is not clear who we are. We illustrate some sort of other sphere of

Russian literature. We act in relation to local writers and authors who live in other diasporas, far from the establishment's positions—marginal people with an interesting language. We have a social role, and it is strange that the establishment does not react to it.³⁹

Goldstein originally thought that Russian literature written in Israel could be considered capable of serving as “an organic Israeli product, with all the birthmarks of our life here.” Later, though, he spoke very differently and repudiated the Israeli space. “My writing has two poles” he said, “it targets a Russian-Israeli minority, as well as Russian literary circles for whom that minority's output is important. I am part of international Russian literature, which has a presence in New York, and in Prague too, and the place where it is written is irrelevant.”⁴⁰

Writing in Israel in the Russian language creates an opposition between the desire to write local literature on the one hand, and to address the Russian diaspora on the other. As Grobman phrases it: “there is an objective reality: the capital city of everyone writing in Russian is Moscow, the same way that writers in Hebrew have Tel Aviv as their capital city, and the capital of authors writing in French is Paris.”⁴¹ So how can we bridge between these two positions?

For the FSU immigrants, the biblical story of the Exodus is embodied in Israel's heat and its desert climate.⁴² Yet, the long journey and the climate also indicate that Israel is in fact located in the Middle East, between Arabs and Mizrahim. Goldstein observes the Mizrahi space around him with restraint, as the following excerpts, from *Hebetav shel ha-zivug ha-ruhani* (The Aspects of the Spiritual Pairing), shows:

The space around me is bourgeois, but I myself am not well-off, and for accuracy's sake I must admit that . . . I sacrifice two-thirds of my salary to live in the city center, an arm's-length from the salty Mediterranean with its magnesium color. My landlords, two stingy reptiles, have lived in the same stairwell since the British Mandate. His legs, afflicted with swollen veins, have betrayed him and he slouches for days in a wheelchair facing the TV. His wife can still walk. The God of the Jews gave them a retarded son, a fat fellow with bulging eyes, who's learnt how to bang on everything—hard surfaces, and surfaces that respond with a hollow echo—and screams his heart out for the rest of the day. At first it made me shiver, then I got used to it.

. . . In their black reservations that loathe enlightenment, Jews remain Jews, in Bnei Brak's foul-smelling rabbit warrens, in Mea She'arim's nature reserves, where a fanatic cult with an Aramaic name lurks in echoing cisterns—a nest of hate for the state which dared to rise before the Messiah's coming. Cloying hot madness.

. . . When I talk about Jews, I'm referring to the Ashkenazim, of course. In their distant past they were Mizrahim. After two thousand years in Europe and the West they returned to Israel, to Canaan's bosom, and were knocked

senseless by the markets' hustle, the Levantine torpor, and the sun . . . Instead of sweet and sour meat, stuffed fish, chopped salty herring with egg and onion, and honey cakes, the quick-to-adapt Ashkenazi native-born majority now prefer the Maghreb's pita-bread packed with satisfying legumes. The collaborators adore football, buy beer en masse, warble arabesques in the melodies of rabble from Aden and Rabat, and love women's asses everywhere.

. . . The idiotic backgammon checkers roam freely across the noble chessboard (the Semitic rabble willingly accepted the downfall of chess-lovers, whose Jewish sagacity was perfection itself, before the sons of Japheth). Philosophy was ridiculed, poetry grew moldy with disuse, and apart from a handful of Russians and some foreign nomads, no one read on the bus or the beach. Palm-trees, not pages, rustled in the breeze . . . and that evil wind extinguished western enlightenment . . . The Orient has enfolded us in shrouds. The last rays of European light have left the Ashkenazi soul.⁴³

Goldstein's ironic lines present an extremely anti-Mizrahi and anti-Arab outlook, yet he also blames the Ashkenazim for forgetting their origins and subjecting themselves to an inferior culture. Goldstein is not alone. Worth mentioning here is Maya Kaganskaya's (1939–2011, immigrated to Israel 1976) straightforward revulsion from the East and the Arab identity. A philologist, publicist, and journalist, she had a column in the *Hadashot* newspaper and published numerous essays on literature. She co-authored with her husband, Zeev Bar-Sela, a book on Bulgakov, *Master Gambs and Margarita* (Tel Aviv, 1984), and later published a book of essays *Dimdumei elim* (Gods' Twilight, 2005). In an interview with Shlomit Len, she says:

I hate the East. Everyone has a conception of his own death, his hell. For the protagonist of 1984, it was rats. So for me, the rat, my hell and death, turned against me, is the East, the Muslim world. To my immense regret, I wasted long periods in hospitals. I was there for months, in quite a bad condition, but what made a terrible impression on me was the entire families, clans, of Arabs and of our Mizrahim too, who came in, sat around from morning to night, ate meals there, while the kids ran around—at least they did not grill shishlik there. The Mizrahim are a very archaic people, and in all archaic tribes, the central events are birth, marriages, and deaths . . . Culture starts beyond nature—literature, metaphysics, philosophy, music. As soon as someone feels that what he is given is not enough, he wants to build an alternative world. That's the Western man. When Israel becomes more and more part of the East, it is the end of the world for me, the end of our dream. Israeli culture is starting to be pulled in that direction; it is enough to see the number of Mizrahi programs on the television and radio. It is awful . . . I do not believe in a culture without hierarchies. I will never accept that Mizrahi music and Mozart are one and the same.⁴⁴

“We left Russia and did not want to return to it,” asserts Kaganskaya, “not in our souls, not in our imagination, not intellectually, but today we are going back there in spirit.” In the life in the USSR, where free movement and entertainment were restricted, “literature satisfied all our needs—political life, social life, philosophy, freedom, everything, because Russia was never a democratic society and literature was the most liberated phenomenon in the entire Russian culture.”⁴⁵ Compared to the Russian literature and culture, Israel appears to be a remote province in the middle of a vast empire, while its increasing affinity to the Mizrahi identity leads it towards decline and death. Kaganskaya criticizes the multicultural position; she states that it is “a totalitarian ideology, because it prohibits you from speaking the truth: there is a preferable culture, there is a cultural hierarchy. West versus East.”

Kaganskaya seeks to follow what she considers the cultural hierarchy. Goldstein follows the same line of thought: he believes that literature written in Israel should engage with the Israeli experience. But, in a manifesto entitled “O literaturnoi emigratzii” (On Literary Emigration), he proposes the concept of “imperialist literature.” According to Goldstein “imperialist literature” should aspire to present the diverse nature of the various locations of the literary diaspora, among them the Israeli site;⁴⁶ however, at the same time, he projects a set of values and a very specific perception of the Russian culture upon the local spaces. In *Farewell to Narcissus* he explains how this literature will manifest:

the Russian literary Jerusalem-Tel Aviv will become a new noble gem in the necklace of Mediterranean capitals. And someone cultivating Russian words in Israel will find brethren among those who ply the same trade in Casablanca or in Tangier, in Istanbul, in Tripoli, in Tunis, in Algeria, in Marseilles . . . It will be an amazing multilingual community, an unheard-of guild of kindred minds . . . The city of the sad sun, the forever sunset in whose rays the tired desire resides, and the air trembles with barren stoical philology, and there are too many non-encounters for anybody to believe in lasting love . . . An author who sees himself first and foremost as a writer of the Mediterranean may be able to preserve that ancient passion.⁴⁷

Goldstein’s romantic portrait is wholly colored with paternalistic and imperialist tones. His conception of the literature of the place, and the glorification of the Middle Eastern space, is tightly woven into the cultured Russian language that has an imperialist mission.

