UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Rootless Cosmopolitans: Literature of the Soviet-Jewish Diaspora

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

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2013

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my fellow travelers – Inna, Sania, Roman and Boris

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

In citations from the original Russian, I rely on the United States Library of Congress Transliteration system. All of the translations from Russian are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

PREFACE

Between 1970 and 2009 almost two million Russian-speaking Jews and their non-Jewish relatives left the territories of what has come to be known as the former Soviet Union for resettlement in Israel, the United States and Germany. Shaped by Soviet policies, which detached Judaism from Jews, by the experience of displacement, and by their encounters with their host cultures, the immigrants were quickly recognized as a unique social group, in large part because of their secularism. They have come to be known as "Russian Jews" or "Soviet Jews," or simply as "Russians," because of their strong connection to Russian and Soviet cultures. Those who came in the 1970's were considered to be seekers of political asylum who longed for freedom of cultural expression and religious practice. The wave that began in 1989 acquired the unfortunate name of "*kalbasnaia immigratsia.*" The "kielbas immigration," it was speculated, left for material and economic reasons, in search for the "kielbas" of which there was a shortage in Soviet stores, rather than for a new homeland.

Both waves of border crossers have become the subjects of a transnational, multilingual and cross-generational body of literature. In this dissertation I focus on contemporary works, published in Russian and English, by Dina Rubina, Liudmila Ulitskaia, Gary Shteyngart and David Bezmozgis. This literature stresses the singularity of Soviet-Jewish identities and social behaviors. Yet, while depicting historical events and immigrants' everyday lives, the fiction of the Soviet-Jewish diaspora also tackles larger conceptual problems and suggests new ways of addressing the double question of Jewish identification and belonging at the turn of the twenty-first century. I take these implicit

suggestions and use them to define a theory of identity that I refer to as "rootless cosmopolitanism."

This dissertation is composed of four chapters. Chapter 1, "A Doubly Diasporic Consciousness," establishes the sociohistorical and theoretical contexts of the dissertation. I trace the history of the phrase "rootless cosmopolitan" in Soviet culture, emphasizing its particular relevance for Russian-speaking Jews. This phrase, which has long conjured up memories of Stalin-era purges and state-sanctioned anti-Semitism, has re-emerged in the context of Soviet-Jewish immigration, gaining new definitions and applications. I argue that "rootless cosmopolitanism" is a useful name for a theory of identity that recognizes the cultural and diasporic hybridity of Soviet-Jewish immigrants. Referring to scholarship in history and the social sciences on Russian-speaking Jews, I identify the immigrants' tendency to mix Soviet, Jewish and host customs while re-constructing their identities after resettlement. This process produces new and hybrid Soviet-Jewish identities. Furthermore, engaging with theoretical work on diaspora, I assert that Russian-speaking Jews have a doubly-diasporic consciousness. In other words, they find themselves between two seemingly opposing narratives of displacement – the Jewish diaspora and the Russophone diaspora. I signal that the literature in this dissertation represents Russian Jews as members of multiple diasporic communities who experience multiple exilic trajectories and multiple homecomings. As a result, contemporary literature questions the dichotomies of exile/home and diaspora/return that lie at the center of traditional theories of diaspora. I end the chapter by situating the authors in this dissertation within a literary context, noting the canonical traditions to which they belong, but also pose a threat.

Chapter 2, “Impossible Returns: The Israeli Fiction of Dina Rubina,” examines how narratives of exile and home intersect in the minds of immigrants who to came to Israel after 1989. The chapter centers on the work of the Russian-Israeli writer Dina Rubina, using her immigration-themed texts as my case studies. I situate Rubina's fictional narratives within a sizable body of research in the social sciences on Russian-speaking Jews in Israel. A prolific writer of novels, short stories, essays and screenplays, Rubina narrates the different stages of immigration: departure, journey, arrival, absorption and even the trip back to the country of birth. An emigrant from the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, Rubina is known as a model Russian-Israeli because of her commercial success as a writer and her vocal support for her adopted state. I read Rubina against the grain, illustrating that her Israeli fiction calls into question Zionist mythologies of homeland and return by dramatizing the disorientation of immigrants shaped by Soviet concepts of territorial rootedness. However, I also show that Rubina's more recent novels focus on diasporic mobility, portraying the multiple paths of return available to immigrants who travel back to the FSU, and divide their lives among at least two different homes. I conclude that Rubina's fiction undermines the determinism inherent in Zionist constructions of diaspora, which privilege reversal to a single homeland.

Chapter 3, “Jews in Translation: Liudmila Ulitskaia's *A Merry Funeral* and *Daniel Stein, Translator*,” shifts the focus to identification, creating a parallel between hybrid concepts of diaspora and hybrid identities in Soviet-Jewish diaspora fiction. A classical model of Jewish diaspora requires a stable definition of a Jew. However, as Liudmila Ulitskaia's fiction shows, diasporic conditions necessarily lead to the transformation of

Jewish identity and to multiple interpretations of Jewish authenticity. In the chapter, I engage in the close analysis of two of Ulitskaia's novels that focus on the disaggregated identities of East European Jews. Each text centers on characters who decouple their Jewish identity from Judaism. In *A Merry Funeral*, Ulitskaia introduces readers to an ex-Soviet artist who defends his choice to remain religiously unaffiliated in the face of pressure to become a "real" Jew. Ulitskaia moves from tackling a Soviet-produced secular identity to religious conversion in the novel *Daniel Stein, Translator.* Connecting Ulitskaia's work to theories of interlingual and cultural translation, I argue that the author portrays Jewish converts as interpreters of cultural identity. Ulitskaia also directly engages with Israel's policy toward converts, critiquing the state's refusal to extend return immigration to Jews who affiliate with other religions. I conclude that both novels insist on diasporic subjects' right to re-map their identities and to express disaggregated Jewishness.

Chapter 4, "Diasporas Without Homelands: David Bezmozgis' *The Free World* and Gary Shteyngart's *Absurdistan,"* turns to representations of Russian-Jews' immigration to North America. I examine works by a younger generation of writers, whowork in English but also demonstrate engagement with the overlap between Jewish identity and space that ties them to Rubina and Ulitskaia. In *The Free World* and *Absurdistan*, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis concern themselves with the encounter between Russian-speaking Jews and Jewish Americans. Both writers illustrate that these encounters reveal tensions between Soviet and American constructions of Jewishness and expectations for Jews' political allegiance. Shteyngart and Bezmozgis undermine Israel's centrality by foregrounding characters who choose to go to North America over their

biblical homeland. Yet, using these texts, I illustrate that Israel's centrality haunts even the Russian-speaking Jews who deliberately position themselves outside their self-proclaimed homeland. Referring to theories of voluntary exile, I claim that Shteyngart and Bezmozgis use their fictional works to imagine identities divorced from nation-states. I conclude that both North American writers re-invert the diaspora prototype through self-exiled subjects who question associations between the concepts of home and nation-state.

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Chapter 3, in part, was published as “The Russian-speaking Jewish Diaspora in Translation: Liudmila Ulitskaia's *Daniel' Shtain, Perevodchik*” in *Slavic Review*. The dissertation author was the primary author of this paper.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Rootless Cosmopolitans: Literature of the Soviet-Jewish Diaspora

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2013

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By the end of the twentieth century, Russian-speaking Jews solidified their reputation as emigrants and refugees – a people without a home. This was because the turn of the twenty-first century saw large waves of Jewish emigration out of the former Soviet Union. This emigration produced a new diaspora and new cultural identities shaped by Soviet history, the experience of relocation and contact with host-cultures, particularly Israel and the United States. Scholars, artists and policy-makers have had a difficult time fitting ex-Soviet Jews into existing identity categories. Consequently, Russian-speaking Jews came to be perceived within their new homelands as inauthentic Jews as a result of their cultural hybridity. Moreover, ex-Soviet Jews' lingering attachments to the former Soviet Union, ambivalence about putting down new roots, and reluctance to view their immigration to Israel as a return to their Promised Land, have compromised dominant theories of Jewish belonging.

In this dissertation, I argue that Soviet Jews inspire "rootless cosmopolitanism," a theory of a de-essentialized and deterritorialized cultural identity. I derive this theory from the close textual analysis of contemporary literature about late-twentieth-century Soviet-Jewish emigration, which I contextualize within historical, anthropological and sociological studies on Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants. More specifically, I compare the fictional works published between 1990 and 2010 by a transnational group of authors that includes Dina Rubina and Liudmila Ulitskaia, who publish in Russian, and Gary Shteyngart and David Bezmozgis, who publish in English. I argue that these authors re-cast Jewish immigrants as rootless cosmopolitans, or members of a hybrid diaspora who manifest context-dependent strategies of self-fashioning. I show that, in this way, post-Soviet fiction portrays Jewish identity as an interpretive process, rather than inborn trait, and re-maps Jewish space, thus disrupting the dichotomy of homeland and exile that defines traditional models of Jewish diaspora. These interventions overlap with theories of diaspora beyond the Jewish context. Finally, I emphasize the applicability of "rootless cosmopolitanism" for other studies of transnational groups that confront issues of identity and location simultaneously.

CHAPTER ONE

A Doubly Diasporic Consciousness

"'Diaspora' has become a global word that fits the global world. It has been a proper noun...Today it is a common noun. It 'speaks' for itself."

– Stéphane Dufoix, *Diasporas*

"Rootless cosmopolitan" [*bezrodnyi kosmopolit*] is a loaded phrase for Russian-speaking Jews. It is burdened with the history of Stalin's purges, specifically with what has come to be known as the campaign against cosmopolitanism of the 1940s and 1950s.[1] The campaign defined rootless cosmopolitans as citizens who lacked patriotism and disseminated foreign influence within the USSR.[2] Most who came under attack were Soviet Jews, including theater critics, Yiddish-speaking poets and doctors. They were accused of disseminating Western European philosophies of aesthetics, pro-American attitudes, Zionism, or inappropriate levels of concern for Jewry and its destruction during World War II. The phrase "rootless cosmopolitan" was synonymous with "persons without identity" and "passportless wanderers" when applied to Jews, thus emphasizing their status as strangers and outsiders.[3] The campaign is infamous for persecuting not only individual Jews, but also for seeking to eliminate Jewish culture in the Soviet Union.

1 For more on the campaign against cosmopolitanism, see Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948-1967: A Documented Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984). For an exhaustive collection of documents relating to the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign, see D.G. Nadzhafov, and Z.S., eds., Belousova, *Stalin i kosmopolitizm: dokumenty Agitpropa TSK KPCC, 1945-1953* (Moscow: Materik, 2005).

2 Negative associations with cosmopolitanism in Russian culture have been traced to the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, who condemned cosmopolitan attitudes while promoting Russian nationalism in the 1840s. See Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews*, 154; and Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 135.

3 Joshua Rubenstein, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 48.

Yiddish, the Soviet Jews' national language, came under attack during one of most tragic events of the campaign, the Night of the Murdered Poets (August 12, 1952), which saw the execution of thirteen Yiddish poets, including Peretz Markish and David Bergelson.[4]

Contemporary fiction by writers from the former Soviet Union (FSU) who explore the Russian-Jewish experience in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse are haunted by the association between Jews and rootless cosmopolitanism. These writers regard the hunt for cosmopolitans as a defining moment in Soviet-Jewish history. In *The Cosmopolitans*, Nadia Kalman, an immigrant writer who lives in the US and publishes in English, suggests that the campaign encapsulates the persistence of the Jewish Question [*Evreiskii Vopros*] in the Soviet Union. The novel, which represents Russian-Jewish immigrants living in Connecticut, features a stream of consciousness passage that jumps from mentioning the Jewish Question to the following historical references,

> The Affair of the Cosmopolitans, the Affair of the Dictionary, the Affairs of the Doctors, the Engineers, the Theater Critics: Stalin's whimsical purges. Remember the time he accused those Yiddish poets of spying for Israel? Have you guessed what happened to that merry band who traveled the world proclaiming the end of anti-Semitism?[5]

Evoking the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, including the Yiddish poets, who faced punishment after World War II, the novel suggests that the persecution of Soviet Jews during the 1940s and 1950s proves that the Jewish Question was not resolved in the Soviet Union. In other words, Jews did not find acceptance in Soviet society.

The anti-cosmopolitanism campaign is also on the minds of such prominent contemporary Russian-language writers as Liudmila Ulitskaia and Dina Rubina whose

4 The poets were executed following a show trial. All were members of JAC (the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee), which was responsible for raising financial and political support from abroad for the Soviet effort to defeat the Nazis. For a detailed account of trial, see Rubenstein, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom.*

5 Nadia Kalman, *The Cosmopolitans* (Livingston: Livingston Press, University of West Alabama, 2010), 35.

work I analyze in this dissertation. Rubina's short story, "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden," which I read closely in Chapter 2, features a character who was imprisoned during the campaign for reasons unbeknownst to him. Both Ulitskaia and Rubina also incorporate into their fiction the Doctors' Plot [*Delo Vrachei*], the climax of the campaign, in which Jewish doctors faced deportation, Gulag imprisonment and execution for allegedly planning to assassinate Soviet authorities, including Stalin.[6] In her story, "March Second of that Same Year" [*Vtoroe marta togo goda*], Ulitskaia represents a family of Jewish doctors living in fear of exile. Rubina, on the other hand, dramatizes the deportation and exiled existence of a Jewish doctor in Central Asia in her novella *Liubka* (2009). In all of the aforementioned texts, details of the campaign appear as traumatic flashes that hold a key to the Russian-Jewish collective consciousness but require further decoding. Yet contemporary writers and scholars largely agree that the labeling of Jews as rootless cosmopolitans confirmed their image as aliens, or diasporic others who posed a threat to the Soviet homeland.

The fact that numerous Jewish intellectuals were rehabilitated after Stalin's death, including all of the poets murdered in 1952, suggests that "rootless cosmopolitanism" was a false charge, or a deliberate act of mislabeling. It is therefore surprising that Russian-speaking Jews would want to associate themselves with the phrase. Yet writers and scholars suggest that the phrase is useful, particularly for representing the phenomenon of Jewish mass emigration from the Soviet Union. In her anthropological study on Russian-Jewish immigrants, Larissa Remennick claims, "Stalin was not so wrong when he coined the term 'rootless cosmopolitans' as a collective second name for

6 For more on the Doctor's Plot, see Louis Rapoport, *Stalin's War Against the Jews: The Doctor's Plot and the Soviet Solution* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

Soviet Jews; many of them have harbored dreams of leaving the Socialist Paradise ever since their affair with Soviet power began to dwindle."[7] In other words, the phrase is, to some extent, descriptive of the Russian-Jews' attitudes toward the USSR, or their lack of rootedness. Moreover, Remennick's study, which charts late twentieth-century Russian-Jewish scattering across Europe, Israel and North America, suggests that the labeling of Jews as rootless cosmopolitans became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The phrase also captures aspects of the immigrant experience for Russian-speaking Jews who crossed borders in the 1970s and 1980s, and indeed became stateless while temporarily living in Italy or Austria and awaiting approval to come to Israel or North America. Moreover, "Rootless cosmopolitans" takes on ironic connotations when applied to the post-Soviet Jewish immigrants who have come to be viewed as firmly rooted in Russian and Soviet cultures and to be commonly referred to as "Russians."

Most fascinatingly, the phrase and the concept of a rootless cosmopolitan is becoming empowering for contemporary authors who identify as Russian Jews. For example, during his talk, on March 3rd 2013, at Stanford University's "The Future of Jewish Storytelling" conference, the writer Gary Shteyngart called himself a rootless cosmopolitan in a tongue-in-cheek but proud tone. This act of self-labeling was Shteyngart's response when I asked him from the audience whether he considered the former Soviet Union or the United States to be his home. Shteyngart refused to choose between the place of his birth and his adopted country, deploying the concept of a rootless cosmopolitan to imply that he did not have a homeland or exclusive national allegiance. Elaborating on his answer, Shteyngart, who had immigrated to the United

7 Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration and Conflict* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

States at the age of eight, spoke about the dilemma of being from a country that no longer exists – the USSR. In other words, rather than identifying with the victims of the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign, Shteyngart adapted the phrase to express his tenuous relationship with the Soviet Union and simultaneously to suggest a manner of locating himself beyond the boundaries of his birthplace or country of citizenship. As I show in Chapter 3, another English-language writer, Canadian-based David Bezmozgis, lends new associations to the phrase "rootless cosmopolitan" in his novel *The Free World*. Both of these writers rely on the original connotations of the phrase, including cultural alienation, lack of patriotism and wandering. Yet, as evoked by Shteyngart and Bezmozgis, these connotations take on positive values and interplay with new meanings that relate to Jewish identity in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and late twentieth-century Jewish mass-migration.

This dissertation brings together literature that represents Russian-Jewish immigration to Israel and North America during the latter half of the twentieth century to develop rootless cosmopolitanism into a coherent theory of diasporic identity.[8] I reclaim the phrase for this project because it captures the overlapping questions of Jewish selfhood and belonging on which contemporary writers meditate in their works. As the writers that I examine in this dissertation show, Russian Jews must negotiate between multiple, and competing, definitions of Jewishness before, during and after their immigration. They equally have to tackle the issues of home and exile in the context of their experience as an extraterritorial Soviet minority, attachments to their birthplace and

8 This dissertation does not analyze Russian-Jewish immigrant culture in Germany, another major immigrant hub. For an analysis of Russian-Jewish literature in Germany, with a particular focus on the writer Wladimir Kaminer, see Adrian Wanner, *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 50-89.

relationship to Israel, the nation-state that claims to be their homeland. As culturally and geopolitically decentered subjects, Russian-speaking Jews have the potential to subvert stable concepts of cultural identity and national allegiance. The fiction that I analyze in this dissertation uses the figure of the Russian-Jewish immigrant to expose the limits of Soviet, Judaic, Israeli, and Jewish-American notions of what defines a Jew and to re-map Jewish space beyond the center-periphery schema. A present-day rootless cosmopolitan views identity not as an accomplished entity that is subject to judgements of authenticity, but as a dynamic process where cultural traditions collide and combine to create new ideas and practices.

Sociohistorical and Theoretical Contexts

The literary representation of Russian Jews as "rootless cosmopolitans" does not match up with the dominant perception of the immigrants within their host-countries. Within their host-countries, Russian Jews are known for expressing right-wing politics and patriotic sentiments.[9] In American media, journalists regularly juxtapose Russian-Jews' Republican leanings with American Jews' tendency to identify as Democrats, framing the discrepancy as a problem.[10] With some exceptions, scholars and journalists suggest that Russian Jews' voting habits are motivated by a sense of patriotism toward

9 Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 100-125. Remennick writers, "in the last Presidential election in November 2004, the exit poll conducted by RINA among 802 Russian-speaking voters in four locations in New York and Philadelphia (Kliger, 2005) showed that 77 percept voted for President Bush, 22 percent for Senator Kerry and 1 percept for no one; 80 percept of respondeds who votes Bush had decided on this choice more than a month before the election," 199. See also, Samuel Klinger. *Presidential Election 2004: Russian Voters*. NY: The American Jewish Committee Report, 2004.

10 See for example, Alexander Zaitchik, "What a Country," *Tablet*, April 4, 2011, http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/63785/what-a-country.

their adopted country, the United States, and toward Israel.[11] On the other hand, Russian Jews are portrayed as being rooted in Russian culture and consequently as being difficult to assimilate. Communities like the one composed of Russian speakers in New York's Brighton Beach, also known as "Little Odessa," appear in popular culture as enclaves closed off from interaction, where immigrants live as if they were still in the FSU. Scholars like David Laitin complicate the image of Russian Jews even further, claiming that immigrants in the United States have undergone a process of "de-cosmopolitanization" by reconnecting with their Jewish identities, in other words, re-becoming Jewish after immigration.[12] In Israel, Russian-Jewish immigrants stand apart from non-immigrant Jews, a condition reinforced by the proliferation of Russophone institutions and social networks.[13] Yet, as constituents of the base of Yisrael Beiteinu, a political party with a radically nationalist stance, Russian Israelis appear to express great pride in their new roots. The name of the party, translated from Hebrew as "Israel Our Home," suggests little doubt about national allegiance on the part of the immigrants.[14] Despite its disagreements and limitations, the aforementioned research, which suggests that Russian-Jews have multiple but strong attachments, points to a lack of symmetry

11 According to Remennick, "Among those who voted for Bush in Brooklyn, the most important political issues were Israel (53 percent), terror (21 percent), and strong military (11 percent)," *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 199.

12 David Laitin, "The De-cosmopolitanization of the Russian Diaspora: A View from Brooklyn in the 'Far Abroad," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 13, no. 1 (2004): 5-35. Laitin's study observes "the everyday emergence of a religiously oriented Jewish-American identity among these once secular cosmopolitan Jews," 7.

13 On Russian-Jews' alienation in Israel, see Dina Siegel, *The Great Immigration: Russian Jews in Israel* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998).

14 On voting among Russian Jews in Israel, see Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*. For a different perspective, see Majid Al-Haj, *Immigration and Ethnic Formation in a Deeply Divided Society: The Case of the 1990s Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel* (Boston: Brill, 2004). According to Al-Haj, "voting patterns among FSU immigrants are dynamic, changing according to their perceived interest. They tend to vote against the party in power, probably because it is judged to be responsible for whatever difficulties they encountered in the absorption process. The hope that a change of government would improve their status and conditions also plays a considerable role," 135.

between the immigrants' and the literature's ideological leanings.

Still, other scholars who highlight Russian-Jewish immigrants' cultural hybridity and willingness to defy the norms of their host countries allow us to see overlaps between the community and the fiction. Fran Markowitz's anthropological studies of Russian Jews, particularly residents of Brighton Beach, have consistently illustrated the group's ability to form a community "in spite of itself," or without formal institutions.[15] Markowitz has also emphasized the community's tendency to engage in practices that blend Russian, Jewish and American practices. Markowitz's well-known account of a *bat mitzvah* celebration at a Russian restaurant serving food that does not conform to the laws of *kashrut*, with the presence of a rabbi, shows Russian Jews engaging in in the invention of new traditions.[16] These traditions create a compromise between the participants' secular backgrounds, nostalgia for Soviet culture (represented in the restaurant), and eagerness to appropriate rituals that have special value in Jewish-American culture, such as lavish *bat mitzvah* celebrations.

Social scientists who study Russian Israelis have noted that while professing their fidelity to Israel, Russian Jews resist Israeli absorption policies and ideologies by embracing their Russian identities. Dina Siegel, an anthropologist who has closely examined the Great Aliyah, the largest wave of Jewish migration from the FSU to Israel (1989-2010), claims that "...the emphasis on 'Russianness' as a general identity of all immigrants from the former Soviet Union, both Jews and non-Jews, is an expression of protest."[17] In her ethnographic work, Elana Gomel shows that certain immigrant

15 For example, Fran Markowitz, *A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Emigres in New York* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

16 Fran Markowitz, "A Bat Mitzvah among Russian Jews," *The Life of Judaism*, ed. Harvey Goldberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 121-137.