An analysis of the beliefs of Alexander Barash, who was also a member of *Zarkalo*’s editorial board, provokes a similar conflict. Barash published four poetry anthologies in Russian: the first two were published in Israel during the 1990s, and the other two published in Russia. He also translated Hebrew poetry into Russian and was awarded a prize by the Tel Aviv Foundation for Culture and Art. Barash initially intended to write poetry that, like Goldstein’s, “artistically comes to terms, by means of the Russian language, with the Mediterranean

landscape (geographic, historical, and spiritual).⁴⁸ He presented his credo on a Russian-Israeli literature website, called *Ostrakon*—a Greek word which means a fragment of clay pottery. Later, however, he reshaped his beliefs, and in a lecture in 1998 he presented a completely different position that disconnects literature from its local space. He argued that

In the act of immigrating, we divorced ourselves from Russian literature's collective, we walked into the desert of the holy city, in the verbal and symbolic sense, but without severing our connection with the "outside world" of the Russian culture . . . I propose calling this new possibility "international Russian literature." Language is the only criterion that distinguishes it. In the same way that French, English, Spanish, and German literatures have no geographical or literary boundaries, so too Russian literature—no less imperial in its nature and scope—can abandon the artificial form to which it was subjected for historical reasons, and start to traverse the entire globe . . . international Russian literature can easily create itself alone . . . calmly, quietly, and democratically, in the absence of the motherland.

. . . I have spoken about the existing advantages for Russian-Israeli authors. The fact that today these are the circumstances, that—after Moscow—Israel has no competitors in the quality and quantity of its cultural circles . . . For Israel, Russian has the opportunity to be at the center of international Russian literature.⁴⁹

Barash's and Goldstein's texts indicate change in the views of Israeli Russian literature. At first they declared their willingness to write local literature, yet later they turned towards Russian culture and literature. Barash's late position promotes an ideal of a literature without territory. Thus, it appears that for both Goldstein and Barash—and perhaps for others as well—the drive for differentiation and the wish to connect to Russian literature outside Israel did not come to light in their early works, but only later, after they realized that cultural integration in Israel was harder than they could have ever predicted. So, it is not impossible that the transition from writing Mediterranean literature, with its local point of reference, to writing Russian literature, with its global point of reference, was tied to their migration experience. Conversations with authors writing in Russian disclose that Israel did not give them the appropriate welcome: they encountered unwillingness to translate texts from Russian to Hebrew, and when their works were translated, the translations seemed inadequate. Thus, some authors abandoned the idea of inclusion into Israeli culture and sought a different audience, outside Israel's borders.

Dmitri Slivniak, who is also a member of the editorial board of *Zerkalo*, has a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies (awarded by Tel Aviv University in 2001), and now lives in Canada. Slivniak proposes granting autonomy to the Russian culture: "The world's most developed countries have already coalesced into post-national communities, which are multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-cultural . . . the state of Israel as well is now becoming that kind of community."⁵⁰

Slivniak asserts that the Russians should not be treated as “another wave of immigration,” but a cultural ethnic minority, resembling the Arabs or the Ultra-Orthodox: a minority that merits a cultural autonomy, which would allow them to have a separate schooling system, from nursery school to university. Slivniak’s manifesto seems to accept the “privilege” reserved to Arabs and Ultra-Orthodox, with its unavoidable outcome—being located on society’s outskirts: only with that autonomy, can they keep, nurture, and develop their culture over generations.

Vrubel-Golubkina, the editor of the *Zarkalo* periodical, does not deny the continuing need for Russia, “where our colleagues are, where it is possible to conduct a dialogue, where we are appreciated for our true value”; but she disagrees with Slivniak’s model, maintaining that the Russian-speaking community is overly heterogeneous in cultural terms.⁵¹

In tandem with their quest for readers outside Israel, the community of Russian authors in Israel understood the importance of being part of Israeli literary frameworks with a formal representative that takes care of their interests. At first they were represented by the Russian Department of the General Union of Writers in Israel, headed for years by Efrem (Efraim) Bauch (born 1934, immigrated to Israel 1977). With the immigration in the 1990s and the formation of a critical mass of writers in Russian, problems cropped up with this representation and they searched for alternative options. Members of the “Jerusalem Literary Club”—founded in 1991, and including Alexander Barash, Michael Weisskopf, Gali-Dana Singer, Maya Kaganskaya, Eli Luxenburg, and Mikhail Gendelev (who was elected as head of the club)—felt the need to join forces, after despairing from the way in which the Russian Department represented them. The club’s goals encompassed inclusion within Israeli culture; direct collaboration between authors writing in Russian and Hebrew; wide-ranging and diverse support of new immigrants in their cultural absorption in Israel; stimulus and encouragement for translation initiatives, in both directions; and the coordination of contacts in the publishing sphere; all with the desired result of consolidating the social status of authors writing in Russian in Israel. The club’s manifesto states that the goal of the “Jerusalem Literary Club” is to found a bilingual periodical and a club bulletin. Only three editions of the bulletin were published, in a limited format. Gali-Dana Singer and Nekoda Singer eventually picked up the gauntlet and launched the periodical and continued the battle for bilingual literary endeavors.⁵²

Gali-Dana Singer (born 1962) is one of the leading poets writing in Russian in Israel. She has written six poetry books in Russian, two of which were published in Israel, and the others in Russia. A volume of her selected poems was published by NLO, the prestigious publishing house. Singer writes in three languages: Russian, Hebrew, and English. Three of her poetry books were published in Hebrew: *Lahshov: nahar* (To Think: A River, 2000), which contains translations of her poems originally written in Russian; *Shirim ivrim* (Blind Poems, 2002); and *Tsoref mikrim* (The Coiner of Incidents, 2006). Gali-Dana is also a

prolific translator from English and Hebrew into Russian, as well as from Russian and English into Hebrew. She has translated poems by Leah Goldberg, Yona Wallach, Dan Pagis, Hezi Leskly, Israel Eliraz, and Meir Wieseltier, and has won literary prizes such as the Prime Minister's Prize for 2004.

Nekoda Singer (born 1960), her partner, is a writer and an artist. His first novel, *Tickets at the Box Office*, was published by Gesharim (Jerusalem-Moscow, 2006); his second book, *Drafts of Jerusalem*, was published by Russkyi Gulliver (Moscow, 2013). He translates Israeli prose into Russian, among them David Grossman's *Someone to Run With* (Moscow, 2004), and writes essays on the situation of Israeli literature written in Russian.

Gali-Dana and Nekoda immigrated to Israel in 1988, and in 1995 founded the periodical *Dvoetochie* (Colon), together with Israel Mahler (Azriel Shonberg). Six editions in Russian appeared over the first two years. In 1999 Gali-Dana Singer and Peter Kriksonov edited a bilingual anthology, *Siah meshorerim* (Poets' Talk), with Hebrew translations of poetry written in Russian, in Israel. The anthology represented the first step on the path towards crystallizing a perspective on bilingual writing. This was the idea behind a new edition of *Dvoetochie*. This time Nekoda and Gali-Dana Singer decided not to publish it in Russian but to propose a bilingual periodical *Dvoetochie: Nekudotaim* (Colon, 2001) containing pages in Hebrew and pages in Russian. Six editions were published between 2001 and 2004, and now it appears in the format of an online periodical in Russian that publishes an annual edition in Hebrew. *Nekudotaim* strives to break down the definitions of "Russian" and "Hebrew" literature; both Hebrew and Russian editions contain translation and original writing. However, the texts in Hebrew and Russian are not identical, that is, the Hebrew editions do not feature translations of texts that were published in Russian in the same volume.