17 Siegel, *The Great Immigration*, 69.

behaviors undermine and impact Israel's foundational principles. Thus, the immigrants' insistence on using the Russian language becomes political within a country that prides itself on the invention of its national language and that has a history of promoting monolingualism.[18] According to Gomel, "by ostentatiously flouting the injunction of *rak ivrit* (only Hebrew), the phrase every immigrant hears daily in his/her first years in the country, the Russians are flouting the foundations of the Zionist utopia."[19] Examining the immigrants' penchant for violating their host country's principles leads Gomel to the conclusion that "the Russians in Israel... are on the cutting edge of the ongoing Jewish metamorphosis."[20] Russian-Jews may be said to manifest aspects of rootless cosmopolitanism "in spite of themselves," to borrow Markowitz's phrase, through gestures and everyday choices. By foregrounding these choices, the writers whose work I analyze in this study are re-imagining and politicizing Russian-Jewish immigrants rather than documenting their experiences.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that scholars and fiction writers who nuance perceptions of Russian Jews also implicitly challenge binary and essentialist approaches to Jewish identity. In the West, Jewish culture continues to group individuals as either Jews or non-Jews and to imagine Jewish identity in terms of a religious core and a secular periphery. This prototype contains a spectrum of identities, with some being closer to the core and others to the periphery. The more central members, whose lives are defined by religious laws and customs, such as the keeping of kosher dietary rules and the speaking of a Jewish language (Hebrew or Yiddish), as well as allegiance to Israel, are regarded as

18 On the role of Hebrew in the formation of an Israeli national identity, see Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
19 Elana Gomel, *The Pilgrim Soul: Being Russian in Israel* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2009), 119.
20 Ibid., 142.

being more Jewish or having more of the essence of Jewishness. Zvi Gitelman, an eminent scholar of Post-Soviet Jews in Russia, Ukraine and the immigration, consistently relies on his own version of the binary-protype model. His paradigm is based on the division between "thin culture" and "thick culture" Jews.[21] According to Gitelman, thick culture "has tangible manifestations (language, customs, foods, clothing)."[22] Yet religious affiliation is perhaps the most important manifestation for Gitelman. A Jew of "thin culture" whose identity is "symbolic," and without "content," to use Gitelman's other terms, does not live according to Jewish law, does not speak a Jewish language (Hebrew or Yiddish), and does not reflect Jewishness in manner of dress. Gitelman suggests that most Jews, including Israeli and American, have become "thin."[23] However, Gitelman's research suggests that Russian-speaking Jews are the ultimate case study for thin culture. Gitelman explains that Russian-Jews' thin culture stems from their "disaggregated" identities, or identities where ethnic and religious aspects lack cohesion. Indeed Russian Jews frequently identify as being Jewish exclusively "by nationality," employing the Soviet term *natsional'nost'*. By associating "thin culture" with the dilution and decline of Jewish culture, and with the blurring of boundaries between Jews and non-Jews, Gitelman implicitly puts blame on "thin cultured" Jews like Russian-Jews.[24] Moreover, by locating Russian Jews on the periphery of Jewish culture, Gitelman contributes to their marginalization in the West and their image of being inauthentically Jewish. He also

21 Gitelman uses these phrases throughout numerous books and articles on Russian Jews, the most recent and detailed being *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). The study focuses on Jews who remain in the FSU, but includes a chapter on Russian-speaking immigrants.

22 Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine*, 22.

23 Zvi Gitelman, "The Decline of the Diaspora Jewish Nation: Boundaries, Content, and Jewish Identity," *Jewish Social Studies*, *New Series,* 4, no. 2 (1998): 112.

24 Ibid.

consequently promotes a dualist and hierarchical view of Jewish identity, which post-Soviet literature critiques.

The conceptualization of Russian-Jews as unrealized Jews, through no fault of their own, prevails within their host countries, including Israel and the United States. This image is fueled by the residual potency of Cold War-era biases and of the exodus narrative that made possible the Soviet Jews' mass emigration. The outcome of Israel's Six-Day War (1967) rekindled Soviet Jews' desire for emigration.[25] The previous mass emigration of Jews out of Russia and the USSR occurred between the 1880s and the 1920s, with the majority of the population heading to the United States.[26] Since its establishment, few Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union. Jews who attempted to acquire exit visas in the late 1960s were consistently met with refusal and consequently nicknamed "*refuseniks*." The mass movement out that the fiction in this dissertation represents occurred in stages known as the Third Wave, beginning in the 1970s, and the Fourth Wave, which peaked in the 1990s. Between 1989 and 2009, 1.6 million Jews left the FSU, with 61% immigrating to Israel and the rest to the United States and Germany.[27] The wave to Israel came to be known as the Great Aliyah. Lobbying on the part of American Jews, which put pressure on the US government and Soviet leaders, was indispensable in facilitating the relocation project.

Since its inception, American Jews portrayed the project as a rescue mission. The biblical narrative of Jews' exodus from Egypt provided the language and imagery for the

25 Remennik, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 37.

26 See Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). What historians of American Jews refer to as the third Jewish migration is also known as the second migration of Russian Jews.

27 For statistics on late-twentieth century Russian-Jewish migration, see Mark Tolts, "Demography of the Contemporary Russian-Jewish Diaspora," Conference on Contemporary Russian-Speaking Jewish Diaspora, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, November 13-15, 2011.

lobbying efforts, including the slogan "let my people go."[28] The narrative stated that Jews needed to leave in order to avoid systematic discrimination and to enjoy the freedom to practice Judaism. The rationale was that through re-education abroad, Russian-speaking Jews would be able to return to their Jewish roots. Organizations, including HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and Joint, also known as JDC (The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) aided Soviet Jews through the immigration, acculturating them in the process. In Chapter 4, I examine the interactions between immigrants and agencies through Bezmozgis' *The Free World*. As Bezmozgis shows, it was during these interactions that Russian-speaking Jews, who were constantly reminded of their status as Jews in the Soviet Union, became confronted with the idea that they were not real Jews. The comparison of novels written about the different waves shows that refusenik-era immigrants appeared heroic and driven by "pull factors" to their hosts, while immigrants from the turn of the twenty-first century appeared more disempowered and motivated by "push factors."[29]

Writers of the Soviet-Jewish diaspora do not deny, but in fact dramatize, the disaggregation of immigrant identities and their alienation from Judaic culture. These dramatizations must be decoded against their historical context, particularly the establishment of Jewishness [*evreistvo*] as an official identity category in the Soviet Union. The unification of the Soviet republics and the creation of the Soviet nationalities

28 Murray Friedman and Albert D. Chernin, *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999); and Stuart Altshuler, *From Exodus to Freedom: A History of the Soviet Jewry Movement (*Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

29 Larissa Fialkova and Maria Yelenevskaya define pull and push factors thusly, "While pull factors have a positive nature and are characterized as facilitating or enabling, push factors are associated with constraints and exclusion," in *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 39. In other words, previous immigrants were thought to be pulled toward Israel while late-twentieth century immigrants were pushed by socioeconomic factors.

policy divided the peoples of the Russian empire into distinct national groups. Yet even before these state-sponsored efforts, Jewish identity began to split apart into a religious category – Judaism [*iudeistvo* or *iudaizm*] and a secular, ethno-national category – Jewishness [*evreistvo*]. Since then, a Jew would be called either *evrei* or *iudei*. At the turn of the twentieth century, Russian speakers already used the terms *evreistvo* and *iudeistvo* exclusively rather than interchangeably.[30] The Jewish thinker and activist Simon Dubnow relied on the term "*evreistvo*" in his efforts to imagine Jewish nationhood, which he referred to as "a new Jewishness" [*novoe evreistvo*].[31] This is to say that Jews in Russia participated in the creation of this secular ethno-national identity, believing in its potential to liberate them from their religious upbringings.

The term *evreistvo* also fit well with Soviet attempts to create secular ethnic communities that would fulfill Joseph Stalin's definition of a nation. Entrusted with the task of addressing the nationality problem, Stalin claimed in his 1913 writings that "a nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture."[32] However, national identity [*natsional'nost'*] became an inheritable identity when the state required that it be listed in the internal passports of all Soviet citizens on what became known as "the fifth point." Since 1938, registrars recorded each individual's nationality based on information

30 According to Judith Kornblatt, "The two terms for 'Jew' were not so distinct in the late nineteenth century, when the Jewish question was so hotly debated," in *Doubly Chosen: Jewish Identity, the Soviet Intelligentsia, and the Russian Orthodox Church* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 49.

31 I refer here specifically to Dubnow's letters which were collected and published as *Pis'ma o starom i novom evreistve* (1897-1907) in St. Petersburg, in 1907. For more on Jewish nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia, see Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

32 Joseph Stalin*, Marxism and the National and Colonial Question: A Collection of Articles and Speeches*, ed. A. Feinberg (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 8.

in birth certificates.[33] Like other Soviet minorities, Jews could not choose their nationalities but had to become *evreii*.

However, in order to embody the concept of *evrei* and fit into the larger Soviet nationalities schema, Jews had to transform. State-sponsored efforts in the 1920s and 1930s encouraged Jews to develop a secular national culture, which emphasized Yiddish as the official Jewish language and relied on Sovietized versions of Judaic rituals. For example, Jewish Passover dinners, seders, became "red seders," or celebrations of the liberation of the Russian-Jewish proletariat from backward Judaism.[34] This investment in the development of the Jews as a nationality dramatically waned in the post-war era, when Jews allegedly became disproportionately preoccupied with their particular condition. Certainly, the events associated with the campaign against cosmopolitanism made it clear to Jews that they had to take care to not be "too Jewish" and to conform to the dominant culture, Russian.[35] Gitelman, who discusses these transformations of Jews and their culture under Soviet policies, probably intends to be descriptive when he concludes that Jewish identity became thin and without content. However, his terminology is laden with value judgements, reinforcing the Soviet, Western and Israeli history of judging Russian Jews as being either "too Jewish" or "not Jewish enough."

Alternatively, as scholars, we can resist the temptation of focusing on the ways in which Russian-Jews fail at manifesting a prototypical Jewish identity by investigating

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33 Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 294.

34 Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 35.

35 According to Yuri Slezkine, "'Russian' and 'Soviet' had always been related...the Sovietness of the Soviet state was predominantly Russian," in *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 277. When the poets who were members of JAC were not sufficiently Soviet, it was implied that they were not sufficiently "nonethnic," to borrow Slezkine's term, and therefore not Russian enough.

how they re-interpret and improvise on Jewish rituals in the context of their Soviet experience. As Anna Shternshis' work shows, Russian-speaking Jews have Soviet-influenced concepts of Jewish authenticity, which have evolved from one generation to the next. Without rejecting Gitelman's theoretical framework, Shternshis amends it, focusing on the transitional generation between traditionally-raised and thin-cultured Jews.[36] She opens her study with the introduction of a member of this generation, Sara F., who is in the process of cooking what she refers to as "kosher pork." "Kosher pork" is, of course, an oxymoron in the context of Judaic law. Yet, as Shternshis explains, it is not that her subject is ignorant or wrong about Jewish dietary laws but that she manifests an identity influenced by the Soviet cultural policies of the 1920s and 1930s.[37] According to Shternshis, as a result of these policies, "Soviet Jews did not consciously choose their Jewish practices."[38] However, as Shternshis and Markowitz show, ex-Soviet Jews willfully reproduce these unorthodox customs. The act of cooking kosher pork, after all, is similar to the celebration of a bat mitzvah at a Russian restaurant in Brighton Beach. Both gestures involve pushing against the boundaries of Jewish traditions while also adapting them to Soviet and immigrant circumstances. For Sara F., pork becomes kosher when it is prepared by a person with "a Jewish soul."[39] Considering her perspective as an expression of cultural translation, rather than misinterpretation, makes it possible to use Russian Jews as case studies for the constant evolution of Jewish identity.

To idealize Russian Jews as radical thinkers who intentionally destabilize stable constructions of Jewish identity, would mean to place them once again on the borders of

36 Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, xiii.
37 Ibid., xiv.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., xiii.

Jewish culture. Like members of any other group, Russian Jews display a diversity of strategies for self-labeling, which depend on their generation, socioeconomic status or trajectory of migration. Their testimonies, as collected by the social scientists already mentioned, show that Russian-speaking Jews often express essentialist views of Jewish identity, referring to *evreistvo* as "something genetic."[40] Yet, at the same time, immigration, which has caused ex-Soviet Jews to become Russians or Russian Jews, has clearly altered their internalized monoculturalism. In the Soviet Union, a Russian Jew was a contradiction in terms, as each minority belonged to a single identity category. By accepting their Russian identities in immigration, ex-Soviets are not only rebelling against their host-culture's assimilation policies, but also taking advantage of the freedom to express hyphenated identities. Despite conceptualizing their Jewishness as a matter of blood, Russian-speaking Jews are known for having high rates of intermarriage and procreation with non-Jews.[41] At times, Jewish identification is indeed a context-dependent gesture for ex-Soviets, such as when it occurs in response to anti-Semitism. Additionally, many scholars note that for many Russian-speaking Jews, being Jewish means embodying the Soviet ideal of intellectualism [*intelligentnost*'], or being a cultured and moral human being, rather than a "biological" Jew.[42] As I show in Chapter 3, while analyzing the work of Liudmila Ulitskaia, having predominantly secular identities has allowed Jews to make conscious choices about religious affiliation in the post-Soviet moment. These choices range from complete refusal to belong to any religious institution to symbolic conversion to religious Judaism or to other religions, such as Christianity.

40 Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen*, 33.

41 On Russian-Jewish immigrants and intermarriage, see Mark Tolts, "Mixed Marriage and Post-Soviet Aliyah," *Jewish Intermarriage Around the World,* ed. Shulamit Reinharz and Sergio DellaPergola (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2009), 89-104.

42 For example, see Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine*, 112.

The specificity of the Soviet-Jewish experience has made the identities of Russian-speaking immigrants disaggregated in ways that appear strange and problematic to American or Israeli Jews. However, post-Soviet Jewish fiction, which represents departures and encounters between immigrants and hosts, suggests that all parties involved respond to these perceived differences by re-evaluating what it means to be a Jew. Being immigrants, Russian-Jews are especially aware of their cultural fragmentation as it necessarily increases in the process of relocation and integration. As I argue in Chapter 2, Rubina illustrates this idea in her novel *Here Comes the Messiah!* by splitting her character into two personas – one being a model immigrant and the other a Russian-Jewish outcast who cannot fit into Israeli society. On the other hand, in *Absurdistan*, Gary Shteyngart introduces readers to a young Russian Jew who longs for the privilege of occupying multiple identity categories, which he associates with American Jews. Shteyngart, in this way, suggests that it is Russian Jews who often see themselves as trapped in their Jewish identities, regarding American Jews as voluntarily disaggregated and therefore complex. Jews who act as hosts to Russian-speaking immigrants in North America and Israel experience the inconsistencies of their identities in the background as a result of their more socioeconomically privilege positions. Coming into contact with immigrants can conceivably bring these inconsistencies to the foreground for American and Israeli Jews. Regardless of their outcome, the interactions between immigrants and hosts expose tensions, conflicting biases about the basis of Jewish identity, but also resemblances that are obscured by culturally specific ways of communicating. For example, as I show in Chapter 4, there are striking parallels between American Jews' and Russian Jews' tendencies to pick and choose between religious and secular aspects of

their identities. Yet, while Americans map their Jewish identities onto religious categories, Russian Jews predominantly prefer the category of ethnicity, or more precisely, the Russian term nationality [*natsional'nost*'].

In Post-Soviet Jewish literature, disaggregated selves correlate to disaggregated conceptions of geopolitical space. As the writers in this dissertation show, ex-Soviet Jews' deracinated identities are shaped not only by their exile from the Soviet Union, but also by their history as an extraterritorial minority within the Soviet Union. In the pre-revolutionary period, some groups, most notably the Bund, the Jewish socialist labor party in the Russian Empire, expressed the goal of attaining control over their social and cultural institutions without occupying an autonomous territory.[43] This desire for extraterritorialism was a reaction to Zionism and to life within the boundaries of the Pale of Settlement which limited Jews' mobility in the Russian Empire. In his writings on the nationality question, Joseph Stalin directly expresses frustration with the Bund's demands, arguing that Jews would not become a nation until they gained linguistic homogeneity and territorial rootedness.[44] In a certain sense, Stalin already saw Jews as rootless cosmopolitans in 1913.

The stereotype of the Wandering Jew, which undeniably lies behind the concept of a rootless cosmopolitan, appears frequently in Soviet literature, encapsulating the problem of the Jew's diasporic condition. Sasha Senderovich argues that the problem of

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43 The Bund subscribed to Dubnow's theory of Jewish Autonomism, an anti-Zionist view of Jewish nationalism based on the development of Jewish culture, including Yiddish. According to Jonathan Frankel, "Although Dubnov and [Chaim] Zhitlovsky were the first to advocate the ideal of autonomism (or extraterritorial self-government), the Bund alone took it up at an early stage (in 1901) and thus lent it real weight. It was adopted in the years 1905-6 by nearly all the Jewish parties in Russia," *Prophecy and Politics*, 171.

44 Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question,* 41-46.

the Wandering Jew became synonymous with the Jewish Question in the USSR.[45] To address the problem internally and thus divert Jews' attention from Palestine, the Soviet Union established its own “red promised land” in the the Far East territory known as Birobidzhan. Established in 1934 and officially titled the Jewish Autonomous Region, Birobidzhan mirrored Israel in state-sponsored rhetoric that placed emphasis on attachment to land and agricultural production.[46] Yet, as Senderovich illustrates, the image of the Wandering Jew did not disappear from the Jewish collective consciousness, but returned to challenge Birobidzhan's status as a Jewish national homeland.[47] Though Birobidzhan retains its Jewish identity to this day, the territory's low Jewish population rates at the height of its settlement support scholars' pronouncements that the project was “largely unsuccessful.”[48]

Soviet attempts to impose territorial rootedness on its minorities, combined with the Jews' tradition of concentrating in metropolitan centers and their experiences of evacuation and voluntary relocation within the Soviet Union, have a residual influence on the immigrants' sense of space and national belonging. It is no wonder that Russian-speaking Jews subscribe to narratives of exile that often fail to intersect with their hosts' concepts of Jewish diaspora. Although it flourished among Jews in late imperial Russia, Zionism lost popularity on the eve of the revolution and became stigmatized and

45 Sasha Senderovich, “The Red Promised Land: Narratives of Jewish Mobility in Early Soviet Culture” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), 221-223.

46 For more on Birobidzhan, see Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland: An Illustrated History, 1928-1996* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

47 Senderovich, “The Red Promised Land,” 272. Senderovich uses the writings of Semyon Gekht to show the the persistence of the Wandering Jew in Russian-Jewish literature.

48 According to Shternshis, “in 1933 the Jewish population reached only about 8, 200,” *Soviet and Kosher*, xv.

criminalized in the Soviet Union.[49] Zionist ideologies played a much more dramatic role in shaping Jewish-American and, of course, Israeli constructions of home, diaspora and national identity.[50] The ideology maps Jewish space in terms of a homeland, located exclusively in the state of Israel, and scattered locales of life in exile. In other words, Zionism subscribes to a "spatial model predicated on center and margins" that is traceable to the earliest conceptualizations of Jewish diaspora.[51] Historically, exile, the event that produces diaspora, *galut* in Hebrew, has had "overwhelmingly negative connotations" in Jewish culture, thus casting a shadow on diasporic existence.[52] Yet as Barbara Mann reminds us, secular and religious Jewish thinkers have had conflicting attitudes toward the prospect of returning to their biblically-designated center. Dubnow's theory of extraterritorial Jewish Autonomism is one of the most famous counter-Zionist and pro-*galut* ideologies. Zionism's firmly negative stance on *galut*, devaluation of diaspora life, and insistence on "return" to what is now a politically sovereign Jewish state filter through Israeli culture, appearing especially in policies and laws surrounding immigration, most notably the Law of Return.[53] In the second chapter of this dissertation, I use Rubina's fiction to analyze Russian Jews' struggles and successes with inserting themselves into the narrative of return and adopting Israel as their home.

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49 On the development of Zionism in Imperial Russia, see Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics.* On how communism usurped Zionism during and after the revolution, see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* , 200-373.

50 On the role of Zionism in shaping Jewish American culture, see, for example, Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 320-330.

51 Barbara Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 98. Mann also makes a distinction between diaspora and exile, in contrast to the tendency to use the words exile, scattering and diaspora synonymously in Jewish culture.

52 Ibid.

53 See William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," *Israel Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005): 36-60. According to Safran, "Zionists hoped for a 'negation' of the diaspora [*shlilat hagalut*]," 44. The Law of Return, passed in 1950, grants to Jews who the fulfill necessary criteria the right to immigrate and acquire citizenship in Israel.

The Zionist belief that Jews should share a single homeland and, as a result, a homogeneous diasporic condition frequently clashes with the Russian-Jewish immigrant experience, suggesting the existence of multiple diaspora paths for Jews. Olga Gershenson claims that Russian-speaking Jews "are part of a traditional Jewish diaspora and of a new Russian diaspora."[54] In other words, they are simultaneously attached to and distanced from two countries and cultures. Indeed, the phrases "Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora," "Russian-Jewish diaspora," and "Soviet-Jewish diaspora" have entered the lexicons of literary and social studies. The relationship between the two diaspora narratives is difficult to pin down, leading to a set of conceptual questions. Does one diaspora negate the other? Does the reversal of one diaspora *produce* the other? How do the two diasporas intersect in immigrant psyches? As writings by Shteyngart and Bezmozgis reflect, even the Russian-Jewish immigrants who chose to come to America could not escape the Israel issue, given its centrality in mainstream Jewish-American culture. In the US, Russian Jews developed strong attachments to Israel but also to "the country that no longer exists" – the former Soviet Union.[55] Which place is the site of exile and which is the homeland for the immigrants? According to Gershenson, because of their doubly diasporic condition, "these immigrants...make us rethink the meaning of homeland and exile."[56]

The persistence of diaspora is a major theme in the literature of this dissertation. This theme helps analyze not only the contradictory status of Russian Jews as immigrant returnees in Israel but also Israelis' unresolved feelings toward their homeland. As Mann

54 Olga Gershenson, "'Is Israel Part of Russia?' Immigrants on Russian and Israeli Screens," *Israel Affairs* 17 no. 1 (2011): 164.

55 On Russian-Jews' support of Israel, see Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 199; Jonathon Ament, "Jewish Immigrants in the United States" *National Jewish Population Survey* 7 (2004), 17.

56 Gershenson, "'Is Israel Part of Russia?,'" 164.

observes, despite the creation of a Jewish state, “the diaspora does not disappear...rather, it continues and even thrives as Israel's potential rival.”[57] More than that, diaspora continues to exist *within* Israel, among Russian-Jews who see themselves as outsiders in relation to native Israelis.[58] According to Siegel, these immigrants refuse to give up their “Diaspora [Russian and Soviet] traditions and culture.”[59] Citing her mother as a case study, Gomel discusses the Russian Jews' difficulty in reconciling the mythical Promised Land with Israel, the nation-state with real sociopolitical problems. Gomel's mother, who incidentally also claims to “have never lived in any place that was home to [her],” expresses dedication to Israel as an idea while also declaring that she “cannot stand the country.”[60] As I show in Chapter 2, Rubina's Israeli fiction, particularly her story “The Jerusalemites,” firmly establishes Jerusalem's mythical status in the Russian-Jewish collective consciousness, suggesting a sense of homelessness on the part of immigrants who are connected to two “countries” that no longer exist – Jerusalem and the USSR. Yet, perhaps most surprisingly, Russian-speaking immigrants share feelings of homelessness with native-born Jewish Israelis.

Wandering, exile and the search for home are also themes in contemporary Hebrew literature, as scholars of Hebrew literature show. Sidra Ezrahi, in particular, identifies "growing signs of dislocation, shifts in the center of gravity corresponding to increasingly mobile boundaries of the Hebrew self.”[61] Consequently, “'exile' as the repressed other becomes the critique of a culture of the static and the whole.”[62] More

57 Barbara Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies*, 105.
58 Dina Siegel, *The Great Immigration*, 33-34.
59 Siegel, xix.
60 Gomel, *Pilgrim Soul*, 70, 76.
61 Sidra Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 239.
62 Ibid.

concretely, the emigration of native-born Israelis from Israel to such countries as the United States, and the consequent creation of what Steven J. Gold calls the Israeli diaspora, similarly compromises simplistic conceptions of Jewish diaspora. According to Gold, "as both Jews and Israelis, Israeli emigrants are part of two diasporas – the age-old Jewish diaspora as well as the recently established...Israeli diaspora."[63] The multiple trajectories of contemporary Jewish migrants inevitably point to the existence of multiple centers. For example, some Jews, who make pilgrimage to the tombs of Hasidic founders, view Ukraine as a Jewish cultural center.[64]

With so many exilic trajectories and so many centers, why continue to rely on the concept of diaspora while discussing contemporary Jewish identities? Some scholars, most notably, Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, suggest breaking with the term, encouraging Jews to imagine "the end of the Jewish diaspora."[65] Aviv and Shneer's provocation is motivated by their their desire to subvert the dichotomy of exile and home in Jewish thinking, in other words, the center-periphery model that Mann also identifies.[66] The dichotomy, which lies at the heart of Zionist ideologies, has led to "the centrality of Israel in Jewish geography, culture, and memory," which Aviv and Shneer set out to challenge in their work.[67] More specifically, they undermine Israel's status as the geopolitical nucleus of Jewish culture with case studies of Jewish rootedness in the diaspora. Aviv and

63 Steven J. Gold, *The Israeli Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2002), vii.

64 For more on this phenomenon, see Mitsuharu Akao, "A New Phase in Jewish-Ukrainian Relations?: Problems and Perspectives in the Ethno-politics over the Hasidic Pilgrimage to Uman," *East European Jewish Affairs* 37, no. 2 (2007): 137-155. According to Akao, the gravesite of Rabbi Nachman of Braslav in the Ukrainian city of Uman, "has become the principal Jewish sacred place outside of Israel, attracting 15,000-20,000 pilgrims annually from more than 40 countries during Rosh Hashanah," 137.

65 Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

66 Ibid., xv.

67 Ibid., 19.

Shneer's position is, in part, a response to the collaborative effort by Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin to deploy diaspora for imagining a deterritorialized and specifically stateless Jewish identity. The brothers Boyarin similarly resist Israel's centrality in Jewish culture, promoting what they view to be "the diasporic genius of Jewishness, that genius that consists in the exercise and preservation of cultural power separate from the coercive power of the state."[68] Diasporic Jewish culture, according to the Boyarins, negates the idea that a people requires a physical, bounded territory in order to continue to exist. Aviv and Shneer's work, on the other hand, implicitly warns about the risk of thinking about exile as a permanent condition and of home as an elusive object, presumably because this can breed the desire to overcompensate with a strong, sovereign homeland. What Shneer and Aviv overlook is that dislocation continues to be a lived reality or a very recent memory for immigrants such as those from the FSU. For this reason, we must take seriously post-Soviet writers' enduring investment in the concept, if not the term, diaspora.[69]

Yet ultimately, both perspectives, Aviv and Shneer's, as well as the Boyarins', are relevant for this study, particularly in combination. Daniel Boyarin's claim that "diasporic identity is a disaggregated identity" captures the parallel between decentered space and disaggregated selves that emerges from contemporary Russian-Jewish fiction.[70] Aviv and Shneer's effort to examine the multiple ways in which Jews root themselves, as well as the multi-directional nature of Jewish movement, is valuable for understanding the changing conditions of doubly diasporic Jews. Russian Jews, in particular, have gone

68 Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xii.

69 The term "diaspora" rarely appears in the fiction analyzed in this dissertation.

70 Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 243.

from being "passportless wanderers" to having multiple passports and "double citizenship," accompanied by "double emotional allegiance."[71] As I show in the second chapter, Dina Rubina's work addresses the evolution of immigrant mentalities, from focusing on homelessness to juggling multiple homes. The co-existence of double citizenship and double diaspora leads us to reject the dichotomy of rootedness and rootlessness. The concept of rootless cosmopolitanism collapses the dichotomy by suggesting the simultaneity of alienation and belonging.

Post-Soviet writers' insistence on the doubly diasporic consciousness of Russian-Jewish immigrants intervenes in debates about diaspora that go beyond the Jewish context. The field of Diaspora Studies often treats Jewish diaspora as a stable and homogeneous concept. Indeed, the work of such scholars as William Safran, which I analyze more closely in Chapter 2, positions Jewish diaspora as exceptional, original and paradigmatic – a "prototype" for determining the categorical legitimacy of other diasporas, be they Armenian, Chinese, Greek.[72] It is not surprising that more recent conceptualizations of diaspora in terms of rhizomes or "lateral axes" set themselves apart from the Jewish prototype.[73] For example, theories of African diaspora, such as Paul Gilroy's, which imagines a decentered transatlantic space, are often juxtaposed with the center-periphery model, which is still associated with the Jewish diaspora.[74] Russian Jews

71 Gomel, *Pilgrim Soul*, 3. Also see, Larissa Remennick, "The Russian-Jewish Transnational Social Space: An Overview," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 4, no. 1 (2011): 1-13.

72 William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," 36-60.

73 For usage of the phrases "lateral axes" and "lateral connections," see James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302-338. Clifford, who engages with the work of Daniel Boyarin, argues "Decentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return," 306. For applications of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizome model to diaspora theory see, J. Lorand Matory, "The Homeward Ship: Analytic Tropes as Maps of and for African-Diaspora Cultural History," in *Transforming Ethnographic Knowledge*, ed. Rebecca Hardin and Kamari Maxine Clarke (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 93-113.

74 I refer to the paradigm introduced by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

who have had to contemplate multiple experiences of dislocation also subvert prototypical theories of diaspora. Combining Soviet experiences of mobility and exile with Zionist and Judaic narratives, the immigrant characters in post-Soviet fiction experience hybrid and conflicted diasporas. Moreover, the literature in this dissertation that directly confronts Israel's concept of return migration supports the effort to resist teleological diaspora reversal, which is one of the goals of contemporary diaspora theory. Novels, such as Rubina's *Here Comes the Messiah!* and Bezmozgis' *The Free World,* dramatize the disappointments of diasporic homecomings for ex-Soviets, thus validating the emphasis on an "indefinite deferral of return" that marks the work of such scholars as James Clifford.[75] As I show, Stuart Hall's seminal essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," which theories African diaspora in which Africa is "necessarily 'deferred' – as a spiritual, cultural and political metaphor," applies to the work of post-Soviet writers who challenge idealizations of literal returns the homeland.[76] Writers dealing with Russian-Jewish migration thus recapture what Clifford refers to as "the principled *ambivalence* about physical return and attachment to land" that can be found in the Jewish Scriptures as well as in Jewish socialists treatises.[77] By gesturing toward connections between Russian-Jewish fiction and theoretical work in Diaspora Studies, including African and Caribbean diaspora theories, I stress the importance of examining Jewish diasporas in a transnational context.

Relying on the phrase "rootless cosmopolitan" allows me to evoke the increasing

75 Clifford, 321.

76 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 437.

77 Clifford, "Diasporas," 305. I refer again to Dubnow and Zhitlovsky. Additionally, I evoke the command to "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit...Multiple there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you..." (Jeremiah 29:4-7), in Barbara Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies*, 99.

intersection between the concepts of diaspora and cosmopolitanism as they continue to proliferate across the fields of cultural, migration and global studies. The term cosmopolitanism connotes socioeconomic privileges and mobility, and, according to Kwame Anthony Appiah, "an unpleasant posture of superiority toward the putative provincial."[78] Other scholars have highlighted the utopian nature of cosmopolitanism as a philosophy of identities and communities that exist globally, unbounded by nation-state citizenship. According to the editors of a recent critical anthology on cosmopolitanism, "as a practice...cosmopolitanism is yet to come, something awaiting realization."[79] However, these scholars also see the potential of attributing cosmopolitanism to "refugees, peoples of the diaspora...migrants, and exiles," and thinking about the concept historically in terms of "how people have thought and acted beyond the local."[80] Soviet Jews' fraught history as rootless cosmopolitans make them appropriate case studies for thinking about not only the privileges but also the inconveniences of cosmopolitanism in a world of nation-states. The tensions and overlaps between the fiction in this dissertation and research on immigrants suggests that for Russian-speaking Jews, rootless cosmopolitanism is both the stuff of history and "something awaiting realization." My work in this dissertation intends to speed up this process and to introduce rootless cosmopolitanism as a critical paradigm to other scholars working on groups who must wrestle with the double question of identity and belonging in the age of mass migration.

Literary Context

78 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), xii.
79 Carol A. Breckenridge et al., eds., *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.
80 Ibid., 6, 10.

Hybridity and disaggregation characterize not only the subject-matter of the texts in this dissertation, but also their position in literary studies. I bring together writers whose work appears in multiple canons, but also destabilizes standard literary categories. Ulitskaia, who is based in the Russian Federation, and Rubina, an Israeli citizen, are recognized as being Russian writers in the Russian Federation and beyond. Both authors are honored by the most prestigious Russian literary awards, including the Russian Booker and Big Book [*Bol'shaia kniga*] prizes. They also enjoy representation by one of the largest publishing houses in the Russian Federation, Eksmo. Scholars in the field of Slavic literature in the United States lend critical attention to Rubina and Ulitskaia and include them in anthologies of Russian literature.[81] Rubina and Ulitskaia also have a growing presence in the field of Jewish Studies in the United States, making appearances in multinational collections of Jewish prose.[82] Given their large oeuvres, which include numerous texts that do not treat Jewish themes, Ulitskaia and Rubina are not primarily recognized as Jewish authors. Though they are rarely compared in the West, both Russian-language writers inspire scholarship that creates intersections between Russian, Soviet and Jewish cultures.

Intersections and combinations of labels become necessary for situating the

81 See for example, Paul Richardson, ed., *Life Stories: Original Works by Russian Authors* (Montpellier: Stories for Good, 2009); Nadezhda Peterson, *Russian Love Stories: An Anthology of Contemporary* Prose (New York: P. Lang, 2009), *Nine of Russia's Foremost Women Writers* (Moscow: Glass, 2004); Maxim Shrayer, ed., *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry* (Armonk: Sharpe, 2007); Benjamin Sutcliffe, *The Prose of Life: Russian Women Writers from Khrushchev to Putin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

82 For example, Rubina appears in Daniel Jaffe, ed., *With Signs and Wonders: An International Anthology of Jewish Fabulist Fiction* (Montpellier: Invisible Cities Press, 2001); Ulitskaia appears in several Jewish anthologies including, Thomas Nolden and Frances Malino, eds., *Voices of the Diaspora: Jewish Women Writing in Contemporary Europe* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

literary identities and works by all of the writers in this project. As a writer who lives in Israel but publishes exclusively in Russian, Rubina presents a fascinating and increasingly more common case study. The commonality is due to the fact that Israel currently has a productive Russian-language cultural scene, with numerous cultural institutions and literary figures, though none as commercially successful as Rubina. The adjectives "Russian," "Jewish" and "Israeli" not only meet but also come into tension within the work of writers like Rubina. The very existence of the Russian-language literary milieu in Israel challenges the conventional association between Jewish writer and Hebrew language in Israeli culture. The explosion of Russian immigrant culture in Israel undermines not only the *rak ivrit,* "only Hebrew," policy identified by Gomel, but also Israel's investment in Hebrew as a tool for forging national identity. As Gomel reminds us, speaking more generally, "the rise of the nation-state created the ideological trinity of one people, one land, and one language."[83] I illustrate that the writers of post-Soviet Jewish literature disaggregate this trinity in the content of their fiction and with their literary personas, which manifest disunity between the authors' public identity, language and geographical base. Moreover, there is a productive, though currently unrecognized, parallel between the work of writers like Rubina and the work of Arab-Israeli writers currently publishing in Hebrew, such as Sayed Kashua. Nathaniel Deutsch observes that Kashua's reliance on Hebrew rather than Arabic accomplishes a "decoupling" of Hebrew and Jewishness.[84] I believe that, by not using Hebrew, Russian-Israeli writers participate in an inverse, but politically analogous, disaggregation when producing Russian-language fiction within an Israeli cultural context. The cultural and

83 Gomel, *Pilgrim Soul*, 123.
84 Nathaniel Deutsch, e-mail message to author, April 23, 2013.

linguistic hybridity of both groups of writers pushes against the boundaries of Hebrew and Jewish literature as well as the more universal expectation of consistency between a writer's language, political allegiance and cultural identity.

The English-language writers whose work I examine in this dissertation, David Bezmozgis and Gary Shteyngart, present similar problems for canonical categorization, but also opportunities for reconfiguration. Bezmozgis and Shteyngart are recognized as belonging to a literary wave of Russian-American literature, which also includes such writers as Lara Vapnyar, Sana Krasikov, Nadia Kalman, Irina Reyn, Ellen Litman, and Anya Ulinich. All of these writers were born in the FSU and all engage with the Russian-Jewish immigrant experience in the US, with the exception of Bezmozgis, who also represents Canada's Russian-speaking Jews in his fiction. As Yelena Furman notes, these authors are commonly grouped under the category of "Russian-American" even though "Russian-Jewish-American" is the more precise phrase.[85] Adrian Wanner maps writers like Shteyngart and Bezmozgis onto another literary matrix, which he refers to as translingual diaspora fiction, or literature by immigrants of all ethnic backgrounds from Russia that is written in the host language. Grouping the anglophone writers together with Andreï Makine and Ilya Kaminer, who publish in French and German respectively, Wanner successfully identifies a trend of Russian self-fashioning.[86] The dynamic of cultural affirmation and disavowal contributes to the diasporic status of this literature, which initially appears to be assimilationist. Yet despite Russian-American fiction's willingness to reference Russian literature, through intertextual or semantic play, its

85 Yelena Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts: Embracing the Hyphen in Russian-American Fiction," *Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 1 (2011): 19-38.
86 Adrian Wanner, *Out of Russia.*

relationship to contemporary Russian culture has been aggressively undermined.[87] There is, however, some hope for the future of Russian-Jewish-American prose in Russian literary milieus. When speaking at a conference on contemporary Russian Fiction, Irina Prokhorova, the editor of the Russian publishing house the New Literary Observer [*NLO - Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*], included Shteyngart in her vision of a transnational Russian literature.[88] At the same time, in the US, it is the fields of Russian literature and Slavic studies that lend significant attention to Russian-American fiction.[89] These scholars tend to explicitly and implicitly agree that the emergent tradition straddles the traditions of Russian émigré fiction, US immigration literature and Russian literature. At the same time, current research rarely addresses the relationship between Russian-American and Russian fiction.

This project is the first to stage a transnational and translingual literary conversation on the theme of the Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora. In addition to treating this theme, the authors in this dissertation publicly express a sense of membership in a Jewish community. At the same time, these authors make clear their desire not to be reduced to the category of "Jewish writer," preferring to identify themselves in a way that depends on their context. For example, when asked whether he considers himself to be a Jewish writer on March 3rd, 2013, Gary Shteyngart responded by saying "that depends, when I am at a 'Jewish Storytellers' conference at Stanford University, then yes, I am a Jewish writer, when I am at [some other conference] then not

87 Gary Shteyngart, who has been translated into Russian, has mostly received harsh reviews.
88 Irina Prokhorova, "The Art of Remembering and Forgetting: Contemporary Russian Literature in Search of Identity," Conference "Decadence or Renaissance: Russian Literature Since 1990," Oxford University, Oxford, United Kingdom 24-26 September 2012.
89 See, for example the special issue on Russian-American fiction of the *Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 1 (2011).

so much." Shteyngart here does not imply that he sometimes misinforms his audience, but rather underscores his agency in emphasizing certain cultural affiliations over others depending on the focus of the conversation surrounding his writing. Shteyngart, Rubina, Bezmozgis and Ulitskaia would be considered "Jewish writers" according to definitions that state that Jewish literature must address Jewish themes or that argue that Jewish literature is "literature written by Jews...*all* Jews, regardless of any relationship to Judaism or *yiddishkayt* or any of the many versions of Jewishness that have strutted across the stage of modern Jewish history."[90] To the best of my ability, I avoid labeling the authors with racially-laden terms, instead labeling the literature according to its content, relying on the phrases "Soviet-Jewish diaspora literature," "contemporary Russian-Jewish fiction," or other similar variations. Though I acknowledge that this literature is informed by its writers' authority of experience, I place more emphasis on the literature's engagement with the double question of Jewish identity and location at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this way, I suggest that these writers are more subversive when engaged in conversation, as the cultural hybridity of Soviet-Jewish diaspora literature disaggregates the more stable categories of Russian, Jewish and American literature.

90 Michael Kramer, "Race, Literary History and the 'Jewish' Question," *Prooftexts* 21, no. 3 (2001): 289.

CHAPTER TWO

Impossible Returns: Dina Rubina's Israeli Fiction

"The Law of Return? As if any self-respecting civilized Jew would want to return to a place like this! The ingathering of exiles? As if 'exile' from Jewishness begins to describe the Jewish condition anywhere but here!"

– Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*

"Jerusalem is a myth, a sacred myth," concludes Dina Rubina in her 2001story, "Jerusalemites [*Ierusalimtsy*]."[1] As its title suggests, the story presents a group portrait, but of a sub-set of Jerusalemites, the Russian-speaking immigrants, called *olim* in Hebrew. These are recent immigrants who prefer to speak "in the normal language," Russian, and who enjoy watching news from "[their] country," the Former Soviet Union (FSU).[2] Native Israelis, *sabra*, also appear in the story but they are mediated by the immigrants' gaze. Rubina uses this collection of characters to create an atmosphere and to present her claim that cities, like works of art and famous individuals, can be elevated to the status of myth. Yet while suggesting that Jerusalem, a microcosm for Israel, is one such mythological place, Rubina demystifies it through the essay's ironic tone, stinging caricatures and gritty realism. The conflicts between the immigrants themselves, and between the immigrants and the sabras, are in direct tension with Jerusalem's status as a Jewish utopia. As a result, Rubina's Jerusalem reminds one more of a carnival than of the Promised Land.[3]

1 Dina Rubina, "Ierusalimtsy," *Al't Pereletnyi* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2008), 201.
2 Ibid., 147, 154.
3 On Rubina's use of carnival aesthetics and specifically the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, see Anna Ronell, "Some Thoughts on Russian-Language Israeli Fiction: Introducing Dina Rubina," *Prooftexts* 28, no. 2 (2008): 197-231.

Rubina's emphasis on the banalities and quirks of everyday life stands in contrast with her self-perception as a myth-maker and her belief in Israel's capacity for generating and sustaining mythologies.[3] Moreover, as the most internationally-recognized and prolific Russian-Israeli writer, Rubina is informally known as the voice and literary documentarian of the Great Aliyah. The Great Aliyah, which occurred between 1989 and 2000, and which was composed predominantly by Jews from the FSU, is universally acknowledged to be "the single largest wave of Israeli immigration."[4] Given the richness of Israel's Russian-language milieu, which also claims such literary figures as Alexander Goldstein and Igor Guberman, Rubina's popularity in her adopted country and in the Russian Federation is impressive.[5] By calling herself a creator of myths, Rubina not only asserts her authorial agency to transform her observations into fiction, but also warns her readership against conflating fiction and historical facts. While fully appreciating this gesture, I dedicate this chapter to exploring Rubina's tendency to question and even subvert the myths surrounding Jewish immigration to Israel through her representations of Russian Jews' ambivalent attitudes toward their hostland.

Well before Israel's establishment as a modern nation-state, Zionist thinkers, including Theodor Herzl, portrayed Jewish immigration to Palestine as a return to an ancestral homeland.[6] In this way, Israel's champions drew on what William Safran identifies as the fundamental and inextricable connection between the "myth of

3 In an interview with the online publication *Booknik*, Rubina states, "Every writer is, of course, a producer of myths...and my Israel is a myth." *Booknik*. October 2, 2007. http://booknik.ru/context/all/dina-rubina-izrail-yeto-mif/

4 Larissa Remennick, "Twenty years together: the 'Great Aliya' and Russian Israelis in the Mirror of Social Research," *Israel Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2011): 1. According to Remennick, "about one million former Soviets [arrived] between 1989 and 2000," 1.

5 For a list of Russian-language writers based in Israel, see http://www.litkarta.ru/world/israel/persons/

6 See Theodor Herzl, *Theodor Herzl: Excerpts from His Diaries* (New York: Scopus Pub. Co., 1941), 29.

homeland" and the "myth of return" to the homeland in Jewish thinking about diaspora.[7] These myths, which have been around since Jews' expulsion from Jerusalem by the Babylonians (587 BCE) and the Romans (70 CE), define the the paradigmatic model of diaspora, which Safran equates with the Jewish diaspora. Theorists of diaspora generally agree about the controversial nature of return to the biblical homeland in Jewish culture. As Stéphane Dufoix reminds us, Jews have conceptualized return in not only "political," but also "eschatological" terms, in other words, as an event that would occur in the end of days.[8] Thus, for example, when Jews repeat the well-known phrase, "Next Year in Jerusalem!" they do not necessarily express the desire for a literal return.