Nekudotaim—unlike *Zerkalo*—is a periodical that targets an Israeli audience which reads Russian, Hebrew, or both languages. One of its aims is to bring about mutual recognition of these literatures. In the first Hebrew edition of *Nekudotaim*, the editors defined the significance of the periodical's title:

Let's try to see in a colon—a point, and better—two points, one above the other. One of them could be a reflection of the other, but curious uncertainty will always remain—which one? Together they will produce a two-way mirror between the written from right to left and from left to right, like parts of a sentence that are almost independent, and with the special care will reflect precisely this very "almost," and doing so will imply to you, dear readers, where is the body (of the text), and where is the reflection, where is the source and where is the translation, rewriting, interpretation or perhaps another form of commentary or confiscation of assets.⁵³

The connection between the two cultures, grounded on translation from one language to the other, and on juxtaposing the languages and literatures alongside each other, is strongly opposed to the imperialist perspective that we

saw in Goldstein, who was one of *Zerkalo's* editors. *Zerkalo* attempted to provide a voice for avant-garde Russian literature, while *Nekudataim* consciously does not choose an aesthetic position. Gali-Dana Singer claims that “a so-called local school is a political entity, with which it is easier to move onwards and to carry some kind of shared banner, in order to end up in disagreement, clashes, and a split.” She maintains that *Nekudataim* deliberately does not have a specific aesthetic conception but is in fact multicultural:

When I arrived in 1988, the idea of Israeli poetry written in Russian was justified by the existence of what seemed to be an unbreakable wall. This wall was constructed by the Soviet Union's policy, it separated my former life and the Promised Land. Back then, the idea of Israeli literature in the Russian language, as shaped by Maya Kaganskaya, Michael Weisskopf, and Mikhail Gendelev, seemed—at least—to be a natural reaction to a given political situation . . . Then in the 1990s, when I started editing *Dvoetochie*, the mission was not to present another stream or federation of any kind, but the polyphony.⁵⁴

Nekudataim enjoys artistic freedom in its ability to present writers with varied poetics and translations of texts of a different nature. “Both cultures are not that homogeneous,” writes Gali-Dana Singer.⁵⁵ She also maintains that the Jewish experience is by definition multicultural and multi-lingual “as it was in biblical times, the Middle Ages, and in the modern era, apart from the Soviet dictatorship's sad efforts and the Zionist battle to achieve the victory of the Hebrew language.”⁵⁶

The periodical's lack of a clear aesthetic position does not imply that it has no direction. Vladislav Polyakovsky attests that this is the first example of a periodical that successfully opens a dialogue between the two cultures, between contemporary Russian literature in Russia and in Israel, and contemporary Hebrew literature. This is reflected in the survey performed in the periodical's seventh issue, when authors were asked “which authors that became important to you did you first encounter in *Dvoetochie*?” Among the names suggested is a list of Israeli authors writing Hebrew who, thanks to the periodical, became accessible to the audience of readers and writers of Russian—including Hezi Leskly, David Avidan, Michal Govrin, and Ibn Gabirol.⁵⁷

The multicultural manifesto that guides *Nekudataim* is part of the reality of life for many Israeli authors writing in Russian. They are what Ilya Kabakov calls “culturally displaced persons”:

I'm a migrant, educated and formed in the territory of a specific culture, and for quite some time, six years, I've been living in a different territory. My cultural past clashes with the cultural present. After I learnt to swim in a certain lake, I'm trying mightily to keep afloat in a foreign ocean, paddling wildly and swallowing water. Today there are dozens if not hundreds like me, floating for a while, then plunging into the depths again.

. . . I was ready to assume the role of a storyteller who narrates the tales of the terrible country and misery I came from, like a new Homer—in fact, I really wanted it . . . since childhood there was nothing I loved more than telling others what was happening in my home, instead of trying to change things . . . The question is, how to tell that narrative so people will listen? The inherent terror and hopelessness of that situation stems from the fact that every word of yours—a word in the literal sense, or in terms of a visual art—exists in the specific context of your place of origin. In the new place, no one knows that context, and your words are not heard! Even worse, laziness and condescension affect you—all your paintings, drawings, objects, or texts are immediately interpreted and translated in the local context, making your work banal and passé—it shrivels up and dies.⁵⁸

Gali-Dana Singer arms herself against this danger with bilingual and multilingual authorship. In her essay “Ivrit be-shtika” (Hebrew in Silence),⁵⁹ Singer recalls how she realized that it would be almost impossible to translate her works into Hebrew and still retain the complexity of the Russian consciousness: “that’s why I set myself a rule to express only things that could be expressed in my new language, and that freely came to my mind.” And, in an ironic poetical version:

I moved houses
 rented a furnished Hebrew
 a two-seat sofa bed
 a three-dimensional table
 and half a chair
 because
 suddenly I forgot its other half

The temporariness that the speaker senses in the new language rises to the surface in this poem. It’s a rented language, like a rented house, a temporary tongue that gathers bits and pieces from here and there, incomplete. There are attempts to make it a whole language, with the two-seat sofa bed and the three-dimensional view, but then a partial chair appears—reflecting the broken experience of the new language.

Gali-Dana Singer never planned to write in Hebrew. But at the moment she explained why she had no intention of doing so, exactly when she had gotten rid of the ideological trends, she was compelled to try it. First through translating: she ran translation workshops together with Peter Kriksonov. These workshops provided the foundations for publishing her *Siah meshorerim* that contains works written in Russian and translated into Hebrew. Among others, she translated her own poems, and her new direction began during that process. Once she began translating them, she found herself modifying them: “The urge for accuracy can kill a poem; you have to actually rewrite it in order to revive it. And when I realized that, I had to write directly in Hebrew.”⁶⁰ Singer does not judge

authors for their transition or non-transition to Hebrew, though she notes how important it is to open up to a new linguistic experience: “the moment a culture closes itself off, and tries to purify itself from any foreign influence, it no longer interests me.”⁶¹

Nekudatim and *Zerkalo* are not the only periodicals that have published literature in Russian in Israel. *Solnechnoe Spletenie* (Solar Plexus) was another journal where Russian writers in Israel published their works. It was founded in 1997 and appeared until 2003. Its editor was Mikhail Weisskopf, a professor of literature at the Hebrew University. He published a book in English, exploring the image of the Jew in Russian literature in the Romantic era (*The Veil of Moses: Jewish Themes in Russian Literature of the Romantic Era*, published by *Studia Judaeslavica*), and a few important books on Russian literature in Russian. Weisskopf was assisted by Evgeny Soshkin (born 1974, immigrated 1990), a poet and scholar. Weisskopf published two books of poetry in Russian, one in Jerusalem in 2000 and the other published by Gesharim (Jerusalem-Moscow, 2011). Soshkin has an MA in comparative literature from the Hebrew University, where he is currently completing his PhD on Osip Mandelstam. He wrote an introduction to the Harvard catalogue of Russian-Israeli literature and published articles about the poetry of Gendelev, Gorenko, Singer, and others. Among the authors whose works were published in *Solar Plexus* are Gendelev, Soshkin, Gorenko, Tarasov, Gali-Dana Singer and Nekoda Singer, Ptach (Shmugliakov), Makarova, Weisskopf, and Elena Tolstaya. An anthology of translations from the journal into Hebrew was published in 2001.⁶²

Two years after the launch of *Solar Plexus*, one of Israel’s most dynamic Russian-language journals was founded—*Ierusalimskiy Zhurnal* (Jerusalem Magazine), edited by Igor Byalsky. It publishes prose and poetry by Russian-Israeli and international writers, as well as translations from modern Hebrew and biblical literature. Many of the central Russian-Israeli writers were published there, such as Dina Rubina, Grigory Kanovich, Svetlana Shenbrunn, Eli Luxemburg, David Markish, Efraim Bauch, and Igor Guberman. In general, though, the journal is considered conservative, and less aesthetic and cultivated than others; some contend that not all the materials it publishes are high-quality. It is still published and has a quite broad circulation.

The bi-monthly journal *Nota Bene* was published from 2003 to 2007, under the editorship of Eduard Kuznetzov, assisted by Rafail Nudelman. It attempted to present new and high-quality texts by authors familiar to the Russian-reading public. The editors chose eclectic texts—works by renowned Israelis writing in Russian, translations of literature by well-known Israelis, obscure authors, and essays by Russian, German, and American critics.⁶³

Besides the periodicals, there are also websites and international platforms with a significant presence of Russian-Israeli literature. Among them is *booknik.ru*—a Russian-language site focusing on Jewish literature and culture, edited by Sergey Kuznetsov. It is a Russian-language portal that engages with

Jewish life and thought, the history of the Jewish people and Israel, religion, philosophy, and society, as well as Jewish art and literature. Every day close to 6,000 people access the highly popular site. The list of Israeli authors and poets regularly featured on the site is too long to give here; among them are Anna Isakova, Mikchail Korol, Gali-Dana Singer, Nekoda Singer, Dmitry Deitch, Reuven Kip-erwasser, Shlomo Krol, and Elena Rimon.⁶⁴

A Sip of the Russian-Israeli Cocktail

This time the outside world sent them notification of registered mail. Back from the forest, they managed to squeeze into the post office just before a security guard locked the door, and pick up two parcels. Each one of them received the same book in Hebrew. Somewhere inside this book was their novella. Of course, they knew about the “Russian” anthology project in a Hebrew translation. They even signed a weird contract that had been posted to them, and sent it off, signed, into the unknown . . . Veteran authors said that for the past thirty years there had been attempts to publish an anthology, but nothing had ever come of it. So they were not expecting much this time; that is, not that they did not anticipate something good, they did not expect anything at all. In fact they almost forgot the whole thing or, maybe out of superstition, they even hid it from one another. After all, they really longed to see their text not in boring Cyrillic letters, but in the letters of the Song of Songs. Now it was happening. With no prior notice, no working with translators, no copy-checking.

Stunned by the books’ sudden arrival, they stood under a street lamp, each holding a book.

“What a title! . . . yes . . . *The Ghosts of Israel*” Max exclaimed. “I swear, you could not think of a better nickname for immigrant authors.”⁶⁵

The anthology *Ruhot ha-rafa'im shel Israel* (The Ghosts of Israel) was published in 2003. It is a selection of texts, written between 1970–2000, by Israeli authors who write in Russian, and edited by Margarita Shklovski. Elisaveta Michailichenko and Yuri Nesis, whose translated works are part of this anthology, depict the difficulties of communicating with the publishers when they were asked to provide personal details—including “complicated Russian names” of books and places. In the excerpt above, the two novelists stand and look at the final product, awed and alienated, as if the book is not theirs, as if once their texts have been translated into this format, they have been expropriated from them.

The reference to the book’s title, *The Ghosts of Israel*, ironically reflects their feeling: migrants, midway between two worlds, do not completely “live,” but hover over the Israeli cultural space. They arrive at the local post office “from the forest”—signifying a non-Israeli space—and stand under a street lamp’s pallid light, each of them clutching a volume.

The Ghosts of Israel, an anthology containing highly interesting works, was jointly published by Yediote Books and the Absorption Ministry, so that Hebrew readers could access Israeli literature written in Russian. Unfortunately, though, the book's overarching goal was not achieved, since Israeli Hebrew readers showed little interest in the anthology. With very little demand, the publishing house eventually shredded the copies remaining in its warehouse.

The anthology opens with an article by Michael Weisskopf (mentioned previously as the editor of *Solar Plexus*), outlining central themes in Russian-language Israeli literature. It begins with the following words:

In the 1970s immigrants from the Soviet Union started publishing their literary works in Israel (as well as works they had written in the USSR). Thus, a new expressional form developed, distinct in its language from Hebrew literature and in its themes from the Soviet culture. The writers who had recently arrived . . . preferred not to classify their literary works as Russian literature, but as literature in the Russian language . . . This definition is well-rooted by now, though a tedious terminological dispute still continues around it.⁶⁶

Weisskopf maintains that Israeli literature written in Russian operates within a liminal area, between Hebrew literature and the Soviet culture; it does not belong to either world but is located between them. Hence, it is not surprising that the story of their immigration to Israel—"the Exodus theme"—constitutes a formative narrative with contemporary, religious, and mythic layers.

I do not aspire to provide an exhaustive account of Israeli literature in Russian, but to offer short glimpses, to describe a few poetic trajectories and focus on several texts, mainly the ones that were translated into Hebrew or English and gained recognition. My presentation will follow Weisskopf's suggested narrative of immigration, focusing especially on spatial questions: life in the USSR and the escape from it; attitudes to the Israeli space and its citizens; and the hyphenated Jewish-Russian identity.

On the Journey between Diaspora and the Holy Land—Efrem Bauch and David Markish

Efrem Bauch is the Chairperson of the Federation of Russian-Language Authors. An author, poet, and translator, he published eight novels and two poetry books in Israel between the 1980s and the 2000s, as well as one book in Moscow, in 2002. He has translated several Israeli authors into Russian, including Benjamin Tammuz, Naomi Frenkel, and Miron Chaim Izakson. Bauch's translation of Uri Zvi Greenberg's poems was published in Tel Aviv in 1992, and his book *Dante be-Moskva* (Dante in Moscow; original name Jacob's Ladder) was published in Hebrew in 1997. His book of translated poems *Yerushat merhakim* (Distanced Inheritance) was published in 2000.

Bauch's works portray a process of reinforcing Jewish roots, and forging a new connection with the Torah, the synagogue, and even Yiddish culture.⁶⁷ This phenomenon characterizes many Jews in the post-Soviet era. His first book, *Jacob's Ladder*, was written in 1984 and published three years later. It is about a psychiatrist who undergoes a spiritual process through his work and his relationship with some of his Jewish intellectual patients. Against the backdrop of the Soviet Union in the 1970s—the lack of personal freedom and fear of the regime's vigilant eyes—he begins to remember repressed Jewish memories. At the end of the narrative he immigrates to Jerusalem, leaving his family behind.

Bauch's novel chronicles both a personal-psychological process and a social one, propelling the protagonist towards a new awareness and recognition, which completely turns his life around. Although it seems that the text is subversive since it defies and objects to the Soviet regime, it is conservative in its literary poetics. Klavdia Smola asserts that Bauch is structuring a maturation and education process that resembles Soviet-era stories in which the characters undergo a process that molds them into dutiful Soviet citizens. In this case, the result is an attraction to religion and Zionism, and a departure to Israel.

Since he immigrated to Israel, infused with a clear Zionist ideology, Bauch justified in his works anything that related to Judaism's historical framework and the state of Israel. As Smola notes:

Efreim Bauch is one of a number of Russian-Jewish authors who are realistic about the difficulties of life in Israel but who nevertheless manage to justify this existence to themselves: this is expressed in the recognition of Israel as their home, something which can reconcile with mortal danger and serious cultural differences.⁶⁸

This ideological perspective clearly contributed to the author's status within Israel's literary establishment. He was appointment chairperson of the Russian Department at the General Union of Writers in Israel. This position granted him the power to set the canon of Russian-language Israeli literature. His critics, however, stress his lack of literary innovation in terms of language and plots, and claim that, while he has put Russia behind him, he has clung to its literary norms.⁶⁹

David Markish (born 1939, immigrated 1972) is a prolific author who since the 1970s has been publishing numerous novels in Israel, the US, and Russia. Many of his works have been translated into Hebrew, and three were translated into English.⁷⁰ Markish was born in Moscow in 1939. His father, Peretz Markish, was a renowned Yiddish author, poet, and playwright. In 1952, on the "Night of the Murdered Poets," Peretz, the father, was condemned as a "Jewish Nationalist and an enemy of the people" and shot. Afterwards, Markish was not allowed to leave for Israel until 1972.

His works describe the life of Jews under the Soviet regime, but do not focus only on local historic contexts. He is also engages with history, questioning loyalty and betrayal, belonging to a collective, and standing against it. Thus, for example, while his book *Reshit* (The Beginning, 1975) describes the life of Jews

under the Soviet regime and *Kalba* (Dog, 1984) focuses on the process in which a Jew searches for his roots and a life that suits him, his novel *Ha-leitsanim* (The Jesters, 1985) describes the dispute between Tsar Peter and his son the Heir Apparent, and Pyotr Shapiro's role in freeing the Russian army from the Turkish siege, while in *Rosh ha-havura* (The Head of the Group, 1992) he focuses the figure of Nestor Makhno during the Russian civil war.

In *Ha-malakh ha-shahor* (The Black Angel), which was translated into Hebrew in 2010, he describes the life of Yehuda Grossman, who is a literary echo of Isaac Babel, the Jewish-Russian author. Babel was born in 1894 in Odessa and was shot by a firing-squad in 1939. Markish's book was inspired by Babel's diaries and his book *Red Cavalry*. Yet, Markish's book itself does not strictly adhere to history. In an interview with Maya Sela, he remarked, "I wanted to understand the identity of the intellectual Jew."⁷¹ As an author, he feels closer to Babel than to his father: "Babel was a Russian writer, and my father was a Jewish writer. I am a Jewish writer who writes in the Russian language, like Babel. He was also close to the subject of the Jews . . . He knew Yiddish, of course, but wrote in Russian."