However, since achieving statehood, Israel has effectively undermined metaphorical interpretations of return through its policies and language. The state's immigration law, the Law of Return, clearly designates immigrants as returnees. The Hebrew word for immigration, *aliyah*, or ascent, lends moral and mystical connotations to the act, while also reinforcing the image of Israel as the Holy Land. Moreover, as Larissa Remennick points out, "aliyah to Israel is ideologically constructed as homecoming (repatriation)," and as "resettlement," an idea that "many immigrants internalize[d]."[9] Indeed immigrants have been expected to forget that, "[although] the ingathering of the Jewish Diasporas to the State of Israel after 1948 was the largest global project in return migration...the return in this case has been purely symbolic, given

7 William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83-100.

8 See Stéphane Dufoix, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing 'Diaspora': A Study in Socio-Historical Semantics," *Transnationalism: Diaspora and the Advent of a New (Dis)Order*, eds. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg (Boston: Brill, 2009), 47-75. According to Dufoix, "Though harshly conflicting with each other, eschatological and political visions of 'galuth' shared a definition of it as an exile expecting return," 60.

9 Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration and Conflict* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 8, 54.

thousands of years of life in the Diaspora."[10] Yet, as Remennick also shows, ex-Soviet immigrants' high expectations often resulted in "disappointment," "identity crisis," and "social alienation."[11] Rubina, who represents the efforts and failures of Russian-Jewish immigrants to integrate into Israeli society, demythologizes immigration as a return and a spiritual ascent.

Given the interdependence of the myths of homeland and return in Zionism, Rubina's emphasis on the impossibility of return necessarily compromises the mythological view of Israel as the home of all Jews. Rubina portrays Russian Jews as being most at home within Russian-speaking milieus and when surrounded by Soviet culture. Yet she also suggests that being accustomed to their history as extraterritorial Others in the USSR, Russian-speaking immigrants are skeptical about the possibility of finding home. Rubina's fiction thus confirms the shared conclusion of numerous social scientists, namely that Russian Jews' decision to come to Israel was not motivated by ideological reasons, such as the belief in the necessity of diaspora reversal.[12] Scholars analyzing Great Aliyah suggest that FSU immigrants do not buy Israel's return narrative wholesale, despite taking advantage of the Law of Return. These scholars regard Israel's largest wave of immigration as driven by "push" rather than "pull" forces. In other words, the research shows that Russian-speaking Jews were compelled more by the desire to leave the FSU than by the desire to come to Israel. For example, Majid Aj-Haj directly states that members of the Great Aliyah should be considered "normal" immigrants rather

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 282.

12 See Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*; Larissa Fialkova and Maria Yelenevskaya, *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007); Dina Siegel, *The Great Immigration: Russian Jews in Israel* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998); and Majid Al-Haj, *Immigration and Ethnic Formation in a Deeply Divided Society: The Case of the 1990s Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel* (Boston: Brill, 2004).

than *olim*, a label traditionally reserved for subjects who view themselves as ascending to the Promised Land.[13]

Some studies show disagreement. For example, Larisa Fialkova and Maria Yelenevskaya initially claim that "[their] material does not show that the mythology of homecoming to Israel had any palpable impact on the choice of migrants' destination," only to later say, "although for the most part Soviet Jews were secular and assimilated, the notion of the Promised Land was not obliterated from their collective consciousness."[14] Taken collectively, these studies portray Russian-speaking Jews as confounded by, or largely detached from, the diasporic myths surrounding their migration. Rubina's fiction confirms Soviet Jews' fraught relationship with these myths by staging debates between characters on the topics of exile and belonging and by pointing to the historical factors that cause Soviet Jews to be apprehensive about the concepts of homeland and return.

According to Zionist ideology, diaspora Jews are a symbolically homeless people. By coming to Israel, Jews reverse their diasporic status and regain their homeland. This teleological narrative is based on what Caryn Aviv and David Shneer refer to as the "diaspora/homeland dichotomy," or the idea that exile and rootedness in a national territory are mutually exclusive and mutually opposed conditions.[15] These conditions also have different values, suggesting that life in the diaspora is, by definition,

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13 "*Olim*" (*oleh* in the singular) is the Hebrew term for Jews who undergo aliyah. Speaking about the Great Aliyah, Al-Haj claims, "this wave of immigration was motivated not by Jewish-Zionist ideology but by pragmatic cost-benefit considerations," *Immigration and Ethnic Formation in a Deeply Divided Society,* 100. Fialkova and Yelenvskaya make a similar claim when stating, "Although the immigrant wave of the 1990s is referred to as the 'big aliya,' sociologists show that it was more of a migration [in Hebrew, *hagira*] than an aliya," *Ex-Soviets in Israel,* 42.

14 Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 86.

15 Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 4.

inferior to life in the homeland. I illustrate in this chapter that Rubina's work collapses the dichotomy between diaspora and homeland in several different ways. More specifically, Rubina portrays Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel as doubly diasporic subjects, or subjects for whom a new homeland, Israel, becomes the site of a new diaspora, the Soviet-Jewish diaspora. Israel's mythology as the Jewish ancestral homeland additionally complicates the immigrants' notion of their origins. Rubina's fiction also emphasizes that diasporic conditions are necessarily paradoxical, as they suggest simultaneous *distance from* and *belonging to* a place, people or community. As a result, the experience of double diaspora can lead to double belonging and to cosmopolitanism for immigrants who engage in multiple returns, such as back to the FSU, and then again to Israel, ad infinitum. This multidirectional movement blurs the lines between diaspora and homeland while also undoing the teleology and unidirectionality of Israel's return-ascent narrative.

Throughout this chapter I show that Rubina's meditations on space always involve the issue of Russian-Jewish identities, specifically their disaggregation. Being shaped by Soviet, Judaic, and Israeli influences, as well as by the process of dislocation, Russian Jews manifest cultural hybridity and identity crises. Rubina suggests that we should explore, rather than resolve, the ambiguities in Soviet-Jewish identities because they reveal the dynamic nature of selfhood. Her oeuvre participates in this kind of exploration through its content and form. For instance, she enacts the disaggregation of her authorial self by including alter-egos into many of her works. More specifically, Rubina inserts into her novels and short stories, including all of the ones that in this chapter, characters who share biographical information with their author, such as the name Dina. As Anna Ronell

notes, these literary experiments do not warrant simplistic conflations between subject and author. Rather, they testify to Rubina's tendency to play with authorial masks and identities, while also "giv[ing] a sense of coherent, continuous narrative, which in turn give her readers an illusion of familiarity."[16] I suggest that the splitting of Rubina's authorial self communicates the instability and the "familiarity" experienced by rootless cosmopolitanism who enjoy mobility but also negotiate between different cultural milieus, switching or combining the masks "Russian" and "Jew."

This chapter is divided into three sections, "The Push to Return," "A Jewish Diaspora in Israel" and "Homelands as Diasporas." In the first section, I read closely "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden [*Iabloki iz sada Shlitzbuttera*]," Rubina's 1994 short story about Jews living in the Soviet Union on the eve of the mass waves of emigration. The story focuses on a pair of disaggregated and ideologically conflicted Jewish characters as they confront their sense of place in relation to Israel and the Soviet Union. I argue that the story highlights the extraterritorial nature of Soviet-Jewish identities and their internalized fear of being "too Jewish." Combined, both factors make Russian-speaking Jews weary of nationalisms, including Zionism, and consequently, of opting for ethnic repatriation. In the second section, "Jewish Diasporas in Israel," I analyze *Here Comes the Messiah!* [*Vot idet Messia!*], Rubina's 1996 novel that traces the experiences of immigration, *aliyah*, and absorption, at the turn of the twenty-first century for ex-Soviet Jews in Israel. The novel suggests that Russian-speaking subjects who undergo immigration make a genuine attempt to view it as reversal of exile and rootlessness. Yet, as I show, the novel implies that diaspora becomes hybridized as immigrants' feelings of

16 Ronell, "Some Thoughts on Russian-Language Israeli Fiction," 212.

displacement and allegiance double and blend together in the event of their Israeli "homecoming." By portraying immigrant homecomings as difficult and anti-linear processes, *Messiah* questions the aspiration toward return assumed by paradigmatic constructions of Jewish diaspora. The final section, "Homelands as Diasporas," refers to Rubina's more recent works, *The Syndicate* [*Sindikat*] (2004) and *On the Sunny Side of the Street* [*Na Solnechnoi Storone Ulitsy*] (2006), which move away from the topic of immigration in order to identify the transnationalism of Russian-speaking Israelis who navigate at least two paths of departure and return. I suggest that these novels, which place Russian-Israelis in multiple centers, undermine the (single)center-periphery model of diaspora that continues to dominate Jewish culture.

Rubina's perspective is relevant for theoretical discussions about diaspora that currently strive to re-figure traditionally static views of homeland as a territorially, geopolitically and nationally exclusive entity. In this chapter, I show resemblances between Rubina's fiction and the theories of diaspora within and beyond Jewish Studies, thus promoting a comparative and cross-cultural approach. Like scholars of diaspora, Rubina discounts simplistic juxtapositions between the homeland and hostland, and, without articulating a clear position on Israel's existence or repatriation laws, exposes the myths and ideologies that justify the presence of Jews in the Middle East. Her fiction suggests that the case of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants demands new constructions of Jewish diaspora that can dynamically respond to the diversity of Jewish movement at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Push of Return

Rubina is best-known for representing the Russian-speaking community in Israel. Yet her slightly earlier texts, such as the story "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden" show the writer exploring the issues of Jewish identity and geopolitical allegiance from within the Soviet Union. The story is framed as a recollection of the Stagnation period, which preceded the loosening of emigration laws under Gorbachev and the onset of the Great Aliyah. "Apples" presents Soviet Jews grappling with the possibility of leaving behind their places of birth for a homeland in Israel. Rubina dramatizes the dilemma of whether to stay or leave faced by Soviet Jews through an encounter between two characters, Dina and Grisha. Dina, a stylized version of Rubina, and the narrator of the story, is a Jewish woman from Uzbekistan who attempts to help an Uzbek friend publish a short story in a Jewish literary journal during one of her frequent trips to Moscow. When Dina stumbles upon a Yiddish-language journal, she meets Grisha, an elderly member of the editorial staff. Their interaction, which results in a conversation about emigration, suggests that Jews in the Soviet Union critically engaged with their status as a diaspora minority in the USSR and with the issue of homeland.[17] The story highlights the differences in identification, produced by historical, generational and geographical factors, among Soviet Jews. Rubina implies that, despite these differences, Soviet Jews shared a sense of cynicism toward the narrative of return, which stemmed from their ambivalent attitudes toward what the story calls their "national consciousness [*natsional'noe samosoznanie*]," or Jewish self-identification.[18]

17 Francine Hirsch refers to Jews as "diaspora nationalities" in "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 38. According to Hirsch diaspora nationalities were defined as "the diasporas of foreign nations whose allegiance lay elsewhere," *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 290.

18 Dina Rubina, "Iabloki iz sada Shlitzbuttera," *Shkola beglosti pal'tsev: povesti, rasskazy* (Moscow:

Rubina's story argues that subjects who lack a unified Jewish national identity cannot readily envision themselves belonging to a Jewish state. The story implies that historical and cultural forces, including the residual anti-Zionism and the invisibility of Jews in Soviet culture, contributed to a conflicted sense of self on the part of Jewish subjects.[19] "Apples" even directly contextualizes itself within a historical moment when the presence of Jews in Soviet in literature was highly discouraged and regarded as being "not entirely appropriate [*ne sovsem prilichnym*]."[20] It is within this climate that the characters in the story manifest their disaggregated identities, or identities that, according to Zvi Gitelman's definition, lack correspondence between language-use, sense of genetic connection, or ethnicity, and religious practice.[21] Throughout the story, Dina and Grisha fluctuate between regarding the Jewish aspects of their selves as inborn, ethnic or cultural, depending on the context of their conversation. What they agree on is the secular nature of their identities. This kind of cultural fragmentation stems directly from the Soviet effort to secularize Jewishness by separating Judaic rituals from their religious function and co-opting them for political purposes.

Dina shows a high degree of distance from Judaism, which the story encourages us to interpret as a sign of her cultural shame. We learn that Dina represses the memories of her childhood, which are colored by misunderstandings with her Yiddish-speaking

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Eksmo, 2008), 346.

19 While the Soviet Union was one of the first countries to recognize Israel's statehood in 1948, it took a strong stance against Zionism shortly after and distanced itself form Israel after the Six Day War.

20 Rubina, "Iabloki," 319. For a secondary source, see Mikhail Krutikov, "Constructing Jewish identity in Contemporary Russian Fiction," *Jewish Life After the USSR*, eds. Zvi Gitelman, Musya Glants and Marsall I. Goldman (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003), 252-275. Krutikov implicitly supports Rubina's claim view by stating, "In the Russian parlance of the 1960s through the 1980s, *Evrei* – Jew – had a peculiar status, somewhere between a dirty word and a state secret," 253.

21 Gitelman discusses the disaggregation of ethnicity and religion in many of his works. See, for example, Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 126.

grandfather.[22] A member of the generation of Soviet Jews known for displaying the most extreme form of alienation from traditional Jewish culture, Dina has a tenuous connection to the world of her grandfather beyond her personal recollections. When asked on two different occasions in the journal's office who she is, Dina answers, "an accountant." When asked pointedly whether or not she is Jewish, she snaps back, "Who else would I be? [*A kto zhe eshche*?]."[23] She does not enthusiastically embrace Jewishness, but treats it as a biological fact. According to Gitelman's model, Dina is a "thin" Jew whose identity is without content.[24] Yet Dina's response follows the old cliché, and trope in Yiddish humor: Jews always answer questions with questions. More importantly, as the story shows, her residual memories form the hidden backbone of her cultural identity and are easily triggered by Yiddish speech. Upon hearing it in the journal's office, Dina finds herself understanding the language and realizing that she "hadn't forgotten anything – not not even one word, or intonation."[25] She also finds herself transported to the days of her childhood in episodes that the story portrays as out-of-body experiences. Even though she recalls Yiddish totally and revisit memories form her Yiddish-filled past, it is clear that Dina considers herself to be shaped by diverse cultural elements. These include her grandmother's *tsiganka* (Roma) heritage, Dina's place of birth in Tashkent and, perhaps

22 Dina's rejection of Yiddish is typical to her and even earlier generations of Jews in the USSR. As Gitelman explains, "The Soviet Union became the only state in history to fully fund a network of over a thousand Yiddish elementary schools...However many Jews rejected this secular substitute for the Jewish culture they and their ancestors had known on two grounds: 1) for those still clinging to tradition, this was an ersatz and even inimical culture; 2) for those aspiring to upward vocational, political, and – as they saw it – cultural mobility. Yiddish was the culture of the outmoded, backward prescientific *shtetl*, whereas Russian culture was a world culture that it its Soviet form stood for science, technology, rationality, and progress," Zvi Gitelman, "Jewish identity and secularism in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine," *Religion or Ethnicity?: Jewish Identities in Evolution*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 244.

23 Rubina, "Iabloki," 339.

24 On the view that Russian Jews have "thin culture" see, Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (New York: Cambridge University, 2012).

25 Rubina, "Iabloki," 332.

most importantly, her independence and mobility as a cosmopolitan who travels between Tashkent and Moscow, comfortably navigating both urban environments.

Grisha is the story's other rootless cosmopolitan who has wholeheartedly internalized the Soviet "friendship of nations [*druzhba narodov*]" credo and who consequently lacks a "national-ethnic consciousness." The "friendship of nations," or "friendship of peoples," ideology aimed to promote the harmonious coexistence and cooperation between the different Soviet ethnic groups within the nationalities schema. Grisha expresses a genuine affection for this Soviet interpretation of multiculturalism, stating, "I cry when I hear Ukrainian songs. When I hear 'The March of the Patriots,' I also cry, like an old mule."[26] The story makes a point of mentioning that, despite his patriotism and good will toward other Soviet peoples, Grisha was targeted during the campaign against cosmopolitanism. The fact that he was one of the campaign's victims, even serving a prison term, hardly confirms that Grisha was guilty of disseminating ideas that were anti-patriotic or imported from Western Europe, the United States or Israel. The piece of information does, however, symbolically link him with the concept of cosmopolitanism in Rubina's narrative. By preserving his Yiddish, which he refers to as "the native language [*rodnogo iazyka*]," and working at a Yiddish journal, Grisha shows a a strong connection to East European Jewish culture.[27] At the same time, he clearly disassociates the Yiddish language from religious practices in the manner demanded by the Soviet Union. According to Anna Shternshis, an individual such as Grisha belongs to the "'transitional' generation," which came of age under Stalinism.[28] This generation most

26 Ibid., 346.
27 Ibid., 336.
28 Shternshis, xiii.

strongly internalized the disaggregation of Jewishness from Judaism in the USSR. As a result of this education, Grisha, like Dina, resists being reduced to a single identity category.

Rubina uses Dina and Grisha to suggest that because Soviet Jews disassociate the various aspects of their identities, they also struggle with accepting direct connections between peoples and territories. The question of Jews and their homeland enters "Apples" by way of the the short story that Dina brings into the journal's office, which she keeps referring to as "a story by an Uzbek writer on a Jewish theme." The work of fiction is about an old Jewish man who confides in his Uzbek neighbor about the tragedy of his son's departure for Israel. The old man, however, lacks the desire to join his son abroad. Grisha's immediate response to the story is positive and passionate. He exclaims, "What did they [the Jews] forget over there...and what will these degenerates and traitors find? Harmful Zionist propaganda! Bluff and myths!"[29] The story thus inspires him to share his own negative view about Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, particularly to Israel. Grisha praises the piece for featuring officially-sanctioned content, or what he refers to as correct behavior. He also agrees with Dina that the story confirms the value of the Soviet multiculturalism policy and is an overall effective work of propaganda for the Soviet side. Dina, on the other hand, does not express strong feelings about Israel either way. Her hesitation to express a stance is understandable in light of the Soviet Union's active position against Israel under Brezhnev.[30] Dina primarily associates herself with Tashkent, the city of her birth. Yet, in general, she appears to be the kind of person who does not

29 Ibid., 334

30 For more on the Soviet Union and Israel, see Yaacov Ro'i, and Boris Morozov, eds., *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

have to express exclusive national allegiance to any one particular place.

Grisha's exaggerated patriotism and willingness to tow the party line quickly turn out to be a facade for a much more complicated stance toward Israel. As the story makes clear, the issue of return migration deeply affected individuals like Grisha, who had dedicated their lives to correct revolutionary living, faced disappointment with the Soviet system and ultimately accepted their status as cosmopolitan, city-rooted Jews. With the looming opportunity of mass immigration, these individuals had to reconsider their sense of allegiance and what Rubina refers to as their "national consciousness." They had to confront their increasingly antiquated and conflicted worldviews, and "the distorted Soviet concepts of ethnicity, ethnic identity, nationality, and religion."[31] For individuals of Grisha's generation, being a Soviet Jew meant proclaiming one's rootedness in the Soviet motherland.[32] Yet to be a Jew was also to be considered rootless, and to be suspected of collaborating with foreign enemies. The transitional generation, to which Grisha belongs, had the opportunity to transcend their *shtetl* backgrounds. However, as part of the bargain, this generation had to categorically reject affiliations with Jews abroad, unless they were necessary to the Soviet cause, and with forms of Jewish nationalism that were not sanctioned by the USSR.[33] The stigmatization of Zionism, coupled with the jingoism of the "friendship of nations" rhetoric, most likely explains why the issues of national consciousness and political allegiance trouble Grisha. In the midst of Grisha's tirade against the immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union, Dina muses, "it was unclear why

31 Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 61.

32 I refer here to the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia*, in other words of rooting minorities in their national culture, which I discuss further in Chapter 3. For more on *korenizatsiia*, see Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52.

33 The creation of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was a notable exception to this policy.

he was upset: because of the Jewish population's drain abroad or the impossibility of following the example of this group of renegades."[34]

As the story illustrates, in addition to his fear of not belonging in Israel, Grisha is uncomfortable with the idea of repatriation because of his fear of the erasure of Soviet Jew' cultural memory. Conveying this point allegorically, Grisha bitterly recalls the biblical narrative of Jews wandering around the desert with the goal of letting the older generation of slaves to die out, and with them the collective memory of their suffering, before entering the Promised Land.[35] Additionally, Grisha is wounded by the idea of his children privileging their mythological ancestors over the predecessors who, like himself, continue to live and require care in their old age. In this way, his rejection of Zionism, particularly the promise of a return to the land of forefathers, becomes earnest and sympathetic in the story. Grisha's critique of the repatriation narrative has less to do with his allegiance to Soviet power than with his opposition to the view that Soviet Jews are incomplete, peripheral and irrelevant because they do not reside in Israel. When Grisha questions the validity of Zionist ideology, he presents a genuine anti-nationalist critique that problematizes the notions of Israel as the land of the Jewish past and the future.

Grisha's absence of faith in return migration is only threatened when he discovers the tragic death of first and unrequited love, Frida, who turns out to have been Dina's aunt. Once they determine that Grisha grew up knowing Dina's family in the Ukrainian town of Poltava, Dina informs Grisha that Frida was murdered during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, shot in the back by a German soldier. The story causes Grisha to admit to Dina, and to himself, that "the cup has run dry [*vse vypito iz etoi chashi*]" for

34 Rubina, "Iabloki," 340.
35 Ibid., 345.

Jews in the USSR.[36] In his moment of vulnerability, he sadly concedes his position to a generation that he believes will choose Israel. Grisha bitterly declares, "after you bury me in the Vostrekovskoye cemetery – go rebuild the nation and be well." [37] For his part, Grisha refuses to participate in the process of national-building because he knows that he lacks the nationalist sentiment demanded by the task. It is at this moment that he declares "I don't have a national consciousness," and then again, "to hell with my national consciousness!"[38] Even though he calls himself an old mule, Grisha emerges as a person capable of change. Upon hearing about the events surrounding Freida's execution, he recognizes that difficulty of living with the history of anti-Semitism in the USSR. For this reason, he backs down and allows people of Dina's generation to be pushed toward Israel in what he sees as the last desperate attempt at cultural survival.

The retelling of the story of Frida's murder also has a profound effect on Dina. Frida's boldness in staying behind to be with her lover, instead of following the rest of her family in the evacuation, causes Dina to rethink her Jewish identity, or lack thereof. Rubina's story suggests that it is Frida's lack of awareness about her vulnerability as a Jew, in other words, her lack of national consciousness, that guaranteed her death. In Frida's story, Dina recognizes the impossibility of transcending Jewishness altogether. She asks herself, "To whom do I belong [*ch'ya ya, ch'ya*]?" but does not arrive at an answer.[39] As the character explains, "this inner feeling of blood tie cannot be imposed onto someone."[40] In this way, Dina begins to see Jewishness as a social construction rather than a genetic attribute and "Jew" as a label imposed from without. She thus rejects

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 345-346.
39 Ibid., 347.
40 Ibid., 348.

the Soviet approach to identification, which prevented Jews and other minorities from labeling themselves.[41] Ultimately, the threat of anti-Semitism brings Grisha and Dina together, allowing them to experience rapprochement as both characters realize that identification is a historically-informed process. In fact, the story suggests that a complete lack of awareness about the ways in which one is situated within history, society and culture is as dangerous as the kind of nationalism that Grisha rejects outright.