The question of the language and identity of Russian-Israeli authors entangles Markish who, like Bauch, is a central figure in the General Union of Authors. Like Bauch, Markish also believes in returning to Judaism: "one cannot live in Israel and not experience the scriptural stories—the history of a people in its country."⁷² Though Markish himself writes in Russian and argues that "the transition from one language to the other is close to impossible, and the rare exceptions bear out the rule," he does not try to preserve the language among the next generations—his children speak Hebrew, and he is not optimistic about Russian literature written in Israel.

In his collection of essays *Shalosh sha'ot tisa* (A Three-Hour Flight, 1990) he elaborates on this idea:

There is only one connection, I believe, . . . *Hebrew*, the shared language. "One people—one language"—this slogan has yet to die away, and will definitely not die away for many years ahead: as long as there is a diaspora and immigration. If Hebrew gradually pushes out the primary language imported from the diaspora, if it forcefully overpowers that primary language—in the speech, and most of all in the consciousness—then it will be a genuine national adhesive.

This is achieved by willpower and maybe also by the enforcement that an individual exercises on himself. I know Russian Jews who, ten years after immigrating, started forgetting their Russian, and when they form sentences, they translate from Hebrew to Russian. Each takes his own course: one—a broad path, the other a narrow winding one; the third halts after the first few hesitant steps. The path taken depends on many factors and circumstances: the environment, professional interests, language-acquisition skills. And all the same, the spiritual, emotional factor also plays significant role: the urge

not to negotiate but to think and feel in the tongue of the ancient prophets who walked these hills and valleys. This concealed drive is characteristic of Russian Jews who preferred Israel to America or Australia.⁷³

Markish's linguistic manifesto stands in contrast to the language in which he writes; it places him in an inferior position. According to his own manifesto, the very act of writing in Russian implies disloyalty to the Zionist-spiritual idea he propounds. Thus, in light of this manifesto, the only way to understand his position as a Russian writer is to accept the concept of "the desert generation," that would place his generation in the twilight zone between "there" and "here."

Markish's liminal reality—between his father, the Yiddish writer, and his Hebrew-speaking children—is noticeable in his oeuvre. His short story, "Sof ha-olam" (The End of the World), which appears in the anthology *The Ghosts of Israel*, gives a metaphorical illustration of this tension. The story is a hallucinatory tale of repressed memories that rise to the surface and jeopardize the ostensibly Israeli routine. Reuven Gutnick, aged 50, lives with his wife Paulina, grandfather Moshe, and dog Yuka. Their domestic space is set within an Israel space, on a street named Arzei ha-levanon (Cedars of Lebanon).

Reuven wakes up one morning and gets ready to take Yuka out to the little green backyard with an olive tree. But that morning, the garden looks different, and he finds that a huge cedar of Lebanon with a wide canopy has replaced the olive tree. A huge ape, baring its teeth, hangs on a branch as high as the building's second floor. The dog is frightened, as are the rest of the family, who have no idea what to do. The horizon itself seems different. Instead of the street there are dark patches of trees and a broad river running through a plain. The houses and people have been replaced by a European space where weird people and animals pass by. Overhead in the sky, numbers write themselves, recalling events from the past, generating alienation and resentment between Reuven and his wife. When darkness falls, the family goes to sleep. The next morning everything returns to its right place and the dog runs out to the yard with the olive tree.

This short story, with its spatial disorientation, blends together the Russian and Israeli experiences. It exposes what lies beneath the very fragile shell of normality: the secrets, anger, and residues from the past. Unlike what was required of Jews in the Soviet culture, the Israeli experience should be liberating, free of secrets and without affectation. Yet the residues of the past do allow the previous space to morph into the new one. In Markish's story, while things are back in place again the next day, as if the events were part of a nightmare, everyday routine shows its fragility.

The Liminality of Spaces and Times—Anna Isakova

"Ma'arbolet" (Vortex) is a short story by Anna Isakova, who was born in Lithuania in 1944 and came to Israel in 1971. Her story blends together the Russian and Israeli spaces. It opens with the following words:

In my childhood, time and space still suited themselves to the proportions of a human being and gently snuggled around it. The photos in our family albums were arranged in a circle, because the circle implies wholeness.⁷⁴

In the past, people controlled time and space. The narrator's childhood is described through this prism, in the shade of the ice refrigerator, fresh food, and childish pranks. But the story's principal trajectory dismantles any possibility of normative life after the war. The story presents a chilling episode in the life of the protagonist. As a medical student, the protagonist and her friends arrive at Königsberg, where they experience "for the first time in our lives the distortion of space and the wildness of time."⁷⁵ On an abandoned ghost-town street they come across an isolated shack set in an overgrown garden. They see a backyard with a swing suspended from an unreachable high branch. As they enter the shack, they see a huge rooster dancing on a table. Thus, they encounter the real inerasable dimension of time. The home was abandoned years ago, yet the tree has continued to grow (this is in fact why the swing is so high above the ground) and the rooster has become savage. Later they walk in circles through the town and lose their way, unable to leave that nightmarish space. This memory links the young women together.

The next time they meet is in Jerusalem, three decades later, when her friend decided, after a grave illness in which "she managed to visit the next world," to visit Jerusalem in search of certain trees she saw in her dreams. Now the haunted Russian street is replaced by an Israeli space: "I should have been alarmed by the Jerusalem Syndrome. People affected with this disorder set themselves goals that should be avoided . . . I knew that Jerusalem did not affect me that way, but had never taken the time to wonder why."⁷⁶ Four unknown species of trees appeared in her friend's hallucination, with a red ribbon tied to a branch of one of the trees. The quest through Jerusalem's landscapes, in search of these specific trees, disrupts their path once again. They walk in circles, losing their way again. Even when they find the trees, the question of whether or not Jerusalem is a kind of spiritual answer remains unanswered.

After being denied emigration for several years, Anna Isakova managed to immigrate to Israel. Although she insisted on coming to Israel without any prior knowledge of the language or the culture, she was not an idealist. Isakova's aesthetic perception is substantively different from Markish or Bauch; she refuses to consider Israel or Jerusalem sacred places or the only alternative for Russian-Jews.

Isakova's much admired novel *Oh, That Black Moon!* was published in Moscow in 2004, and was nominated for the Russian Booker prize; a Hebrew translation, titled *Ve-az hish'hir ha-yare'ah*, was published in 2009. Though the novel's narrative may seem to resemble those of Bauch and Markish—describing the complex lives of Jews in the Soviet world and their escape from it—it presents a different trajectory.

The novel follows the childhood and adolescence of Lyubov, an infant girl who was born—like Isakova herself—at the height of World War II. It chronicles two families—Lyubov’s family, her parents Yucker and Mal, and their friend, the physician Getz, his wife, and sisters. The novel describes the lives of Soviet Jews, their incessant flights, and their attempts to survive in a hostile society, knowing they will be the first to be accused of something they did or did not do. Throughout the years, Yucker and Getz’s friendship constitutes the only safe refuge where they can speak the truth without glancing over their shoulders. Endless suspicions towards those around them and lack of security follow their lives. Lyubov grows up to become a decisive young woman, perhaps because of her father, who was raised in appalling poverty and yet built his life by himself. She is loyal to no one, not even her parents. These qualities enable her, at the end of the novel, to leave Russia, after her mother’s suicide and her father’s trial for a murder he did not commit.

Isakova’s narrative differs from the idealistic narrative of Bauch and, to some extent, Markish’s works as well. While Judaism is certainly a central theme in *Oh, That Black Moon!* it is presented as a fact of life, with no ideology or drive towards Judaism or Zionism. The only urge is to flee a state that devours its citizens, even at the cost of betraying the family. Thus, Zionism plays no role, and the protagonist escapes the Soviet Union for Germany, despite the heavy burden of the history of Germany and the Jews.

Poetry That Bites—Igor Guberman

Life in USSR and in Israel constitutes a dominant theme in Russian poetry written in Israel. Igor Guberman’s (born 1936, immigrated 1988) poetry presents a critical and ironic gaze at life both “there” and “here.” Guberman’s poetry has received a great deal of acclaim primarily because of his signature aphoristic and satiric quatrains, called *gariki* in Russian (*garik* is also the diminutive form of the author’s first name, Igor). His publications in Russian are too numerous to allow a complete list. He published three books in Israel (1978, 1988, 1990), a few in the US, and a great deal in post-Soviet Russia, culminating in a four-volume collection of selected writings published in Moscow (Vremja, 2009). A collection of his works, translated into Hebrew *Karpion be-tokh biuv* (A Carp in the Sewer), was published in 2007.

Guberman is renowned for his witty and ironic use of language. His poetry makes use of various dialects and languages and is characterized by directness and candor. As someone who was sent to Siberia and served a brutal prison sentence, he combines in his poetry the language of the Russian literary tradition with prisoner slang and Yiddish dialect, and peppers it with sexual forthrightness.

Anna Ronell states that the Soviet experience required a very specific form of self-detachment for coping with the split between the individual personality and the Soviet experience. This split did not disappear in Israel, rather, it manifested in different ways. Ronell points out that:

this experience of simulation led to the emergence of a worldview that was highly cynical toward the official system of representation and discourse and that consequently trivialized all forms of meaningful political participation. In fact, in contemporary Russian-Israeli literature it is still possible to discern echoes of the “split” personalities that Soviet citizens developed in order to afford a respite from the system of collective ideological surveillance that enforced social and cultural compliance. Soviet individuals used dissimulation as a mechanism of separating participation in collective rituals from their private lives and beliefs . . . In Israel, this compartmentalized mode of life was transformed into the separation of things Russian and things Israeli, and consequently, is reflected in the narratives of contestation and adaptation.⁷⁷

Guberman’s use of bitter humor in the texts gives a poetic cynical expression of this Jewish-Soviet experience, shown in these two quatrains:

Yarn-spinning art is Russia’s forte,
it gets improved and always rules;
the native sheep comply: prefer they
to name their own shepherd wolves.

The speech of lies is suave and fluent;
in style, it draws nigh to perfection.
The speech of truth by slips is ruined
and marred by logic disconnection.⁷⁸

According to Greta Slobin, “Guberman deploys a poetics that creates a brilliant compact poetic unit with a witty punch line able to carry a great semantic impact of philosophical and political significance. The poems are a sharp political satire of the repressive state and meditations on the dual identity of Russian Jews.”⁷⁹ His poetry weaves measured quatrains and accurate rhymes on the one hand, with harsh language and indignant criticism on the other. The irony and criticism of these short poems stem precisely from the way in which the content and language contradict the catchy structure and undermine it. He juxtaposes sublime language with a coarse language that responds idiosyncratically to any kind of ideological pretense, which presents beautiful and well thought-out lies. The language of ideology is always clear and logical, subordinate to the rules of proper language; the truth, on the other hand, uncovers the ordered language, breaking its logic.

Though Guberman’s critical attitude is rooted in Soviet soil, his poems do not refrain from giving a humorous-critical perspective on Jewish identity and Israel. As the next quatrain reveals:

I pine for the Promised Land. Is she real?
from doubts I cannot break loose.
My life would be dandy in Israel,
if t’weren’t for the swelter and Jews.

This poem recalls the Yiddish tales and aphorisms about Jews who cannot get along with one another. Israel—the longed-for land, a country free of antisemitism—is also a place where all the Jews, in the popular phrase, “give each other hell.”

Returning to Holy Jerusalem, Returning to “Blood” and “Love”—
Mikhail Gendelev

For many Israeli Russian writers, the holiness of Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular is a unique virtue that juxtaposes their new lives in Israel. In an article that Isakova wrote in 2005, she tries to understand the place of Jerusalem in Russian-Israeli literature:

When one reads the books one after the other, the esoteric meager lives of Russian immigrants, the daily search for a tiny income, conjoined with a no less fervent quest for the meaning of life; ecstatic admiration of the local reality together with a critical, sometimes ironic attitude to that same reality; the strong drive to push one’s way into established society, tinged with contempt for that same society which rejects immigrants and closes ranks before them give the impression of a unified epopee. If someone would connect the most successful parts of the authors’ books into a single text, we would obtain a magnificent testimony of the strange, entertaining, sometimes tragic life of “the Russian Jerusalem.”

Jerusalem’s total hold over a poet is a unique phenomenon: it views Jerusalem as a symbol of Israel, the ancestral homeland, the *fons et origo*, the ultimate goal to be attained . . . The way in which the city’s image was built up in their consciousness long before they came to Israel is strange, occasionally fantastic, and comprised of pictures and sounds integral to the Russian and Soviet culture. There is a cultural tradition, not only a Russian one, of Jerusalem as a city of torment. It makes no difference whether it is the Passion of Christ or the torments of our Mother Rachel. Jerusalem is a magnet for transcendental, superhuman suffering, a paradigm of suffering and horror, almost a divine judgment . . . a city awaiting apocalypse.⁸⁰

Mikhail Gendelev (1950–2009, immigrated 1977) was considered one of the greatest of Israeli poets writing in Russian. Gendelev graduated from the Leningrad Medical Institute and worked as a sports medicine physician. In 1967 he started writing poetry, but did not publish his works in the Soviet Union. In 1977 he immigrated to Israel where he lived in Jerusalem since 1979. He participated in the First Lebanon War as a combat physician. In the 1990s he published numerous articles in the press, and was the first president of the Jerusalem Literary Club. Though in the last decade of his life Gendelev lived partly in Moscow and partly in Jerusalem, in interviews he stresses that he sees himself as an Israeli, so he never reclaimed his Russian citizenship: “by no means do I regard myself as a Russian poet, I regard myself as an Israeli poet writing in Russian.”⁸¹

Gendelev reached the summit of his literary activity during his years in Israel. A collection of his poetry was published as *Partial Collected Writings* (Moscow: Vremya, 2003), with a comprehensive introduction by Michael Weisskopf. He later wrote a few other collections of poetry, including his last volume which contains his later poetic works—*Love, War and Death in Memoirs of Contemporaries* (Moscow: Vremya, 2008).

Unfortunately, Gendelev was almost unknown to Israeli readers. Though he was awarded Israeli accolades—the Ettinger and the Tsaban prizes—and a selection of his poems was published in a Hebrew translation,⁸² he remains a little-known figure. Gendelev translated medieval Jewish poetry into Russian, including works by Moses Ibn Ezra, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, and Yehuda Alharizi, as well as contemporary Israeli poets like Haim Gouri. In my reading of his poetry I will outline the central poetic principles he uses, while focusing on Israel's place in his poetry. His poetry is challenging to translate, so I do not offer many examples of his writing.

In an interview for *Simurg*, Gendelev articulates the place of Jerusalem in his poetry. Unlike the traditional Russian perspective that proposes the classical dichotomy of heavenly and earthly Jerusalem, he maintains that his writing melds the spiritual Jerusalem with the physical.⁸³ According to Maya Kaganskaya, this is not a religious perspective on the Israeli space,⁸⁴ but rather a poetic position. Even when God appears in his poetry, he is associated with words and writing, demanding the abandonment of language in favor of a different articulation:

So strong in me is the desire to leave our speech,
to leave poignantly and inhumanly,
for
our God does not know Russian,
he remembers no Russian names⁸⁵

Gendelev argues that the Israeli space permits a blending of pathos and irony. Pathos, in contemporary Russian poetry, has come to be regarded as something obscene, while the dominance of the ironic component led to devaluation of the archetypal themes (love, war, and death); harmony, he maintains, is placed right between pathos and irony. Jerusalem—or the relation between the heavenly and the earthly Jerusalem—enables a natural return of the lost poetic pathos.⁸⁶

Gendelev perceives the situation of foreignness as the only way to achieve the poetics of in-between, between pathos and irony: “I grew accustomed to that feeling, started loving it, cultivated it, protected and grew it—that feeling of non-belonging. I played with it so much that I made it into a literary and life device.”⁸⁷ Gendelev considers his migration experience as a vital process: “migration is a very affirmative factor for any author,” he maintains in an interview.