Rubina's portrayal of two Soviet Jews who lack a sense of connection to Israel confirms the dominant view in research on the Great Aliyah – that Soviet Jews were not ideologically-driven immigrants. However, "Apples" adds much-needed nuance by showing the importance of the myths of homeland and return for shaping Soviet Jews' views of emigration. In the story, Rubina suggests a spectrum of engagement with the myth of return, from neutrality to outright rejection. Moreover, her narrative suggests that homeland itself is a fragmented and unstable concept for Jews like Dina and Grisha whose lives are characterized by dislocation and mobility, from Poltava to Kharkov, Moscow and Tashkent. When Grisha proclaims "My god...you scattered us all over the earth," upon learning that Dina lives in Tashkent, he speaks not about Jewish scattering from biblical Jerusalem but about Jewish movements and evacuations across the USSR.[42] In this way, Rubina already introduces the idea that Jews have multiple paths of diaspora. If there is a point of geographical origin for Grisha, it can only be the small village near Poltava, where his and Dina's family once built their homes. Yet for such assimilated individuals as Dina and Grisha, who have made new homes in cities, this place of origin

41 On the official labeling of Soviet peoples in their passports, see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 294.

42 Rubina, "Iabloki," 339.

is no longer a home or a possible return destination. Through these characters, Rubina shows that for Soviet Jews homeland is not a fixed geographical point that can be found in Eastern Europe or Palestine.

"Apples" is an open-ended story whose characters are ultimately poised between rootedness and rootlessness. Dina and Grisha are rootless cosmopolitans whose feet remain planted on Soviet soil. It is not their lack of patriotism that renders them rootless cosmopolitans, but their acceptance of their status as extra-territorial subjects. Conventionally, we think of cosmopolitans as people who feel at home everywhere in the world. Yet rootless cosmopolitans, as Rubina's story shows, are also defined by their struggle to establish direct connections between identity and homeland and by their willingness to live in places from which they do not originate. We are safe to assume that Grisha will die in the USSR rather than leave for the Jewish state. Dina's case is more uncertain. Will the act of facing of anti-Semitism be the impetus that will make her join the great wave of immigration? According to Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, "anti-Semitism did not always cause people to emigrate, but readiness to face it was an important part of feeling Jewish."[43] The story does not follow up on Dina's life. At the same time, reading "Apples" in the aftermath of the Great Aliyah makes it difficult not to see her as being at least tempted by the prospect of emigration. Regardless, we are left with the impression that if Dina does go, it will be because of a push, a symbolic "rifle to her back." "Apples" suggests that this is a legitimate reason for departure, without framing the departure as a return. Rather, Rubina suggests that a return to one's cultural past may occur in the most unexpected of places. For her heroine, it is the office of a literary journal in Moscow that

43 Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, *Ex-Soviets*, 51.

becomes a portal for her journey back to her grandfather's house and a childhood filled with Yiddish.

A Jewish Diaspora in Israel

Here Comes the Messiah!, Rubina's 1996 novel, picks up where "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden" leaves off historically. Rubina's first novel since her immigration to Israel, and her first international success, captures the moment of the Great Aliya with depictions of the social enclaves formed by recent immigrants. *Messiah* also employs flashbacks to represent the process of migration, particularly the practical and psychological hardships faced by Soviet Jews. Rubina's novel shows that the internal conflicts about cultural connectedness and geopolitical belonging articulated by the characters in "Apples" do not disappear upon Soviet Jews' arrival in Israel, but rather intensify. The cultural disaggregation shaped by Soviet history continues to haunt and even evolves for Russian-speaking Jews, especially the the intelligentsia, all of whom, according to the novel suffer from a "split personality disorder [*razdvoeniem lichnosti*]."[44] The novel makes clear that the immigrants' disjointed sense of self directly corresponds to their spatial disorientation and doubly diasporic consciousness, which awaken when they attempt the paradoxical act of coming home to a new land. *Messiah* implicitly shows Grisha's fears to be prophetic by suggesting that the process of repatriation does not successfully remake Soviet Jews from diasporic minorities to geographically-rooted and spiritually-fulfilled members of a cohesive nation.

44 Dina Rubina, *Vot Idet Messia!* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), 21.

Messiah is, in some ways, an earlier but more detailed version of the story "Jerusalemites." More specifically, the novel presents a detailed sketch of the Russian-speaking community presented in multiple voices and in a style that mixes magic and realism. The text's depiction of immigrant everyday life confirms the dominant view in the social sciences that, in general, the largest wave of immigration from FSU experienced unforeseen difficulties integrating with Israel's *sabra* population.[45] *Messiah* most effectively illustrates this social problem with its almost total absence of *sabra* characters, thus communicating the limited interactions between immigrants and hosts. Social scientists studying ex-Soviet *olim* often say that "the immigrants live in two worlds," in other words, the world of the Russian-speaking "ghettos" and mainstream Israeli society.[46] *Messiah* focuses on the former world, moving it from Israel's margins to the center. In the novel, the absence of *sabra* is compensated for as well as guaranteed by the proliferation of Israel's Russian-language media and cultural centers. The "Spiritual Center of the Russian Diaspora [*Duhovnyi Tsentr Russkoi Diaspory*]" is at the center of the cultural milieu depicted in the *Messiah*. This and other Russian-language institutions provide for the immigrants a "literary homeland [*literaturnaia rodina*]," thus rendering them culturally self-sufficient and inevitably insular.[47] The novel even shows the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of its effect on Russian-Jewish immigrants, particularly those living in settlements.

Similarly to the numerous social scientists, Rubina suggests that the problems of social absorption plaguing the Great Aliyah are traceable to not only the newcomers'

45 See Remennick, Siegel, Al Haj and Fialkova and Yelenevskaya.
46 Al-Haj, *Immigration and Ethnic Formation*, 90. Dina Siegel develops a similar argument throughout *The Great Immigration*.
47 Rubina, *Messia*, 8.

desire for separatism or sense of cultural superiority, but also to Israel's absorption policies and attitudes toward post-Soviet Jews.[48] Rubina's fiction illustrates that this dynamic set of causes contribute to a situation where, in the words of Dina Siegel, the immigrants "see themselves...as living in 'the Jewish Diaspora' – a Diaspora which paradoxically is in Israel itself."[49] According to Siegel, the strongest manifestation of diaspora culture appears in the immigrants' retention of the Russian language, Soviet traditions and mentalities. Siegel suggests that Israel's Russian-speaking immigrants retain their diasporic identities because of their disappointment in Israel's ability to live up to its myths and view them as fellow Jews rather than Russians. Fialkova and Yelenevskaya confirm Russian-Jews' uncertain place in the diaspora/homeland schema. They state, "the question of 'Who is whose diaspora?' is sometimes difficult to answer, in particular when we discuss returning diasporas and diasporas of states that no longer exist."[50] Gershenson's manner of conceptualizing Russian-speaking Jews as being "part of a traditional Jewish diaspora and of a new Russian diaspora," is perhaps most relevant for decoding *Messiah*.[51] By portraying turn-of-the-century immigrants, *olim,* as doubly diasporic subjects, Rubina encourages us to reconsider the more conventional view of Jewish diaspora as a scattering from a single origin, the mythical promised land.

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48 According to Siegel, "Many new immigrants among my informants claim that Israelis tend to see them as an undifferentiated homogenous group, without cultural differences, while these are important to Russian Jews themselves," 33; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya argue that "many Israelis show disappointment that the new immigrants of the 1990s did not fit the existing model of *aliya*. 'Proper repatriates,' 'good olim,' would be expected to display their exhilaration at returning home and to show alienation or at least indifference to the old country, its language, culture and traditions," 43; and Al-Haj states that "The social adjustment of FSU immigrants lags behind their residential and economic adjustment," 162.

49 Siegel, 33-34.

50 Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 300.

51 Olga Gershenson, "'Is Israel Part of Russia? Immigrants on Russian and Israeli Screens," *Israeli Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2011): 164-176. Fialkova and Yelenevskaya suggest a similar idea when referring to "the emergence of a Soviet (Russian) diaspora," 300.

Rubina suggests that the Jewish diaspora persists within Israel's boundaries through the novel's Messianic theme. The symbolic, practical, "universal, all-pervasive, professional" waiting for the Messiah unites the disparate lives in the novel.[52] There are more than a few Messiahs in the world created by Rubina, including the head of the diaspora center, and a nameless wanderer who shows up at the Russian-run house of prostitution only to be murdered there. Whether he was a victim of the Jerusalem syndrome or *the* Messiah whom Israel's residents are too cynical to recognize remains unknown. The Messianic waiting is the novel's main leitmotif, which communicates a collective aspiration toward an eschatological return. Images of rootlessness, or literal and symbolic "homelessness [*bezdomstvo*]," to use the Rubina's term, pervade the narrative, overlapping with the Messianic motif. For example, the figure of the beggar who rides the bus in Jerusalem is both homeless and convinced of his role as the Messiah. Combined, the themes of messianism and homelessness symbolically contradict the persistence of Israel's myth of return and the native population's culture of "at-homeness [*domashnost*']" or ability to comfortably claim their space.[53] As Rubina shows, Soviet Jews are attracted to the return narrative that frames their *aliyah* but ultimately fall victim to a doubled sense of displacement, and belonging (to diasporas). Yet, within *Messiah*, the two diasporas intersect and coexist, making for a hybrid Russian-Jewish diaspora. This hybrid diaspora, based on the interplay between Soviet and Israeli conventions, histories and allegiances, upsets the dichotomies of homeland and hostland and the conception of return as a linear trajectory to a specific geographical center.

In a addition to relying on the messianic theme, the novel features other, less

52 Rubina, *Messia*, 11.
53 Ibid., 33.

subtle, allegories that critique the Zionist emphasis on return and particularly on the mass ingathering of all Jews within one territory. As Safran claims, "the idea of *kibbuts galuyot* [the 'ingathering of the Jews'] from the four corners of the earth is a basic component of normative Judaism."[54] *Kibbutz galuyot* is also one of the main principles of modern Zionism. In the excerpt below, the novel identifies a problem with the determinism behind the idea of a Jewish ingathering in Israel while introducing two of its many supporting characters:

> Many people have abandoned Israel throughout its history as a state. In fact, as a rule, it was the fervent patriots. There is nothing surprising about this: in all times and in all countries, it is precisely the fervent patriots who can't handle confronting their own people.
> Yuri Bar-Chanina thought that the whole of the Jewish people [*evreiski narod*] – from babies to the very elderly – must gather in the Holy Land of their ancestors so that, having achieved a righteous life, they would be even more pure and pious, thus illuminating – as is written in the Book of Books – the path to a bright future for all the peoples on earth.
> Borya Kagan loved to repeat, that all kikes [*zhidy*], the whole gang, can sit on their five-piece coin, eat their own shit, and not bother other nations.
> Both he and the other, without question, were staunch Zionists.[55]

The allegorical passage simultaneously establishes strong impressions of the two characters and employs them as devices in the novel's interpretation of Zionism. More specifically, the novel associates Zionism with a simplistic and teleological view of Jewish progress, which is based on the consolidation, isolation and consequent "de-cosmopolitanization" of Jews, to borrow David Laitin's term. Furthermore, *Messia* suggests a connection between Zionist determinism and uncritical patriotism, which are similarly embodied by secular and religious Jews, such as the characters Yuri and Borya.

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54 William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," *Israel Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005): 45.

55 Rubina, *Messia*, 218.

At the core of Zionist determinism is the literal approach to the myth of return, or the belief in a geographical negation of diaspora, *shlilat hagalut*.[56] *Messiah* re-establishes a sense of uncertainty toward diaspora negation by ridiculing characters who hold simplistic Zionist views and by foregrounding more complex renegotiations of the concept of diaspora, such as that undertaken by the novel's heroine, the writer N. The writer N. is an immigrant who enters the Jewish state "during those days, legendary by now, when three thousand repatriates per day arrived at Ben-Gurion airport," and who experiences a particularly traumatic confrontation with Israel's myth of return.[57] This character represents the Russian-speaking Jews who fail to insert themselves into Israeli society and who struggle with doubts about immigration, which result in their psychological instability or split personalities. In her analysis of Rubina's fiction, Anna Ronell argues that the Russian-Israeli author often reveals the contradictory nature of the "immigration-as-homecoming" concept by pointing out that Soviet Jews are expected to recognize Israel as their home but, in practice, "are marginalized economically, culturally, and linguistically."[58] The writer N.'s fate in Israel, particularly her inability to make a living by publishing her work, a fact that forces her to clean houses and engage in morally-questionable side work, testifies to the impact of economic strife on the minds of immigrants who attempt to put down roots in Israeli society. Along with her class marginalization, the writer N. suffers from cultural alienation caused by her unfamiliarity with religious and traditional Jewish practices. Moreover, her son's maladjustment to the

56 Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," 44.
57 Rubina, *Messia*, 208.
58 Anna Ronell, "Russian Israeli Literature Through the Lens of Immigrant Humor," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 4, no. 1 (2011): 157. Ronell appropriates the phrase "immigration-as-homecoming" from Edna Lomsky-Feder and Tamar Rapoport, "Homecoming, Immigration, and the National Ethos: Russian-Jewish Homecomers Reading Zionism," *Anthropological Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2001): 1–14.

Israeli military deepens her sense of being socially apart. However, in Rubina's narrative, the immigrants' socioeconomic struggles relate to larger ideological and existential dilemmas about Jewish history, identity and belonging.

Messiah destabilizes a Zionist rhetoric of return that romanticizes the event of immigration as a homecoming, by staging the writer N.'s arrival at the Ben-Gurian airport as a moment of disappointment. At the airport, the writer N. overhears a local young man speak with a "wild small-town accent [*s dikim mestechkovym aksentom*]," associated with "pre-modern," Pale of Settlement, Jews.[59] Remembering her grandfather, who rejected his *shtetl* background by moving to the city and unlearning this accent, the writer N. hopelessly realizes that her children would mimic this hybrid speech, composed of "sing-song, inquisitive intonations, which had migrated to Yiddish from ancient Hebrew, and then from Yiddish to the Russian language of Jews in the Pale of Settlement."[60] The figure and speech style of this young man but also the military presence at the airport moves the writer N. to the following fatalistic response to her immigration:

> She suddenly felt such an endless orphanhood [*beskonechnoe sirotstvo*], homelessness [*bezdomnost'*], deprivation, and a nauseating fear, as if a merciless hand which, having moved the fabric aside, was penetrating inside, into the rib cage, and removing a tumor of the soul with the metastases of the past. She understood that from her birth to her death, she was doomed to being escorted by automatic weapons; and it didn't matter, be it to the execution pit, or for the protection of her life. Everything was finished, everything had perished; there was nowhere to return to and return was impossible [*i vernutsia nekuda, i vozvrashchatsia nel'zia*].[61]

The novel further strengthens the association between the writer N. and homelessness in

59 Rubina, *Messia*, 208.
60 Ibid., 207.
61 Ibid., 209-210.

Israel by showing her cross paths with the vagrant self-proclaimed Messiah on her bus ride from the airport. The fact that the writer N. never overcomes this initial reaction to her relocation forces us to see her experience as more than a standard manifestation of immigrant culture-shock. Moreover, the detailed rendering of the scene encourages readers to see it as emblematic of the writer N.'s struggle with cultural rootlessness and helps to explain her complex attempts to compensate for her inability to fit in through her writing.

According to Fran Markowitz, homecomings are "messy points of convergence" between "personal desires," sociocultural influences and ideologies promoted by nation-states.[62] As a result, immigrants often experience an unpleasant "clash" between "the imagined home and reality in the state-qua-homeland."[63] For Rubina's heroine, the clash between the idealized memorial homeland and the nation-state that she encounters proves to be devastating. Notably, the devastation, in her case, comes from an unexpected recognition of correspondence between the country she left behind and her adopted country. The element of militarism, signaled in the phrase "automatic weapons" is one such resemblance. The image of the writer N., a woman "escorted by automatic weapons," mirrors the image of Frida, from "Apples," who is shot to death in the back. This parallel between the two texts produces an uncomfortable sense of continuity between the former Soviet Union and the Jewish state.

The writer N.'s experience at Ben Gurion dramatizes the idea that an immigrant's homecoming to her ancestral homeland can ironically make her feel "homeless" and

62 Fran Markowitz and Anders H. Stefansson, eds., *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 22-23.
63 Markowitz, *Homecomings,* 23, 27.

"orphaned." Her proclamation "return is impossible" contradicts Israel's official narrative of immigration-as-homecoming by portraying immigration as dislocation, and representing the two-diaspora phenomenon. Markowitz argues that a homecoming may result in "the construction of new diasporas in the ethnic homeland."[64] In *Messiah*, the ambiguous nature of the claim "return was impossible," which may refer to either Israel or the FSU as the return destination, suggests a doubled or hybridized form of diaspora. *Messiah*, in this way, negates traditional distinctions between diaspora and homeland, showing that through the process of return migration, a diasporic site, the Soviet Union, may transform into a homeland and a memorial homeland, Israel, may become the site of a new diaspora, the Soviet-Jewish diaspora. The search for a "real home" thus emotionally redirects diasporic subjects to the home they left behind. Additionally, Rubina's heroine finds her memorial home to be haunted by ancestors who are not mythical but her own, particularly her grandfather, before he abandoned his Pale of Settlement upbringing. The novel's emphasis on similarities and continuities between Israel, the FSU and the Pale of Settlement upsets the diaspora/homeland, or Israel/diaspora, dichotomy identified by Aviv and Shneer. In fact, studies on the Great Aliyah often show that for immigrants the process of return migration often results in confusion rather than a resolution between "here and there," or homeland and exile, which manifests most powerfully in their speech.[65]

The writer N.'s conflation of Israel with the former Soviet Union, of "here" with

64 Markowitz, 10.

65 Based on their interviews with ex-Soviet Jews, Fialkova and Yelenevskaya observe that "the instability of interviewees' spatial world is often manifest in the confusion of deictic markers here and there...In the analyzed narratives we often come across antitheses here/there, and in some instances Israel is referred to as there and the FSU as here," 169. Davids Shneer and Caryn Aviv make a similar though more general observation,"Jews are rethinking their ideas about Israel and the tensions between exile and home, diaspora and homeland, here and there," *New Jews*, 2.

"there," the old with the new country, the mythical and the real, underscores the disorienting effect of return migration, and the inadequacy of dichotomous approaches to diaspora for doubly diasporic subjects. Rubina's heroine experiences disorientation in not only spatial but also temporal terms. Rather than "ascending," she feels herself moving backward in time, toward what is typically portrayed as a pre-modern Jewish past in the Pale of Settlement. Her disgust at the idea of her son regressing to speaking with a Jewish cadence is problematic for its implications of internalized anti-Semitism. At the same time, it is clear that the writer N. is bothered by the prospect of dishonoring her grandfather's successful rebellion against his traditional upbringing, and his rabbi father, by escaping from "a provincial town [*mestechko*] in the South of Belarussia," presumably, for a more cosmopolitan destination.[66] For Rubina's heroine, the thought of "coming full-circle [*krug zamknulsia*]," is disturbing because it requires the erasure of Jewish cultural development in the Soviet Union since the migration out of the Pale of Settlement.[67]

The conclusion "return was impossible" is strikingly analogous to Stuart Hall's claim "we can't literally go home again" in his famous meditation on diaspora, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."[68] The home that Hall refers to, in this case, is Africa, not the continent, but the "imagined community" of peoples whose histories are marked by the scattering produced in the Atlantic slave trade. As Hall argues, "the original 'Africa' is no longer there."[69] For this reason an individual who identifies with the African diaspora cannot expect to experience a homecoming when journeying to the African continent

66 Rubina, *Messia*, 208.
67 Ibid., 209.
68 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 437.
69 Ibid.

today without ignoring the effects of historical change. Similarly, Rubina's heroine in *Messiah* realizes that she cannot literally return to Jerusalem, the mythological homeland, because it is "no longer there." By recognizing the impossibility of her return, the writer N. undermines Israel's tendency to conflate itself with the biblical Promised Land. The continuity between modern Israel and Canaan is constructed though the state's repeated appeals to Jewish autochthony in the Middle East. As Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin note, "the Israeli Declaration of Independence...begins with an imaginary autochthony - 'In the Land of Israel this people came into existence' - and ends with the triumphant return of the People to their natural Land, making them 're-autochthonized.'"[70] The Boyarins see the efforts to portray Jews as being indigenous to the Middle East, and to guarantee their ability to reroot themselves, as risky and regressive. The scholars suggest that Israel's rhetoric erases that "the experience of Diaspora...has constrained Jews to create forms of community that do not rely on one of the most potent and dangerous myths – the myth of autochthony."[71] Moreover, by linking nativism and statism, Israel rejects what the Boyarins refer to as "the diasporic genius of Jewishness... [which] consists in the exercise and preservation of cultural power separate from the coercive power of the state."[72] Rubina's novel does not go so far as to suggest that Soviet Jews should recognize their "diasporic genius." However, by dramatically interrupting its heroine's homecoming, *Messiah* participates in a much broader critique of diasporas that rely on the mythology that a people can return to its roots by means of geographic travel and re-settlement.

70 Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 718.
71 Ibid., 699.
72 Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), vii.

It is important to acknowledge that the Boyarins, among other theorists, have received criticism for over-privileging the diasporic position and underestimating the material and psychological difficulties imposed on diasporic subjects by their liminal status.[73] In *Messiah*, Rubina avoids romanticizing the persistence of diaspora by showing the crippling effects of double dislocation on FSU immigrants in Israel. By portraying the writer N.'s complete inability to adapt to her social environment, Rubina warns against the potential outcome of double diaspora – a hopeless sense of alienation. Gomel similarly suggest that FSU immigrants suffer from a "deracinated" identity that prevents them not only from accomplishing the kind of speedy absorption demanded by the Israeli government, but also from seeing themselves as responsible agents within Israel's social landscape.[74] Rubina's writer N., who proclaims her homelessness upon her arrival in Israel, clearly shares the rootless mentality described by Gomel. By tracing the hardships of the writer N., *Messiah* inspires empathy for the condition of deracination without privileging or condemning it.