symbols can be refurbished only when the whole world speaks another language . . . It is a process of inverted symbolism: a table becomes a table, war is war—death—becomes your own death—and life—your own life, not life in general. Elucidating one's relationship with God is no longer a collative exercise, but yours alone.⁸⁸

The sense of alienation and foreignness helps Gendelev to observe the Israeli “home” from within and from the outside. On the one hand, when he writes: “Moshe Rabenu— / I shall say— / Moshe Rabenu, is it not time for us to go home?”⁸⁹ he accepts the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. Yet on the other hand, home is conceived of as empty:

I have
no one in my home
we shall notice only a trace
they are not
but not because
they are not
they are not at all.⁹⁰

The home is deserted and mute, but is also under threat. For Gendelev, the Arab culture threatens to destroy home and its foundations. In his poem “To Arabic Speech,” he writes:

In Russian all love is the iambs of lycee frictions
in Russian what is war
ivans snuff our fritzes
but
what
in Russian is death

Gendelev thinks we should “walk out from our speech” but in fact he mourns the loss of Russian speech within the Muslim space. War, an act of terror at the bazaar, may lead to the downfall of God-Mandelstam (the poetic god who stands alongside him) and the rise of Allah, the Muslim God. In fact, as he writes:

For me
death like a need to step out on the porch from our speech
just to relieve myself just with the bleat of sheep
with teeth
to utter into oxygen
a wish for war!⁹¹

Gendelev calls for a cultural war against the Oriental and Arab identity. As I have shown, this is not an unusual position among authors who emigrated from Russia.⁹²

Gendelev observes Israel from a migrant's perspective, and yet, perhaps because his first acquaintance with the Israeli space was during the First Lebanon War, he contends that Israelis are his poetry's natural readership, able to understand its sources: "each and every man that has been in the army knows that bats indeed abide in . . . local trees. For the Russian reader, however, who has only seen a palm in a pot, and a bat—only in a state of delirium—all this would appear as a metaphor."⁹³ And that is why, in his opinion, "Israel, and specifically Jerusalem, is the only place on earth where one can write 'Blood' and 'Love' with capital letters."⁹⁴ "Krov' I lyubov'" (Blood and Love) is the most basic rhyme in Russian, and because of its obviousness and ubiquity is considered almost a taboo in twentieth-century Russian poetry. As a foreigner who lives in Israel and confronts its harshness, as a poet who does not keep the dichotomy of heavenly and earthly Jerusalem and works to bridge pathos with irony, Gendelev feels free to return to basic archetypal themes and to give them a new and different presence in his poetry.

On War and God—Mikhail Grobman

Mikhail Grobman, presented above as a founder and editor of *Zerkalo*, refuses to endow the words "blood" and "love" with capital letters. Experiencing war inspired other emotions in him. In his poem *Sinai*, written in 1978, Grobman draws an analogy between the biblical narrative of the conquest of the land and contemporary soldiers in battle:

Here Moses served his people, served for forty years—
 set up his radio transmitters
 dispatched his armor to secure the passes—
 the tracks of mountain partridges
 and the dead spirit of the nations
 cling to the slopes—
 and soldiers sit around on folding chairs
 dreaming meat, meat on the shelves
 of Tel Aviv Jerusalem Natania
 Afula Bet Shemesh Beer-Sheva Petakh-Tikva . . .
 and the dead spirit hovers above the pots—
 Here Moses served his people, served for forty years—
 here Navin⁹⁵ dropped his paratroops—
 and to this very day
 the hoots of military shofars knock at clouds
 . . .
 thunder of heaven rolls in the crimson sky
 and bloody rain pounds on the skulls of soldiers.

Biblical associations appear in this text not to justify war but to express an antiwar position maintaining that the world holds nothing new; that the soldiers of Moses are now replaced by other soldiers who continue to fantasize about

the meat pots and just want to go home in one piece. In another poem, written in 1984, Grobman utters real protest against the God who “blessed” the Israeli space with wars and casualties:

The print of the palm of God where he blessed these mountains
 has long since moldered away. Its traces
 have mingled with the ashes of Arabs,
 with sheep dung and with dust
 its spikes of heat and cold have reached dead level
 and only from time to time
 the heavenly thunder of an F-16
 recalls the energetic Creator’s feudal plans
 . . .
 tiny green soldiers
 run up the slopes shoot loudly
 fall down
 pink bloodied souls
 ascend like balloons
 vanished for good
 forever⁹⁶

Like the previous poem, this one also concludes with the death of soldiers who, in the Creator’s eyes, look like toy soldiers—“tiny green soldiers.” God is at play, and his playing field is the sacred space of a country awash with blood.

Grobman describes both the Russian and Israeli spaces as dark places, where compassion is almost absent. Yet in Russia, the cruelty of the space is found in silence and loneliness, as in these two excerpts:

Above the Northern land
 a frozen
 aching sound
 above the radiant land
 the echo of a bell and a cold breath from the valley of death⁹⁷

and:

Self-Portrait
 in a black black land
 in a black black city
 in the horribly black Tekstilschiki street
 in a black black alley
 in the black black apartment
 in a black black corner
 . . . sits a horribly black Mikhail Grobman
 . . . drinking black black ink.⁹⁸

The Israeli space is described as aggressive and often crowded, unclean, and noisy:

morning after morning I rise to hunt people
my pocket full of bullets, an M-16 in my hand⁹⁹

and:

Black cockroaches in dark robes and hats
filled the streets with rumbling rows—
black vermin as high as a man
piled on one another like the waves of slow flood,
allenby, Ben-Yehuda, Dizengoff,
Ibn Gvirol, Arlozorov and Jabotinsky¹⁰⁰

Grobman's poetic differs from Gendelev's. Interestingly though, while writing in Russian, both Gendelev's and Grobman's poetry deals intensively with life in Israel and its contemporary politics. This poetry has moved far away from Russian literature; as Igor Bielsky, the editor of the *Yerushalmi* periodical, notes when he defines local Russian literature as "modern Israeli literature in the Russian language:"

This literature is Israeli, in terms of the problems it confronts, the writers' perspective, their personal experience. It is no longer only the Soviet experience but also an experience of a people who have lived here for ten or twenty years. It is a literature in which signs of the time and place are visible.¹⁰¹

Between the Narrator and the Immigrant—Dina Rubina

Dina Rubina (born 1953, immigrated 1990) also engages with life in Israel in her works, yet she imbues the absurd aspects of everyday life with humor. Rubina is a highly successful author who has published novels and numerous volumes of collected short prose. Some of them were first published in Israel, others in Russia. She has been awarded many prizes and several of her works have been dramatized for the screen and translated into various languages, including four books into English. A short-story anthology in Hebrew, entitled *Shem mishpaha kaful* (Dual Surname) was published in 1993.

In an interview to a Russian periodical, Rubina declared—with some resemblance to Gendelev's words—that she is glad to be a migrant:

I left Russia as the author of four books, a rather well-known writer. But of course, it is a completely new aspect of life, a way looking at life, a different destiny, another existential awareness—this experience sent to me from heaven. You know, many things can happen to a writer in life. He can leave one place, relocate elsewhere. He can be a total stranger in any nation . . . but for me that step turned into a new chapter of creativity and life. Of course—otherwise I would be a wholly different writer.¹⁰²

Rubina defines herself as an Israeli author, and frequently refers in her writings to the Israeli landscape and to her home in Ma'aleh Adumim. Issues of migration, life in Israel, and the inter-generational divide are all themes in her works.

Her well-known book, *Here Comes the Messiah*, written in 1996, follows the story two women: Zyama, a former Russian now living in Israel, and the narrator N. Both women live parallel lives, with the implied author hovering above them. Rubina's narrator is a Jewish intellectual involved in the immigrant community, like herself. Yet the character is not identical to the author, and thus there are multifaceted relationships, with analogies and contradictions, between the author, implied author, the narrator, and the protagonist.¹⁰³ The novel was printed in eight editions in Moscow, but has not yet been translated to Hebrew.