As the passage about Borya and Yuri reveals, *Messiah* discourages ideological extremism, whether it is voiced by a fervently religious individual, Yuri, or a secular, self-hating Jew, Borya. Similarly, the novel suggests that neither hopeless rootlessness nor an uncritical, patriotic sense of belonging are productive states for the immigrant psyche. Rather, both are polarities that need to be worked through by the immigrants. In *Messiah*, this effort takes the form of a dialectical process, between the writer N. and her literary creation, Ziama, an FSU immigrant and journalist who successfully overcomes the problems of adjustment that plague the writer N. In other words, *Messiah* relies on the

73 See, for example, Shneer and Aviv, *New Jews*.
74 I borrow the term "deracinated" from Elana Gomel, *Pilgrim Soul*, 70.

text-within-a-text literary convention, at times, blurring the boundaries between its real and imaginary heroines. For example, the novel introduces Ziama on its very fist page, while significantly delaying the writer N.'s incorporation into the text. Since her introduction, Ziama appears to us as a fully-developed character who is entrenched in the Russian-speaking Israeli milieu. Moreover, in the aftermath of her eventual death, Ziama is evoked by the voice of the Messiah who enters the novel to express his sympathy toward the woman and a promise to resurrect her upon his return. The novel ends in the style of magical realism, encouraging our uncertainty about the divide between the imaginative, the mystical and the real, thus forcing us to see Ziama and the writer N. as two sides of the same psyche.

With this splitting of the diasporic subject, between the writer N. and Ziama, Rubina makes literal the disaggregation of Soviet-educated immigrants and shows the dynamic relationship between the disappointment of immigration and the persistent dream of return. Ziama's immediate introduction into the novel and biographical resemblance to Rubina may trick the reader into conflating her with Rubina. However, to mistake Ziama for Rubina's alter-ego is to ignore the novel's direct suggestion that Ziama is the product of the writer N.'s imagination. *Messiah* establishes a clear author-subject dynamic between the two characters when explaining: “This woman [Ziama] would be completely different, and, of course, she – in contrast to the author herself [the writer N.] – has to love this entire small space, the only one in the world for her, this land and its inhabitants, whom she considered her own people.”[75] It is evident from this excerpt that the writer N. uses Ziama as a surface for projecting her personal desire to embrace return

75 Rubina, *Messia*, 369.

migration.

Through her imaginary foil, Ziama, the writer N. creatively escapes and attempts to exorcise her anxieties about immigration. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ziama, as imagined by the writer N., is marginally affected by socioeconomic problems. Ziama's psychological and social absorption also follows the demands of Israel's policies. As the novel explains, shortly after her immigration, "quickly, and effortlessly she absorbed this entire country, and its people, who initially shocked her with their simplicity and pride."[76] In contrast to the other immigrants, Ziama quickly acquires fluency in Hebrew and begins to keep kosher. In other words, she becomes what Gitelman calls a "thick cultured" Jew. Ziama also happily imposes a teleological narrative on her immigration, which allows her to enjoy an idealized, mystical homecoming and, moreover, to see herself as part of a larger movement toward the fulfillment of Jewish history. According to the narrative, "in the very first days, she'd felt herself a pebble, placed precisely into a curve in the pattern of an enormous mosaic panel, a piece of smalt selected by the hand of Him who'd thought up the entire pattern."[77] Ziama's sense of return takes a literal dimension when she starts seeing her dead relatives, or presumably individuals who resemble them in the streets of Israel. Additionally, through her set of attitudes and lifestyle choices, including the keeping of kosher laws, Ziama is more symbolically and practically connected to Judaic culture rather than to fellow Russian-speaking Jews, despite her participation in their literary milieu. While she is, at times, critical of *olim* and *sabras*, we know that she "does not recoil from the face of her people [*ne ustrashilas' litsa svoego naroda*]," unlike the

76 Ibid., 25.
77 Ibid., 25-26.

Zionist patriots discussed earlier.[78] We also learn that Ziama could have gone to Paris, Cologne or Hanover instead of Israel. For choosing to undergo return migration to the Jewish state, and embracing it unconditionally, Ziama, for most of the narrative, receives the kind of compensation mentioned earlier, namely a sense of connection to her predecessors. In contrast to the writer N., Ziama operates under the assumption that one can go home again, ignoring the symbolic nature of return.

Ziama's strong presence and character development in the novel makes us forget that her idealism and correctness are intended as compensations for the "sins" of the writer N. and other immigrants like her who fail to fit the mold imagined by the state. As the narrator explains, Ziama would be "a lamb selected from God's flock, the whitest, without a single black hair."[79] The novel takes the metaphor further when the writer N. decides to kill off Ziama in a sacrificial gesture, "for the nation, for its sins, its life, and its land."[80] This hyperbolically patriotic statement presents Ziama's death as being necessary for allowing people like the writer N. to continue to exist despite their shortcomings. The writer N. plans the killing in advance and accomplishes it in the style of "an experienced slaughterer," with "an instantaneous strike to the neck" delivered by her own son, a mentally unstable young man who accidentally reaches for his military weapon.[81] To be more precise, he shoots Ziama while aiming at a young Palestinian woman who, out of the desperation caused by her illegitimate pregnancy, attempts to redeem herself by murdering an Israeli and becoming a martyr. Though its impetus concerns Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the crime ultimately remains internal, within the

78 Ibid., 558.
79 Ibid., 370.
80 Ibid., 369.
81 Ibid., 370. The strike to the neck makes the character's death an example of *shechita*, the ritual slaughter of animals demanded by Jewish dietary laws.

Russian-speaking community. In her death, it is Ziama who becomes a martyr while the Palestinian woman survives. The violent culmination of the return-exile dialectic thus yields synthesis. Ziama is offered up as "exchange [*zamena*]," "substitution [*podmena*]," and "atonement [*iskuplenie*]," in the last words of the novel, by an unnamed first-person narrator, likely the writer N. herself.[82] The image of the sacrifice, in a certain sense, signals a return to ancient Jerusalem, where sacrifice acted as the touchstone for Jewish existence. On the other hand, the sacrifice is futile because the death of the heroine makes it impossible for the writer N. to complete her novel. Thus, despite her own intention to kill off Ziama, in the aftermath of the death, the writer N. laments "that novel, which she would no longer have the strength or life-force to finish," as a result of its heroine's demise.[83] The writer N., who now can never become successful, illustrates that the "ultimate sacrifice," the one "for the nation," does not resolve the cultural and creative problems borne by the individuals within the nation.

Messiah ends with the promise of an eschatological return, communicated by Messiah himself, who claims that he will raise Ziama from the dead when he returns, some day. In this way, return becomes instantly deferred. This authorial choice to delay the arrival of the Messiah, and, in turn, the establishment of the biblical homeland in the Middle East, echoes Hall's portrayal of the memorial homeland as "necessarily 'deferred.'"[84] Like "Apples," Rubina's novel is open-ended because it looks to the future, promising the ultimate, eschatological return of the Messiah, but without indicating when it would occur. Rubina's decision to conclude her narrative in a Messianic suspension

82 Ibid., 558.
83 Ibid., 556.
84 Hall, 437.

reinforces the idea that Israel is yet another diasporic site, rather than the negation of the diaspora.

Homelands as Diasporas

"Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden" and *Here Comes the Messiah!* feature Jewish characters who tackle their fractured cultural identities and national allegiances from within either the Soviet Union or Israel. These characters, such as Grisha and Dina, struggle under the pressure to commit to a country and a national identity. *Messiah* explores the consequences of one of these choices, the commitment to put down roots in Israel. Rubina's later novels move beyond the either-Israel-or-FSU dilemma to focus on the privileges and burdens associated with geopolitical mobility between two, or more, spaces. In tracing this shift, I analyze *The Syndicate: A Novel-Comic-Strip* [*Sindikat: Roman-Komiks*] (2004), which foregrounds a Russian-Israeli immigrant who divides her time between Moscow and Israel. and *On the Sunny Side of the Street* [*Na Solnechnoi Storone Ulitsy*] (2006), which is about a writer who travels from Israel back to Tashkent. Both texts embody the pseudo-autobiographical style that characterizes "Apples" and *Messiah*, featuring protagonists who share a first or full name with Rubina. In these, more recent, novels, Rubina portrays the emergence of transnationalism in the lives of Russian-speaking Jewish subjects that is also currently explored in the research on the Great Aliyah.[85] The transnationalism of ex-Soviet Jews manifests in their multidirectional

85 On the concept of transnationalism, see, for example, Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg, eds., *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent on a New (Dis) Order* (Boston: Brill, 2009). In "Debating Transnationalism," Ben-Rafael and Sternberg broadly define transnationalism as referring to the "interests," "allegiances," and "relations that run across states and societies," particularly those involving "people and groups" as opposed to "official bodies," 1. On Russian-Jewish-Israeli

travel, which results in the transmission of objects and ideas, and in their commitment to maintaining social networks that communicate with one other across Europe, North America and the Middle East.[86] As Gershenson suggests, the concept of diaspora continues to be useful for analyzing post-Soviet Jewish culture, especially given the immigrants' newfound mobility. Rubina's work similarly suggests that transnationalism does not negate diasporic identities but makes them more dynamic.

According to Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg, "the common feature of transnational diasporas...is their anchorage in allegiances that imply a reference to a common narrative and plight...and some loyalty (not necessarily overwhelming) to a real, symbolic or mythic 'origin,' center or 'homeland' situated elsewhere."[87] This center-periphery model is, however, complicated by what Ben-Rafael and Sternberg refer to as the "dual homeness" of acculturated immigrants who no longer view themselves as dwelling in a hostland.[88] *The Syndicate* and *Sunny Side* are about acculturated immigrants who experience the two-or-more-home phenomenon by re-establishing their ties to the FSU and acknowledge their connectivity to both places. Therefore, rather than stressing the impossibility of return, as she did in *Messiah*, Rubina focuses on the question of how to conceptualize return given Russian-Jews' multidirectional movements. As Remennick argues, "for most returnees [to the FSU] this journey is not final, but rather another stage

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transnationalism, see Larissa Remennick, "The Russian-Jewish Transnational Social Space: An Overview," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 4, no. 1 (2011): 1-13.

86 See Remennick, "The Russian-Jewish Transnational Social Space: An Overview." According to Remennick, "Many immigrants visit their cities of origin in the FSU and their relatives and friends in the West as often as their incomes allow; the frequency of visits is growing with geographic proximity (i.e. immigrants in Israel and Germany travel to their homelands more often than their counterparts in North America and Australia.) About one-third of all post-1989 immigrants in Israel, over one-half in Germany, and at least one quarter in North America keep Russian or Ukrainian passports (most other successor states ban dual citizenship) and do not need visas; some also have apartments or country cottages in their countries of origin," "The Russian-Jewish Transnational Social Space: An Overview," 4.

87 Ben-Rafael and Sternberg, *Transnationalism*, 2.

88 Ibid., 4.

in their cosmopolitan life cycle. Although 'double return migrants' spend most of their time in Moscow or St. Petersburg (two main hubs of return), they never sever their ties with Israel."[89] The word return no longer seems to apply to the travels of doubly diasporic subjects. However, thinking about return in the plural, and comparing its different paths, is useful for critiquing the notion of a *single* return that rests at the heart of Israel's immigration rhetoric. Moreover, following the various paths of immigrant returns reveals the different ways in which Jews temporarily root themselves transnationally. Caryn Aviv and David Shneer argue that it is more important to think about Jews' efforts to put down roots, specifically in an extraterritorial fashion, than over-investing in the concept of diaspora.[90] According to Aviv and Shneer, a focus on unconventional examples of Jewish rootedness has the potential to let us draw "a new map for the Jewish world, one that has multiple homelands."[91]

In tracing the "cosmopolitan life cycle" of immigrants, Rubina focuses on the multidirectional flow of bodies and ideas. *The Syndicate*, in particular, engages with the theme of transnational movement by presenting a portrait of the Moscow branch of a transnational Israeli immigration syndicate that works to recruit the Jews remaining in the FSU in the aftermath of the Great Aliyah. In the novel, Rubina makes clear that since the Great Aliyah, which swept through like a mystical, avalanche-like force, residents of the FSU have lost interest in immigration to Israel.[92] The Jews featured in the novel who remain in the FSU prefer to either express their Jewish identities in the Russian

89 Remennick, "The Russian-Jewish Transnational Social Space," 5.
90 According to Shneer and Aviv, Jews are rooting themselves symbolically and beyond state perimeters, for example, in mezuzahs, *New Jews*, 5-6.
91 Aviv and Shneer, xv.
92 The Israel Central Bureau of Statistics shows that immigration from the FSU to Israel peaked between 1990 and 1999 and has radically declined since. For more detailed statistics, see http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st04_04&CYear=2011

Federation, which has come to boast three rabbis, or to go to Germany. The novel suggest that the FSU is no longer the supplier of people to Israel, their recipient. The nature of exchange between the two centers is more nuanced and interactive since the largest wave of migration. In this way, the novel creatively supports Gershenson's claim that "[Israel] has in a way become part of Russia. And Russia has in some ways become a part of Israel."[93]

As portrayed in the novel, the Moscow syndicate's constant turn-over of workers imports more Russian-speaking Jews than it is capable of exporting to the memorial homeland. One of these workers is the novel's protagonist, a writer named Dina, who returns to Russia with the organization despite her lack of patriotism for Israel and her strong stance against the dissemination of pro-immigration propaganda. In fact, we learn that initially, she and her husband decide not to work for their adopted state, precisely because of their discomfort with nationalism. This idea is conveyed by the husband who states "to be hostage to an organization, which means, its ideology...Why would you, a self-confessed outlaw, stand under their banner? Let them go to hell! They deserve each other," to which Dina replies, "Exactly."[94] We are left to assume that it is because of 'push' factors, or more precisely, for economic reasons, that the couple decides to go back. Ultimately, Dina comforts herself with the idea that her position, which involves organizing social and cultural events, has no direct effect on emigration. More specifically she works for a department responsible for only nudging Russian-Jews toward *aliyah* within the context of cultural talks, parties and excursions.

The protagonist's regular travels between the FSU and Israel allow Rubina to

93 Geshenson, "'Is Israel Part of Russia?'," 164.
94 Dina Rubina, *Sindikat: Roman-komiks* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2004), 18.

highlight the relative freedom and mobility available to transnational subjects, but also their constant struggles with cross-cultural confrontation, lack of stability and need to adjust to changes that take place during their absence. For Dina, return becomes not only possible but indeed cyclical, a series of difficult repetitions. Both homes have the power to draw Dina back, but also to alienate her. On her very first visit, Dina begins to feel herself become attached to her "two countries" in contrast to her daughter, a young and already die-hard Israeli patriot who, to Dina's horror, begins to sleep covered by an Israel flag upon their arrival in Russia.[95] To conceptualize her complex relationship to her two homes, Dina even compares herself to a bigamist, stating, "I never understood the mentality of a bigamist. Only when I returned to Russia and began to live with her again, did I get it: you love the one you are with, but you think about the one who isn't there."[96]

To describe her own transnational position between Israel and the United States, and to blur the homeland and hostland, Fran Marwokitz uses the phrases "here-there" and "there-here" when referring to each place.[97] In this way Markowitz indicates that her association of nation-state and homeland depends on her context and is therefore in flux. Rubina's heroine in *The Syndicate* appears to share this "here-there"/"there-here" sense of orientation with regard to Israel and the FSU. This character shows that she has made progressed far beyond the "neither-here-nor-there" attitude that plagued the writer N. in *Messiah*. Dina's new and ambiguous sense of orientation also manifests in her language and word-choice. Before one of her departures from Moscow to Israel, she states, "we

95 Ibid., 70.
96 Ibid., 72.
97 Markowitz, who is from the US but lives and works in Israel writes, "I made a home there–here in Israel...Then when I'm here –there, back in the United States, it doesn't take much for me to get fed up with all the materialism gone awry," *Homecomings*, 29.

went on vacation, home."[98] The idea of vacationing at home is, generally, paradoxical. Moreover, these vacations become tense and tragic experiences with the escalation of suicide bombings in Israel. On one of her returns home, Dina becomes a victim of one such bombing and spends the duration of her "vacation" in a hospital. Interestingly, Markowitz evokes terrorist attacks in her meditation on the dissonance of living in a homeland where one feels vulnerable.[99] Rubina similarly highlights how political violence compromises an immigrant's sense of home in their adopted country. Yet it is important to note that Dina is also greeted with violence upon her returns to Moscow. On one occasion, she arrives to find her building set on fire, presumably by a delinquent young tenant. These parallel episodes of violence harken back to the image of a homecoming to automatic weapons from *Messiah* and again effectively blur the binary between and hostland and homeland that supports traditional conceptions of diaspora.

The images of violence in *The Syndicate* prevent the narrative from glorifying transnationalism. Moreover, the text resists portraying diasporic subjects as either opportunists of globalization or politically-progressive agents of resistance vis-a-vis nation-states. Rather, Rubina suggests that the relatively privileged positions of transnational subjects depend on nation-states, in this case, the Russian Federation and Israel. As the novel shows, transnationalism exists in tension with, but also in the service of, the center-periphery diaspora prototype. In *The Syndicate*, transnational exchange often occurs for the good of the nation-state, as Russian-Israelis return to Russia in order to replenish Israel's population and reverse the Jewish diaspora, while increasing the post-

98 Rubina, *Sindikat*, 442.

99 Markowitz, *Homecomings*, 29. Aviv and Shneer draw on similar examples to back up there claim, "Jews in Israel do not feel 'at home,'" *New Jews*, xvi.

Soviet Jewish diaspora. It is Dina's underlying awareness of her participation in the nationalist project that causes her to exaggeratedly reaffirm her political neutrality. For example, when her boss asks her to script his conversation with a potential emigrant, Dina refuses, asserting, "I discussed this issue before signing the contract...no appeals, no propaganda, no persuading."[100] Yet it is this very commitment to remaining apolitical that becomes political when Dina comes to challenge the Moscow branch's wizard behind the curtain, a wealthy Moscow Jew, Noi Raumvich, who acts as the syndicate's contractor, consequently enjoying influence over the office.

Dina's relationship with Noi presents another example of Rubina's tendency to juxtapose two characters in order to explore contradicting interpretation of an idea. In *The Syndicate*, the clash again concerns Jewish teleology and the question of return. However, this time, Rubina tackles the myth of a mass Jewish ingathering in the Promised Land, *kibbutz galuyot*. The phrase "*kibbutz galuyot,*" which refers to Moses's promise of the inevitable exile of the people of Israel and their eventual return, appears in *Deuteronomy* as well as in the rhetoric of modern Zionism. In *The Syndicate*, Noi Raumvich whole-heartedly supports and takes every occasion to fund the ingathering of Jews in Israel. However, he is also astute enough to recognize the lack of potential emigrants in the FSU. As a result, Noi devises a plan to garner interest in the idea of the lost tribes of Israel, identify remaining Jews as members of the tribe, and send them off to Israel on a cruise-ship. To achieve this goal, Noi goes so far as to make Russians of any ethnic background believe that they belong to the chosen people. As the novel makes clear, Noi is a modern-day Noah who gathers together people instead of animals. Dina

100 Rubina, *Sindikat*, 341.

responds to her boss's literal and trickster approach to the idea of a Jewish ingathering with harsh skepticism. Since learning about his agenda, she evades his presence and does her best to circumvent his orders. This attitude reveals her reluctance to act as a recruiting force or embrace the notion of ingathering. Confrontations between Dina and Noi reveal two different views of Jewish mobility and belonging. Noi expresses classical Zionist determinism, while Dina, who embraces Israel as one of her homes, nevertheless refuses to believe that all Jews must live together in Israel. The encounter between Dina and Noi in *The Syndicate* suggests that despite the growing transnationalism of Russian-speaking Jews, myths of return continue to direct and narrate the flow of Jewish migration.

In addition to critiquing investment in the notion of ingathering, the novel takes on the concept of ascent, *aliyah*. As Majid Al-Haj notes,

> Immigration (or *aliya*, to use the Israeli term) has always been perceived not as a demographic movement but as a value process that expresses the crux of Zionism...This value system is reflected by the terms used by both policymakers and the general public regarding immigrants and immigration: Jews who immigrate to Israel are called *olim* – ascenders; those who emigrate are called *yordim* – descenders."[101]

Dina's job at the syndicate causes her to frequently contemplate, play with and mock the term "*voskhozhdenie*," "ascent" in Russian. Her progressive disillusionment is, in part, a produce of the syndicate's environment, which is full of workers who engage in foot-dragging when they are not putting on events that result in disorganized, carnivalesque and culturally offensive incidents. Stocked with characters who come to Moscow for economic rather than ideological reasons and lack any genuine investment or sense of agency in their work, the syndicate often makes Dina feel like she is trapped in an absurd comic strip, as signaled by the novel's subtitle. The fact that such a motley crew is

101Al-Haj, 37.

responsible for assisting Russian-speaking Jews with their spiritual and geographical movement toward the Holy Land demystifies the process of immigration for Dina. The apathy, self-interestedness or downright incompetence of the workers is only heightened by the daunting nature of their task. Rather than moving spiritually up and geographically, FSU residents yearn to go West, to Germany – a situation that the syndicate fails to alter. As Dina quickly learns, syndicate workers are not benevolent guides who help in the crossing over but fishermen or mushroom hunters, who must wait patiently to occasionally find their prey in the deep and hidden corners of Russia. These comical analogies to immigration recruitment in the novel successfully satirize the otherwise idealized rhetoric imposed on newcomers, particularly the notion of immigration as an upwardly-directed metaphysical movement.

Yet it would be inaccurate to say that the novel aims to completely discredit the concept of ascent. Rather, like Rubina's other works of fiction that blend the quotidian with the mystical, *The Syndicate* relies on spiritual imagery to reinvent ascent as a personal experience, a metaphysical journey toward Israel that takes place in the dream-state rather than in the material world. Such an experience occurs to Dina at the very end of her stay in Moscow, on the eve of her return to Israel. It begins as her first successful attempt at meditation and ends when she is suddenly awakened by her coworkers. In her unconscious state, Dina feels herself finally ascend, along with her friends, syndicate colleagues, as well as the lost tribes of Israel, in a giant ark-like ship:

> An endless string of my people, my people from all over the world [*moego vselenskogo naroda*], was lining up and *ascending*, by means of a wide, bridge-like ramp, a giant ship – one by one, with no end in sight, - like a tragic comic strip...
> And I, a forgotten wanderer, impassively joined the tail-end of this

> great queue.
> Easily and cheerfully we went up the ramp to the giant ship, which took us across the Aegean and the Marmara Seas. We *ascended* to the place promised by the abstract God to his mindless, disobedient people, his forgotten rootless people, that had always played with fire...
> We *ascended* to Jerusalem, which lay on flowing and still waters, we swam out to Jerusalem – the Venice of God – along the stone canals that flowed with sacrificial blood, washing the feet of golden lions, who guarded its constant, beating surf.[102]

This entirely spiritual journey, a lyrically-rendered dream, allows Dina to experience the metaphysical transformation promised by the *aliyah* rhetoric without the actual physical travel to a geographic territory. Yet the experience is more cathartic than idealistic. The excerpted journey depicted above is absurd and tragic, suggesting that the process of undoing rootlessness by reclaiming land depends on a bloody sacrifice. The fact that Dina's ascent occurs only within an alternative time-space is significant. In this way, Rubina portrays ascent as an interrupted dream, whose interruption means that there can be no final return. The novel's representation of *aliyah* as a mystical and subconscious journey echoes diaspora theories, particularly those that imagine returns as "subliminal, figurative and symbolic."[103]

In *The Syndicate*, Rubina shows that doubly diasporic subjects must simultaneously negotiate their relationship to Israel and the FSU. The narrative also suggests that the transnational lifestyle, which involves travel to, and interaction with, multiple homelands adds urgency to these negotiations. In *On the Sunny Side of the Street* (2006), Rubina reaffirms ex-Soviet Jews' need to acknowledge their distance from and connection to the Soviet past. Similarly to *The Syndicate*, *Sunny Side* promotes a

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102 Rubina, Sindikat, 570.

103 Robin Cohen attributes subliminal conceptions of return to Aimé Césaire in "Solid, Ductile and Liquid: Changing Notions of Homeland and Home in Diaspora Studies," *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis)order*, 129.

creative and metaphysical return over a physical one. Yet another fictionalized version of Rubina appears as a Russian-Israeli author who attempts to reflect on her life in Uzbekistan and to collect immigrant testimonies, which she refers to as "voices of those gone with the wind [*golosa unesennykh vetrom*]."[104] In her effort to mentally reconstruct post-WWII Tashkent and re-create a relationship to the Soviet Union, the narrator jumps between the present and the past, accomplishing a symbolic break with the linear and unidirectional concept of time and geographical movement promoted by Zionism. In this case, a diasporic return to the FSU occurs in the task of remembrance, as the novel presents a mix of nostalgic meditations, memory failures and serious attempts to reconcile the personal with the historical. The novel shows Rubina shifting the post-Soviet-Jewish experience to the periphery of the text in order to focus on a cosmopolitan city at one of the peripheries of the USSR.

By centering Tashkent, Rubina destabilizes Jerusalem as the Jewish center and homeland. The narrator's recollection is nostalgic but also fragmented. Svetlana Boym's distinction between different forms of nostalgia is useful in understanding Rubina's treatment of Tashkent in the context of immigration. According to Boym there are at least two kinds of expressions of nostalgia – "restorative," which reclaims a linear, idealist and usually nationalist version of past and the more critical, "reflective nostalgia," which appears in imaginative, ironic, experimental and highly self-conscious meditations.[105] In the spirit of reflective nostalgia, Rubina presents her recollections of the past together with meditations on the process of remembering. More importantly, Rubina avoids including a unified vision of post-war Tashkent, but instead offers a fragmented and

104 Dina Rubina, *Na Solnechnoi storone ulitsy* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006), 24.
105 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

disaggregated fantasy that reflects the city's residents. Just as Jerusalem is a myth, Tashkent is a city "that is no longer on the map."[106] Tashkent for the novel's narrator is a Babylon, a Noah's ark, but also an Atlantis buried her mind. As she declares, "I am not concerned with the chronology of this narrative, as there is no chronology in that ocean where cities descend for centuries."[107] Therefore, Tashkent must remain unattainable in the present despite being beloved and fondly remembered by those who once dwelled there. The city is neither recaptured nor forgotten. The novel's claim that cities do not remain frozen in time awaiting the return of their displaced residents forces us to again compare it to Jerusalem, a city that, by this logic, also cannot be fully recovered or reclaimed. Tashkent is Jerusalem and Babylon at once – a site of home and exile.

Sunny Side's portrayal of Tashkent as Babylon, a city that traditionally signifies forced Jewish expulsion overlaps with Robin Cohen's claims that one of the ways of "interrogat[ing] and seek[ing] to supersede the Jewish tradition of diaspora," requires "a revisionist view of Babylon."[108] According to Cohen, a shift in perspective allows us to recognize "the benefits of integration into a rich and diverse alien culture [which] were evident both to many of the first group of Judeans and to their immediate descendants."[109] Rubina evokes Tashkent as a place where Jewish exiles found home, while also celebrating the city's multilingualism and diversity. Her Babylonian Tashkent, contains Jewish cultural life, including Yiddish theater.[110] For example, the narrator boasts that one could attend a performance of Scholem Aleihem's *Tevye the Dairyman*. Even the city's Jewish population is diverse, being composed of locals and displaced cosmopolitans. The

106 Rubina, *Solnechnoi Storone*, 33.
107 Ibid., 228.
108 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 22, 23.
109 Ibid., 23.
110 Ibid., 38.

narrator informs us that Tashkent was filled with different cultural manifestations of Jewry, including Ashkenazi, Bukharan, Mountain and Crimean Jews, making it so that no group could claim Jewish authenticity without being challenged. As a result, much like in contemporary Israel, Jews' cultural diversity was a source of celebration and conflict. The novel encapsulates this idea in an exchange between two Jewish women in Tashkent; one asks, "What kind of Jews are you? Russian?" and the second replies, "Yes and so what?." When the first declares "You're Russian, but we are the real ones," the second retorts, "we're not pretend ones either."[111]

According to Rubina's narrator, in Tashkent's multilingual post-WWII atmosphere, members of different nationalities were literally each others' neighbors. As one of the novel's voices remembers, "who didn't live in that tiny street, whom didn't we have! In official records about its inhabitants the city featured 98 nations and ethnicities! What spontaneous internationalism, a 'Noah's Ark'... to surprise someone by being Armenian, an Aysor, Jew, Greek, Tatar, Uigur or a Korean was difficult."[112] All of these displaced national minorities helped make the city into a Noah's ark was more authentic and "spontaneous" than the vanity project envisioned by Noi in the *The Syndicate*. Tashkent's "spontaneous internationalism" manifests some of the aspects of Soviet multiculturalism that Grisha praises in "Apples." The interactions between the city's residents are colored by conflict and violence, but also by genuine attempts to communicate with one another and aid each other with material needs. According to the accounts in the novel, each group in Tashkent had a sense of its cultural particularism but respected and even admired the differences of their neighbors.

111 Rubina, *Solnechnoi Storone*, 175.
112 Ibid.

By focusing on Tashkent, a Soviet home for uprooted Jews and other minority groups, Rubina shows more directly than previously how Jews engaged with other Soviet nationalities, negotiating differences and boundaries. More specifically, the narrator implies that the Central Asian past can be instructive for embracing the condition of geographical and cultural displacement that characterizes the experience of Soviet Jews in Israel. Yet, perhaps more significantly, the novel implies and even, at times, directly suggests that Jewish experiences in a city like Tashkent, with its Babylonian cosmopolitanism, sets a useful precedent for navigating and improving Arab-Israeli relations. *Sunny Side*, in this way, emphasizes the relevance of the past in dealing with the social and ethnic problems that confront immigrants in their host-lands.[113] Rubina's novel suggests that in Uzbekistan Soviet Jews found a way to live side by side with a Muslim population in peace. This was accomplished through the mutual borrowing of customs and behaviors and the exchange of social rituals. The narrator in particular retains fond memories of the many bazaars in Uzbekistan, where all of the national minorities haggled with one another. The Uzbeks had a particular "talent for haggling" that the narrator respected, appropriated and found herself using in the markets in Jerusalem, particularly when interacting with Arab sellers. In one scene in the novel, the narrator engages in an extensive haggling ritual with a merchant named Selim, an exchange that puzzles her companions visiting from the US. Despite mutual protests, supplications, flatteries and complaints, the narrator and Selim arrive at a deal that satisfies each one completely. The exchange is not without Orientalist undertones, as the narrator exoticizes and creates superficial parallels between Arab and Central Asian Muslims.[114] At the same time, by

113 On Russian-Jewish and Arab relations, see Siegel, *The Great Immigration*.
114 As Fialkova and Yelenevskaya show, Russian-Jews in Israel often express Orientalist views that they

glorifying the bazaar, the novel suggests the need for more haggling in Israel, or rather, more negotiations between the different Jews groups and between Jews and Arabs.

According to *Sunny Side*, remembering the Babylonian aspects of Tashkent is useful in not only coming to terms with histories of Jewish dislocation in the Soviet Union, but also in creating cross-cultural connections within their new homelands. At a certain point in the novel, the narrator runs into an old friend from Tashkent in Jerusalem. During their conversations, the friend nostalgically reminisces about their shared place of birth, suggesting that Soviet experiences of cultural mixing and coexistence are relevant for immigrants' struggles to integrate and confront difference within their host countries. He states,

> the experience of stewing from childhood in our Babylon of ethnicities, nations and nationalities, we knew that a person could be *different*, more than that, he is always different, but it is necessary to *coexist*, since we cannot run away from each other, what is most important is to coexist – that's the foundation of life. And that very ability to understand the other, which became apparent in the extreme experiences of all the different emigrations, is, indeed, one of the best qualities of this damned human nature... that which in the West goes that by that impersonal name, "tolerance." But it's not tolerance, it's a necessary empathy, simply the humbling of one's "I," the recognition that you are not better than the other, but he is not better than you.[115]

The passage brings together the concepts of rootlessness and cosmopolitanism, implying that the process of crossing geopolitical and cultural borders lays bare the need for cosmopolitanism. In this case, cosmopolitanism is less about mobility, multilingualism and dual homeness, as it is about what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls "habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association."[116] The

internationalized in the Soviet Union. They even have a tendency to conflate Caucasians, Arabs and even Jews of non-European descent as a result of Orientalist biases. According to Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, "in Israel, new immigrants characterize the Oriental other as 'bazaar people'," 203.

115 Rubina, 366.

116 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton,

novel's emphasis on negotiations, conversations and co-existence is important given Soviet Jews' well-documented tendency to expect an ethnically and culturally homogenous society in Israel. According to Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, "unprepared for the multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic nature of Israel, FSU immigrants were confronted by a paradox: they came to realize that they had been at home among strangers, and they were strangers among their own people."[117] *Sunny Side* confronts the problem of Israel's diversity for immigrants by gesturing toward the Soviet "friendship of nations" ideal. At times, Rubina's novel suggests that the transnational lifestyles of post-Soviet Jews do not necessarily yield cosmopolitan outlooks. By engaging in a nostalgic re-appropriation of Soviet "spontaneous internationalism" her texts promotes cosmopolitanism as an ideal and encourage cross-cultural exchanges and lateral affiliations between minorities in Israel.

In *Sunny Side*, the experience of living with the condition of displacement in Tashkent, a cosmopolitan center full of local and extra-territorial minorities, provides a useful model for Russian-speaking individuals now attempting to coexist with a new and diverse population. The novel's self-conscious idealization of Tashkent encourages immigrants to approach the diversity of Israel with a more optimistic attitude. Additionally, the symbolic re-excavation of Tashkent establishes a necessary sense of continuity for the immigrants who struggle to fit themselves into Zionist narratives. Rubina's narrative suggests that immigrants should remember their Soviet roots, but self-consciously, and without disguising memory's interruptions, gaps and paradoxes. *On the Sunny Side of the Street* does not attempt to make the Soviet past whole again, or promote

2006), xix.

117 Fialkova and Yelenevsaya, 298.

returns to the FSU, but rather locates usable material in the fractured memories of Israel's disaggregated post-Soviet subjects.

Conclusion

In “Jerusalemites” Rubina claims that she is interested in the mystical rather than the academic approach to myths. However, I show in this chapter that she invites a cultural studies perspective by creating tensions between the mythical, the ordinary and the political. Rubina's work is particularly engaged in exploring a constellation of myths surrounding Jewish immigration to Israel, including the myths of homeland, exile, return, homecoming, ascent and ingathering. These myths shape the policies and culture of the Jewish state and the lives of its residents, natives and newcomers. The newcomers, who arrive in Israel bearing Soviet baggage and speaking a different language, have their own myths and terms, such as national identity [*natsional'nost'*] and homeland [*rodina*]. Rubina's fiction effectively shows that, as a result of these differences, the lines between departure and return, or diaspora and home are not clearly drawn in the minds of Soviet-Jewish immigrants.

Rubina's Israeli-themed novels suggest that the Great Aliyah, more than any previous wave of immigration, proves that we can no longer think about the Jewish diaspora in the singular form. For the Russian-speaking Jews in such novels as *Here Comes the Messiah!*, *The Syndicate*, and *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, diaspora is a hybrid condition, involving double displacements and double allegiances. Rubina shows that process of negotiating between the Jewish diaspora and the Soviet-Jewish diaspora

transforms Russian-speaking Jews into hybrid and culturally disjointed subjects. Yet this disjointedness, or disaggregation, becomes a productive state as immigrants adjust from double rootlessness to dual citizenship. Moving between multiple homes as they enact multiple returns, Rubina's immigrant heroines implicitly destabilize the center-periphery model of diaspora that insists on the final ingathering of Jews from the peripheries (of the diaspora) to the center (modern Israel). These journeys, which take geopolitical and subliminal forms, prove that despite Israel's existence, Jews can retain portable roots and extraterritorial homelands, including their Russian-language *literary* homeland. By closely examining the diasporic trajectories of ex-Soviet Jews, Rubina gestures to the larger questions surrounding Jews and space. In the context of current disputes over Israel's occupied territories, settlements, and partitions, thinking about double diaspora becomes an oppositional force, pointing the way to a more transnational, rather than local and state-based, concept of Jewish identity.

The question of Jews dwell within space relates directly to how they identify themselves in Rubina's novels and short-stories. For example, geopolitical uprootings can produce the kind of double consciousness that is best embodied by not one, but two, literary heroines in *Here Comes the Messiah!*. This doubling, which, at times, hinders our ability to tell apart the copy from the original, touches on the question of Jewish authenticity. I focus on this question in the following chapter while looking at the work of Liudmila Ulitskaia. Rubina's work already shows us that Russian-speaking Jews are set apart from other Jews, specifically Israelis. Ulitskaia's fiction pushes further on the boundaries of Jewish identity, illustrating how diasporic culture challenges our ability to tell Jews apart from non-Jews.

CHAPTER THREE

Jews in Translation:

Liudmila Ulitskaia's *A Merry Funeral* and *Daniel Stein, Translator*

"...the only thing that Jews have in common is the fact that they self-identify as Jews."

– Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora*

"Now, in the twentieth century, there are more 'captive children' than real Jews," states an Orthodox rabbi in Liudmila Ulitskaia's 1997 novel, *A Merry Funeral* [*Veselye Pokhorony*].[1] A 'captive child,' or *tinok shenishba*, is a talmudic concept of a Jew who lacks a Judaic education and, therefore, is not accountable for failing to conform to rabbinical laws, the commandments, or Jewish rituals.[2] "Real Jews," in this case, are Orthodox Jews, such as the novel's rabbi, who live according to the collective body of Jewish laws, known as the *halakha*. Ulitskaia's rabbi, Reb Menashe, cites secular American Jews, particularly those living in New York, and Jews from the Soviet Union, as examples of modern-day captive children. He makes this claim while trying to convert to Judaism one such captive child, Alik – a dying ex-Soviet Jewish artist who resides illegally in the United States.

1 Liudmila Ulitskaia, *Veselye Pokhorony*, *Sonechka: Povesti i Rasskazy* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002), 111. The title of the novel has also been translated as "The Funeral Party." See Ludmila Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party,* trans. Cathy Porter (New York: Schocken Books, 2001).

2 According to David Ellenson and Daniel Gordis, "the phrase *tinok shenishba bein hanokhrim*, 'an infant who was kidnapped [from among Jews and raised] among Gentiles,' appears twice in the Babylonian Talmud, both times in BT Shabbat 68b. A person who falls under this category is not considered liable for the sins that he commits." David Ellenson and Daniel Gordis, *Pledges of Jewish Allegiance: Conversion, Law, and Policymaking in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Orthodox Responsa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 188.

The view of Russian Jews as captive children is not unique to the Orthodox character in *A Merry Funeral*. Members of Israel's rabbinate have implicitly and explicitly referred to Russian-speaking Jews as captive children in their attempts to encourage conversion among immigrants who are not halakhically Jewish, but who qualify for citizenship under the Law of Return.[3] However, Reb Menashe's suggestion that Alik does not fulfill the status of a Jew gestures toward the more general tendency, on the part of Israeli and North American Jewry, to assume that immigrants from communist Eastern Europe are so alienated from Jewish culture as to not be fully Jewish, regardless of their ancestral lineage. Russian-speaking Jews occupy the seemingly paradoxical position of being Jews who require "judaizing" as a result of their "captivity" in the Soviet Union.[4] The process of judaizing is intended to reverse Soviet Jews' internalized split between Jewishness [*evereistvo*] and Judaism [*iudeistvo* or *iudaizm*] and their Russification. Like the Jews of the biblical Exodus narrative, ex-Soviets are often defined by their rupture from Judaism and seen as being more Russian than Jewish within their host countries.[5] Though often seen as victims, Jews from the Soviet Union also represent a threat to essentialist conceptions of Jewishness by destabilizing the traditional

3 Ellenson and Gordis cite Rabbi Yigal Ariel as comparing Israel's Russian Jews to captive children, *Pledges of Allegiance*, 155. Also see Yigal Ariel, "Conversion of Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union," (Hebrew) *Tehumin* 12 (1991): 81-97. An example of a non-halakhic Jew is a Jew born of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. A significant percentage of FSU immigrants fits this criteria given the prevalence of intermarriage between Jews an non-Jews in the Soviet Union. Non-halakhic Jews cannot marry other Jews in Israel or be buried in a Jewish cemetery. On the other hand, the Law of Return has, in some ways, a looser definition, allowing "a child and grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew, and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew to immigrate." For the full text, see Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1950_1959/Law%20of%20Return%205710-1950.

4 I borrow the term "judaizing" from Hasia Diner, who uses it to describe American Jews' efforts to re-educate FSU Jewish immigrants. See Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 317-318.

5 On the exodus rhetoric surrounding Jewish emigration from the FSU, see Murray Friedman and Albert D Chernin, *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999.

dichotomy between “real Jew” and *goy*. The proliferation of these “captive children” signals to many scholars, rabbis and policy-makers the gradual weakening of Jewish cultural identity.

Because post-socialist Jews do not easily conform to Judaic, Israeli or mainstream Jewish-American constructions of identity, they often find themselves representing the limits of Jewishness. As Ulitskaia's fiction shows, being on the borders of the Jewish community, or “borderline” Jews, puts ex-Soviet Jews at the center of debates about what it means to be a Jew in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Similarly to Rubina, Ulitskaia emphasizes the evolving disaggregation of immigrant identities. However, Ulitskaia focuses more on incongruences between religious, ethnic and cultural allegiances. Both Rubina and Ulitskaia show that disaggregation results in intercultural miscommunication and hardship for immigrants. Yet Ulitskaia sets herself apart by celebrating individuals who deconstruct their cultural identities and express them in fragmented and hybrid ways. In *A Merry Funeral* and *Daniel Stein, Translator* [*Daniel' Shtain, perevodchik*] (2006), the novels that I closely examine in this chapter, Ulitskaia suggests that Jewish identity is subject to constant fluctuation and re-interpretation. Moreover, her fiction implies that deviations from an imagined “thick” Jewish identity ensures the adaptation and survival of Jewish culture.[6] In this way, Ulitskaia discourages the codification of unaffiliated Jews as captive children, or persons without agency whose Jewishness is dormant and in need of awakening at the hands of “real Jews.”

Ulitskaia is the only Post-Soviet writer featured in this dissertation who is based

6 I again refer to Gitelman's distinction between thick and think cultured Jews. See Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (New York: Cambridge University, 2012).

in Russia, where she enjoys commercial and critical success. A dissident and active participant in national and local politics, Ulitskaia also has a global literary presence.[7] She is a figure in World Literature who is widely translated from Russian and a household name to Russian-Jewish immigrant readers living in Europe, Israel and North America. Ulitskaia's appeal to these readers is due in large part to her realistic depictions of Soviet everyday life, *byt*, and her engagement with identity problems faced by East European Jews abroad.[8] Moreover, as a cosmopolitan who regularly moves between several continents, Ulitskaia embodies the transcontinental lifestyle that is gradually becoming characteristic of the Russian-Jewish experience. Yet, most importantly, Ulitskaia fits well into discussions of the Post-Soviet Jewish diaspora because of her concern with Jewish belonging and exile in cultural and geopolitical contexts.

Similarly to Rubina, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis, Ulitskaia is interested in border crossers in the broad sense, or in individuals who traverse national and cultural boundaries. In *A Merry Funeral* and *Daniel Stein, Translator*, Ulitskaia presents border crossing characters who inadvertently subvert racialist and nationalist conceptions of Jewish identity espoused by Jewish and non-Jewish groups. Both novels are about disaggregated Jews from Eastern Europe whose Jewish status is consistently called into question or negated, especially by other Jews. *Funeral* centers on Alik, the previously introduced captive child. On his deathbed, Alik is confronted with the choice between

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7 Ulitskaia has participated in numerous protests in the Russian Federation in the past couple of decades. For an interview where she articulates her dissident position, see Elizabeth Day, "Lyudmila Ulitskaya: why I'm not afraid of Vladimir Putin," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2011. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/17/lyudmila-ulitskaya-dissident-putin-interview

8 For an analysis of Ulitskaia's representation of everyday life, see Benjamin Sutcliffe, "The Artistry of Everyday Life: Liudmila Ulitskaia, Svetlana Vasilenko, and Post-Soviet Women's Anthologies," *The Prose of Life: Russian Women Writers from Khrushchev to Putin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009) 99-130.

dying as a "nobody [*nikem*]," in Reb Menashe's words, converting to Judaism, or committing apostasy through conversion to Christianity.[9] Alik, a rootless cosmopolitan in the form of a bohemian artist, dies identifying as a Jew but categorically refusing affiliation with institutional Judaism. Daniel Stein, the titular character of Ulitskaia's 2006 text, is a Polish Jewish translator and convert to Catholicism who views himself as a Christian Jew. As a result of this double identity, Ulitskaia's protagonist fails to gain acceptance among Jews in Israel, his adopted country. When Daniel Stein attempts to root himself in Israel he unwittingly threatens its foundational principles and immigration policy, becoming a symbol for the state's attempt to limit the definition of a Jew.