In 2004, she published *Syndicate*, a comic novel, which is set in a large, highly bureaucratic public organization. The novel presents the way the organization is run with half-humorous, half-scathing criticism and displays a light-hearted portrayal of Rubina's own experiences as a Jewish Agency emissary in Moscow from 2000 to 2003. Though Rubina denies any connection with the plot and its heroine (who, surprisingly, has the same name as hers) and to the Jewish Agency and its staff, the latter were less than delighted by this text.¹⁰⁴

Like Guberman, Rubina's humor is based on her readers' background, since she uses both the Russian literary tradition and the Yiddish culture, where Jews laugh at themselves in a series of misunderstandings. She often stresses, comically, the similarities and differences between Russian and Hebrew. Anna Ronell writes of this:

With the keen eye of a street-scene observer and with the sharp tongue of a politically incorrect chronicler of her culture-in-progress, Rubina exposes the absurd and the ridiculous inherent in Israeli life, highlighting misunderstandings between Russian-Israelis and sabras and turning her text into a highly subversive comedy of errors.¹⁰⁵

Rubina, who is well-known and admired in Russia, introduces her readers to the Jewish identity and the Israeli space.¹⁰⁶ However, Hebrew-readers are not acquainted with her works even though she relates directly to Israel and its social and political issues.

Her book *Dual Surname* contains novellas that are mainly set in the Soviet Union and delineate the Jewish contexts there—whether the Yiddish culture, the family, or the furtive and forbidden debate over emigrating to Israel. These stories mirror the tribulations of Soviet Jews. Unlike *Dual Surname*, her stories in the anthology *The Ghosts of Israel* explore contemporary Israeli space. The first revolves entirely around a string of suicide bombings in Jerusalem, and the different members of a family who are involved on the margins of events. The second confronts stereotypes of Russians in Israel. Its protagonist is an immigrant woman, who cannot find a job commensurate with her skills. She works as a life model for artists to make a living for herself and her son. Her son's

entrance into Israeliness is manifested by his enrollment in the army; he is even nicknamed “the sergeant.” However, as the story unfolds, we learn that he was rejected for the officers course because of his opinions, and now he refuses promotion to the rank of first-sergeant since he is too exhausted to sew on his insignia. The text blends other stereotypes as well, for example, a woman migrant who is an engineer by profession but works as a house cleaner and is unjustly accused of theft; a “typical Moroccan,” who invites for coffee the protagonist, who replies, “I have no intention of being added to the local folklore about Russian prostitutes”; and a Dutchman who has discovered his descent from Spanish *anusim* (forcibly converted Jews). Though this gallery of types is etched with a humorous pen, the pain of immigration and the alienation is evident between the lines, as the protagonist admits in a certain encounter, “I’m actually only 39, and my figure’s still good. But I feel 380 . . . The other day a sociology student stopped me in the street, and said ‘We’re running a survey based on age-groups. Which group do you belong to?’ and I replied ‘I’m between 100 and 120.’”¹⁰⁷

The Multicultural Dining Room—Gali-Dana Singer

I would like to present the work of Gali-Dana Singer as a final poetic trajectory of Israeli literature in Russian. Her poetry, allied with her literary activity elaborated above, argue that Russian immigrants in Israel must undergo a cultural and lingual change based on the face-to-face encounter with the new culture.

Gali-Dana Singer, who is usually grouped with the immigrants who came to Israel between the two great waves (she arrived in 1988), agrees that she also had different expectations from Israeli life and culture. People do not choose their place of birth or mother tongue, as she writes in the following lines (which she in fact wrote in English):

Here you can change a word, there a wording
but nothing can be rewritten as a rule.
It’s too late every time I try.
Writing is a mother. The primary source for the dunces.
You cannot change a mother or can you, can?
A mouthful of hysterical giggles, a handful of coppers.¹⁰⁸

In this poem she makes an analogy between language and the mother. Moving from one language to another is more than changing words. The mother tongue is the foundation of writing, and it never disappears. What is left for the poet is the continuous struggle of finding other words.

Singer objects to the “cultural supremacy” position, and maintains that the difficulty in learning a language lies not in the intellectual sphere but in the mental one.

They accept . . . the supremacy of the culture that they know and love. And what is more, some of the culture’s consumers also feel that they are superior to Russian culture produced here. They attend every show that is imported

from Russia, but will not buy tickets for a show in Russian that is produced here. The press emphasizes this position, probably to flatter the immigrants, which is a very common way of thinking. I find it really sad.¹⁰⁹

Singer also does not refuse to acknowledge the space and to accept the East, while the West remains in her heart, as the lines below disclose:

An Arab on a donkey passes below and I try
to remember not the donkey's ass and not the olive trees
but rather the river:
not stopping, not long,
not dependent on words.
the Arab riding the donkey
moves through the scorched valley.¹¹⁰

The rift between the European vista of the river and the desert space associated with Arabs expresses recognition of the two, together with the perceived inability to bridge the gap between them. The East is not tinged with supremacy or fear of that very different Mizrahi/desert experience, but rather a feeling that “now for the first time, and mine too, you're together.”

Since her arrival in Israel, Singer decided to step outside the cultural and linguistic isolation:

I am a poet who writes Russian and Hebrew. I live here and was born there, and both of them are important to me. I do not want to construct a huge wall to protect and define me. I would not want to close myself up in one particular direction; that is the distinctive nature of my life, if I am already stretching myself in two directions and I have these squinting eyes, why not use them?¹¹¹

In poetic terms, Singer encourages a multicultural influence through Russian literature and poetry, and English and Hebrew poetry. Her bilingual, or multi-lingual approach seems intellectually desirable and balanced, but very few authors have emulated her.¹¹²

Gali-Dana Singer's poem “Selected Poetry of the Dining Room” portrays what I believe to be a symbolic representation of the multicultural approach:

Bound in dusty plush and gilded silence
every piece of furniture was indeed
vaguely aware that it was something dead
and might be just posing as something quite dead
and so it did
as it has been so well understood
by the waxing moon itself.
Each cupboard shelf to be cherished
each chair declaring “My life and glosses are welcomed”

tried to make sense out of good fortune
 they stood in a circle rounding the square table
 being acquired as a set
 they knew each other to be rivals
 but could they be friends
 in such a fraud
 when the minute hands of the popular imagination were needed
 for nearly photographic resurrection?¹¹³

The old furniture and its history, the parts that have died, and the disparity between them create this unique dining room. The furniture can stand as a metaphor for different identities. They construct something new, revive what was almost dead, encourage new relationships, and live alongside each other to assemble a new dining room. The poem presents a picture of tolerance, acknowledgment, acceptance, and understanding. Is this only an ideal? Can Russian-Israeli literature, as well as other literatures, find a place on one of the chairs in Israeli culture's dining room?

Between the Languages—the Geshet Theater

I encountered the Geshet theater group as soon as they started performing in the Habima basement, an unknown theater company of immigrants from the FSU . . . I understood them, they came to me from a long-forgotten part of my youth; they were Habima at its very start, they were the Cameri whose first performances were in the Mograbi Cinema basement, they were the renowned Group Theater founded by Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, who started a theater in America that was, and still is, unrivaled.¹¹⁴

As early as 1914, the initiative and dream of founding a Hebrew theater developed in Moscow among a group of Jewish directors and actors. Three years later, Nahum David Tzemach, Menachem Gnessin, and Hanna Rovina, with the help of Constantin Stanislavski the well-known Russian director and teacher, crystalized the idea. The new theater started operating in a studio of the Moscow Artistic Theater. This was the beginning of the Habima theater; a theater that gained wide recognition following its performance of *The Dybbuk* by the Yiddish playwright S. Ansky, in 1922. Six years later, in 1928, the Habima group arrived in Jaffa port eager to develop the culture in Palestine. The group functioned as a collective, working together, making joint decisions on the repertoire, and sharing the profits. Habima brought new acting and direction norms to the young country. It was a professional theater with high standards and was to become Israel's national theater.

Seven decades later, another theater group made the same journey from Moscow to Israel, in order to establish a theater. This time the main protagonist