According to David Ellenson and Daniel Gordis, it is important to recognize differences between "identity," an individual's "relationship to a group," and "status," the "condition of a person in the eyes of the law."[10] Ellenson and Gordis elaborate that "while these two terms often overlap, they are two distinct referents that are not necessarily identical."[11] Thus, for example, a person may identify as a Jew without enjoying the status of being a Jew in the eyes of a particular Jewish congregation or a polity. I show that Ulitskaia's fiction explores the moments when identity and status do not overlap, especially for Jews from communist Eastern Europe. In the two novels that I analyze in this chapter, these failures of consensus expose the persistence of the question "Who is a Jew?." Yet, rather than answering this question directly, Ulitskaia's fiction draws our attention to identities that collapse the dichotomy between Jew and non-Jew. As a result, I classify her culturally and religiously-hybrid characters as "non-Jewish Jews" or subjects

9 Ulitskaia, *Veselye pokhorony*, 112.
10 Ellenson and Gordis, *Pledges of Jewish Allegiance*, 3
11 Ibid.

who occupy a third space, between identity prototypes, and who consequently challenge traditional constructions of Jewishness. According to Olga Gershenson and David Shneer, the phrase "non-Jewish Jew," introduced by Isaac Deutscher for describing such secular Jewish "heretics" as Baruch Spinoza and Sigmund Freud, has become applicable to post-Soviet Jews.[12] Ulitskaia's novels deepen and nuance the connection between Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Deutscher's theory of unaffiliated Jewishness by focusing on sympathetically-rendered, "heretical" characters who de-essentialize identity.[13] Similarly to Deutscher, Ulitskaia suggests that thinking about non-Jewish Jews as being part of Jewish culture expands existing definitions of Jewishness.

A Merry Funeral presents a Russian-speaking non-Jewish Jew undergoing the transition between life and death, and, in the process, confronting individuals who view his identity in terms of failure, loss and betrayal. The novel contains within it the germ of Ulitskaia's mediation on diasporic identity through translation, which she develops more fully in *Daniel Stein, Translator*. Relying on translation as a metaphor and theoretical tool, Ulitskaia suggests that cultural identities, like texts, yield multiple interpretations. This explicit and implicit play with translation is Ulitskaia's most unique contribution to the literature of the Soviet-Jewish diaspora. The view of translation that emerges in *Daniel Stein, Translator* parallels theories that reject the concept of an ideal translation. Ulitskaia treats translation broadly, as a process of intercultural communication and a metaphor for the historically-influenced transformation of selfhood. *Daniel Stein, Translator* and *A Merry Funeral* disrupt the hierarchical nature of the "thick culture"

12 Olga Gershenson and David Shneer, "Soviet Jewishness and Cultural Studies," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 4, no.1 (2011): 129-146. For Deutscher's original essay, see Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, ed. Tamara Deutscher (Boston: Alyson, 1982).

13 I borrow the term "de-essentialize" from Gershenson and Shneer who apply it to ethnically-mixed Russian-Jews who "custom-build their Jewish, partly-Jewish, or non-Jewish identities" Ibid., 131.

versus "thin culture" binary by suggesting that all Jewish identities, including those of Orthodox rabbis, secular ex-Soviet Jews or Jewish converts to Christianity, are interpretations. In this way, Ulitskaia claims that there are diverse ways of engaging in self-positioning, and that no method of identification is faithful to an imagined original, pure, and therefore superior, cultural identity. Her novels communicate that there are "varieties of [Jewish] authenticity," to borrow Stuart Charmé's phrase, and discourage the view that the identities of Jewish immigrants who are not officially affiliated with Judaism are false translations, or products of the failure to transmit Jewish culture under socialism.[14]

This chapter is divided into four parts, "A Homeless Home," "A Non-Jewish Jew," "A Christian Jew," and "A Land that is Not Home." The first two sections focus on *A Merry Funeral*, illustrating that, similarly to other Post-Soviet authors, Ulitskaia explores how Jews tackle the questions of identity and home simultaneously. In "A Homeless Home," I argue that *A Merry Funeral* highlights the domestic and national dimensions of self-location for ex-Soviet Jews. Set in a New York loft-space full of Russian-Jewish immigrants and other outsiders, the novel stresses the possibility of alternative homes that unite rootless subjects without rooting them in a territory. Within this environment, Ulitskaia examines how permanently diasporic Russian-speaking Jews situate themselves in relation to Jews who view themselves as grounded in a Jewish land and religious practice. In "A Non-Jewish Jew," I suggest that Isaac Deutscher and Stuart Hall provide useful theories for appreciating Ulitskaia's reclamation of a disjointed secular Jewish identity shaped by Soviet policies. The third section of the chapter, "A

14 Stuart Charmé, "Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Jewish Identity," *Jewish Social Studies*, *New Series*, 6, no. 2 (2000): 133-155. I engage with Charmé's ideas further on in the chapter.

Christian Jew," shows Ulitskaia moving from defending unaffiliated Jewishness to defending Jews who have multiple affiliations. More specifically, she confronts her readers with a Jew who chooses to remain Jewish while also being affiliated with another religion, Catholicism. Closely reading *Daniel Stein, Translator*, I argue that Ulitskaia creates a parallel between religious conversion and linguistic interpretation to emphasize the translatability of Jewish identity across languages, histories, geographies and religions. I suggest that, more than the other post-Soviet writers in this dissertation, Ulitskaia establishes a connection between diaspora and cultural translation.[15] In "A Land that Is Not Home," I return the discussion to Jewish space and national allegiance. I show that in *Daniel Stein, Translator* Ulitskaia suggests that, in order be a home for all diaspora Jews, Israel must expand its definition of Jewishness to include converts to other religions. However, I end the section by stressing that the novel sends a complex message about Israel's status as a Jewish homeland. I illustrate that that while expressing utopian aspirations toward a religiously tolerant Israel, the novel also implies that the systematic displacement of Palestinians compromises Jews' attempts to feel at home in the state.

A Homeless Home

A Merry Funeral is set in a West Village artist's loft that lacks basic amenities but shelters numerous immigrants and other social misfits. This is home reinterpreted, by Alik, the bohemian and commercially-unsuccessful painter who came to the United

15 Naomi Seidman stresses the same connection in her study of Jewish and Christian translation practices in *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 10.

States in the late 1960s, or early 70s, following detours to Austria and Italy. Remaining in the US without proper documentation, Alik lives as a politically-stateless subject. His rootless cohabitants and guests significantly contribute to the function and disarray of the household. Some of the notable characters include Alik's Russian Orthodox wife, Nina, current lover, Valentina, ex-romantic-partner Irina, who at one point converted to, but then abandoned, Judaism, and her daughter with Alik, Maika. The novel also introduces such regular visitors as the Russian-Jewish doctors Fima and Berman, and a self-proclaimed Russian "healer." To these regulars, Alik's unconventional dwelling place provides a destination point, a sense of community and even temporary lodging. This is despite the fact that the apartment is "an old rehabilitated warehouse" and therefore not a home in the legal sense.[16] According to the narrator, the loft is "excellent for social functions," but "for everyday life – useless."[17] Alik, its main resident, is also permanently on the brink of literal homelessness, as a result of his unstable financial situation and consequent vulnerability to eviction. Using this character, Ulitskaia creates a rapprochement between the concepts of home and homelessness. Moreover, she reframes Alik's rootlessness as artistic bohemianism and explores the positive and productive aspects of national homelessness*,* a concept associated with regression and entrapment in Rubina's *Here Comes the Messiah!*. As a result, *Funeral'*s unconventional vision of domesticity gestures toward the possibility of unorthodox, specifically anti-nationalist, conceptions of diasporic homes, communities and identities.

Ulitskaia's novel suggests that Jews from the former Soviet Union are especially positioned for reinventing notions of home because, as immigrants, they cross-pollinate

16 Ulitskaia, *Veselye Pokhorony,* 70.
17 Ibid.

models of cohabitation and cultural belonging from multiple cultures. The living space depicted in *Funeral* is a pastiche of experiments in living that echo with fin-de-siècle European bohemianism, the Greenwich Village Beat scene, and Zionist *kibbutz* culture. Furthermore, Alik's loft reminds readers of revolutionary house-communes and Soviet communal apartments, known as *kommunalka*s. Though cooperative, the community in Ulitskaia's novel is not grounded in a national territory or a commitment to the land in the ways that are central to *kibbutzim*. Neither is Alik's place a faithful reproduction of a *kommunalka*. The typical Soviet communal apartment's lack of privacy, constant neighborly interaction and shared facilities are all present in *Funeral.* The novel opens by describing its characters walking around the apartment in a state of almost complete undress, and taking turns showering to cope with a New York City heatwave. However, unlike a Soviet communal apartment, which has come to represent conformism and panopticon-like, neighbor-on-neighbor spying for the purpose of denunciation, Alik's loft provides a safe space for its inhabitants.[18] As Alik's ex-lover, Irina realizes about Alik, "...it was as if Alik had never left [*nikuda ne uezzhal*]! He had set up that Russia around him. A Russia that hasn't existed for a long time. And maybe never even existed."[19] Irina refers specifically to the apartment's atmosphere, particularly its visitors' intellectualism, conviviality, but also dramatic dispositions. The Russia that exists in Alik's apartment is a also a utopian simulacrum composed of artifacts and original aesthetic objects, specifically the artist's paintings. This thoroughly re-imagined Russia signals the different

18 On communal apartments, see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 121-145. According to Boym, "Since the late 1920s and especially during the Stalin years the communal apartment had become a major Soviet institution of social control and a form of constant surveillance," 125. Sheila Fitzpatrick makes a similar argument in *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135.

19 Ulitskaia, *Veselye*, 161.

ways in which diasporic subjects reconstruct their homelands abroad.

According to Robin Cohen, reconceptualizing and drawing distinctions between models of homeland have been major goals in diaspora scholarship.[20] Cohen identifies three dominant homeland prototypes, which he calls "solid," "ductile" and "liquid." According to Cohen, classical notions of diaspora, as derived from the Jewish case, predominantly imagine the homeland as solid, or centralized and territorially-specific. However, scholars of diaspora have shifted the diaspora paradigm by describing ductile homelands, which can be transposed from one locale to another, as well as liquid homelands, also known as "virtual" homelands, constructed through "cultural links."[21] Jews in particular, Cohen claims, are gradually swapping solid for ductile visions of homeland, especially through what he refers to as "dezionization."[22] Yet, for Ulitskaia's Alik, who is detached from Zionist frameworks, the memorial homeland is Russia rather that Israel. Moreover, his version of Russia is at once ductile and liquid, or more precisely, virtual. In a certain sense, he, along with his visitors, successfully transmits aspects of Russian and Soviet cultures. On the other hand, his living space is less like an actual communal apartment than a total work of art *about* communal apartments that is reminiscent of Ilya Kabakov's *kommunalka*-themed installations.

Perhaps more than anything else, Alik's loft is a *prokhodnoy dvor*, where "people [loiter] from morning to night, with some inevitably staying over."[23] The Russian phrase, "*prokhodnoi dvor,*" describes the passageway that connects a building's courtyard to the

20 Robin Cohen, "Solid, Ductile and Liquid: Changing Notions of Homeland and Home in Diaspora Studies," *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent on a New (Dis) Order*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg (Boston: Brill, 2009): 117-135.
21 Ibid., 132. Cohen cites the Caribbean diaspora as a case study for the liquid homeland model.
22 Ibid.
23 Ulitskaia, *Veselye*, 70.

street. It is also an idiomatic expression that refers to a place of constant human traffic and loitering, typically carrying negative connotations. Yet, when applied to Alik's apartment, *prokhodnoy dvor* gains more positive associations, evoking transition, transnationalism and the possibility of multi-directional movement. The metaphor of *prohodnory dvor* suggests the possibility of an impermanent diasporic home, which takes the form of an open passage rather than an enclosed center. In this way, the novel re-appropriates Soviet and Russian cultural artifacts, terms, and ideological dreams of home, giving them new meanings and forms that are relevant to theories of Jewish self-location. Given its unconventional manner of housing individuals, Alik's apartment symbolizes the evolution of Jews' rooting strategies.

As Caryn Aviv and David Shneer argue, exilic existence produced in Jews the habit of "acquiring land and investing it with cultural and metaphysical power."[24] According to Shneer and Aviv, Jews traditionally rooted themselves in "cemeteries...traditional schools (*b'tei midrash*) and ritual bathhouses (*mikva'ot*) – places off-limits to the cultures and peoples around them."[25] However, as the scholars observe, the process of self-rooting is becoming more impermanent and fluid for contemporary Jews. For example, according to Shneer and Aviv, today's Jews are more likely to mark their homes with mezuzahs than attend Jewish institutions. This traditional ritual of hanging an encased parchment of prayer within the door-frames of homes is surprisingly suitable to modern existence. More specifically, the mezuzah's portability makes it a convenient temporary rooting mechanism for mobile Jews. Alik's loft may not be marked

24 Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 5.
25 Ibid., 5-6.

by a mezuzah. However, his living space powerfully evokes the idea that Jews need not own land or property in order to enjoy a sense of home. In fact, no object marks Alik's loft as a Jewish home. What marks his place Jewish is the presence of immigrant Jews, Russian intelligentsia, and the sounds of broken Russian.

Fusing issues of space and Soviet-Jewish identity, *Funeral* encourages readers to rethink not only Soviet theories of domestic life but also its approach to defining, rooting and compartmentalizing ethnic minorities. The Soviet nationalities policy, sketched out by Stalin and crafted by a team of ethnographers in the early decades of the USSR, sought to identify distinct ethnic groups and house them within republics and autonomous regions.[26] In his analysis of the Soviet nationalities policy, Yuri Slezkine re-excavates the metaphor of the communal apartment, illustrating that officials imagined national minorities and their territories as separate rooms that would separate one large shared unit – the USSR.[27] As Slezkine explains, the realization of the communal apartment model depended on the policy of *korenizatsiia,*which Slezkine translates as "to take root" or "indigenization."[28] The policy sought to ensure that each ethnic group acquired its distinct national character, in other words, became rooted in a national language, culture and territory within the Soviet empire.[29] Slezkine further point out that "rootless

26 For Stalin's theory of nations, see *Joseph Stalin, Marxism and the National and Colonial Question: A Collection of Articles and Speeches*, ed. A. Feinberg (New York, 1934); For secondary sources on the Soviet nationalities policy, see Francine *Hirsch, Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

27 Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52. According to Slezkine, "As [Soviet official] I. Vareikis wrote in 1924, the USSR was a large communal apartment in which 'national state units, various republics and autonomous provinces' represented 'separate rooms,'" 415.

28 Ibid., 433.

29 Stalin's definition states, "A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture." *Joseph Stalin,*

cosmopolitanism represented the opposite of *korenizatsiia*-as-rootedness."[30] In Ulitskaia's novel, a communal-style apartment unites, rather than compartmentalizes, individuals from different generations, ethnicities and birthplaces in the USSR. In fact, their unity, and community, are based not on the fact that they all lived in the USSR but on the fact that they left the country, becoming rootless. As the text states,

> All the people sitting here, who had been born in Russia, and differed from each other in their talents, education and general human qualities, were united by the single fact that all of them, in one way or another, had abandoned Russia [*oni vse tak ili inache pokinuli Rossiu*]...No matter how they differed in their outlook, or how their immigrant lives turned out, they shared in the act of leaving one thing: a crossed border, a crossed, stumbling lifeline, the tearing up of old roots and planting new ones, in another soil [*obryv starykh kornei i vyrashchivanie novykh, na drugoi zemle*], that was of a different composition, color and smell.[31]

This image of former Soviet citizens cohabitating after emigration suggests nostalgia for the Soviet ideal of friendship of nations [*druzhba narodov*], which I also locate in Rubina's *On the Sunny Side Of the Street* in the previous chapter. Yet, while *druzhba narodov* preached the co-existence of groups that were supposed to maintain their distinct character, Ulitskaia shows the hybridization of cultures in the immigration.[32]

Cultural hybridity manifests most sharply in the language-use of the visitors and dwellers of Alik's apartment, who speak in their own tongue or, "immigrant dialect [*emigrantskoe narechie*], which easily [incorporates] Russian, English and Yiddish fragments, the most sophisticated curse-words, and the playful intonation of Jewish

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Marxism and the National and Colonial Question, 8.

30 Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," 448.

31 Ulitskaia, *Vesëlye*, 137

32 For scholarship on the hybridity of Russian-Jewish immigrant culture in America, see the work of Fran Markowitz, including *A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Emigres in New York* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); and "A Bat Mitzvah among Russian Jews in America," *The Life of Judaism (the Life of Religion)*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (University of California Press, 2001), 121-137.

humor."[33] Ulitskaia essentially describes a pidgin Russian-English dialect that has come to be unofficially known as Runglish and associated primarily with Russian-speaking immigrants. The particular version that appears in the novel, however, is also characterized by its Jewish accent. Though the "Babylonian" language featured in *Funeral* is "utilitarian" and "primitive" it testifies to the kind of cosmopolitanism and cultural blending that was officially discouraged in the Soviet Union since the inception of the nationalities policy.[34] Yet it must be acknowledged that Ulitskaia's protagonist enjoys bonds not only with a multicultural ex-Soviet population, but also with US minorities. The novel states that Alik has black friends, who came to pay their respects after his death, and points out that the presence of African-Americans is "a rare sight at Jewish funerals."[35] Ulitskaia thus hints at the fraught relationship between American Jews and African Americans in the latter half of the 20th century, using the ex-Soviet immigrant to encourage cross-diasporic coalition-building.[36]

Ulitskaia incorporates into the narrative the event of the 1991 Soviet coup d'état to illustrate that even the Russian Jews who put down new roots in the United States will always be simultaneously connected to, and alienated from, their Soviet homeland.[37] Unlike Rubina's characters, Ulitskaia's, in *A Merry Funeral*, express no recognition of Israel as their homeland and only struggle with attachments to the Soviet Union. The unfolding of the coup, which the loft's residents and visitors watch on television, becomes

33 Ulitskaia, *Veselye,* 83.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 169.
36 For more on the relations between American Jews and African Americans, see Cheryl Greenberg, "Pluralism and Its Discontents: The Case of Blacks and Jews," *Insider/Outsider: Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998), 55-88.
37 The 1991 coup, also known as the August *Putsch*, occurred when a faction of the CPSU attempted to wrest power from Mikhail Gorbachev.

for them a psychological return to the homeland. This historical moment makes apparent the fragility of immigrants' new roots. Up until the coup, the Russian Jews surrounding Alik experienced the Soviet Union as a dream, or rather nightmare, that manifests repressed themes of migration and displacement. The nightmares are specifically about returning to the Soviet Union and being unable to go back to America, their new home. According to the narrator, some dream of "losing documents or being locked up in prison; one Jew was visited by his dead mother who tied him up with a rope."[38] These diasporic anxieties about deportation and return recall but differ from Rubina's *Messiah*, where the heroine struggles with the impossibility of return to either homeland. Moreover, until the late-twentieth century, Russian-Jewish immigrants could not enjoy the kind of multidirectional movement that is depicted in Rubina's more recent Israeli fiction. In other words, permanent deportation could be a real threat to the Third Wave immigrants. However, with the re-emergence of the Soviet Union in their consciousness, the immigrants in *Funeral* realize that "their connection to it was unbreakable [*sviaz' s nei okazalas' nerastorzhimoi*]."[39] This is not to say that the 1991 coup brings with it feelings of nostalgia and longings to go back. On the contrary, the immigrants respond to the re-emergence of Russia in their collective consciousness by experiencing "a sort of chemical reaction in their blood, which produced nausea, a sour taste, and fear.[40] They also simply fail to decode the implications of the events represented on their television. As the novel states, "The events in Moscow were so incomprehensible, that it seemed that everyone needed a translation."[41] In other words, the characters in the novel are so

38 Ulitskaia, *Veselye,* 138.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 137.

transformed by their diasporic condition that they are unable to relate to their homeland linguistically, culturally or politically. Ultimately, the August coup lays bare the simultaneity of the distance from, and proximity to, home experienced by diasporic subjects. It is fitting that Ulitskaia chooses this particular moment to explore this diasporic ambivalence, given the coup's crucial importance to the collapse of the USSR, which would render the characters in the novel emigrants from a country that no longer exists.

According to Rubina's later immigration-themed novels, such as *The Syndicate* and *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, a diasporic subject evolves by learning to move between multiple homes, to the point of blurring traditional distinctions between departure and return. Ulitskaia implicitly supports this view of diaspora through her depiction of Alik's attitude toward return to the Soviet Union. Unlike his friends, Alik is capable of dreaming about going back to Moscow and staying there without experiencing trauma. This is because Ulitskaia's protagonist lacks a sense of center, homeland or national affiliation. Alik is not a citizen of any country, in the literal sense. His stateless condition thus lends another dimension to the novel's declaration, "it was as if Alik had never left." Because Alik never immigrated legally, he also, in a certain sense, never fully emigrated. He belongs nowhere, thus belonging everywhere. As we are told, Alik "quickly made himself at home in new places, getting to know their side-streets and and back-streets, the dangerous and delightful turns, like the body of a new lover."[42] When asked about life in the Soviet Union, Alik proclaims, "We lived well over there, but I am happy wherever I am."[43] This character's unbridled optimism and ability to adapt makes

42 Ibid., 139.
43 Ibid.

him an atypical representative of Russian-speaking immigrants. Yet, as I show in my analysis of *Daniel Stein, Translator*, Ulitskaia tends to rely on charismatic outlier figures in her explorations of Jewish diasporic identities. Using guru-like characters allows Ulitskaia to go beyond the status quo of immigrant communities and to inspire her readers to entertain rootlessness cosmopolitanism.

A Non-Jewish Jew

Similarly to Rubina's immigration-themed fiction, Ulitskaia's novel correlates geopolitical displacement and cultural decenteredness. *Funeral* confirms the view that Russian Jews are disaggregated, as opposed to unified, subjects who separate religious and secular aspects of Jewish culture. More specifically, Alik's self-identification as a Jew, but lack of commitment to Judaic rituals, initially appears to confirm the ideas that ex-Soviet Jews are culturally "thin," symbolic, or inauthentic. The dominant academic view states that Russian-Jewish identities lack "content" as a result of Soviet secularization, aborted attempts at *korenizatsiia,* and the holistic suppression of Jewish cultural expression, as evoked by Rubina in "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden."[44] In *Funeral,* Ulitskaia suggests that, despite their cultural inconsistencies, ex-Soviet Jews are neither without identities, nor in need of conversion to Judaism. Ulitskaia argues that what appears as their negation, or failure, of identity is a crucial part of the cultural

44 As Zvi Gitelman writes, "What kind of Jewishness resulted from the simultaneous stripping away of culture and religion and the state's insistence that Jews remain Jews? It is an identity without much cultural content...Nevertheless, a sense of belonging to 'the Jews' that most people find very hard to articulate persists even in the absence of any concrete content." Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8.

content of Russian-Jewish diasporic identities. For example, Alik's refusal to be affiliated with institutional Judaism, coupled with his identification as a Jew, hybridity as an ex-Soviet Jew, and overall fluidity between the categories of Jew and non-Jew, collectively make up his identity. By portraying Alik as an agent capable of making historically-informed choices, Ulitskaia subverts the image of Russian-speaking Jews as victims of the Soviet regime who are involuntarily alienated from traditional Jewish culture.

Introducing Reb Menashe, who challenges Alik's secularism, Ulitskaia stages a struggle between "thick" and "thin" Jews. The encounter between these two characters shows that Jews indeed conceive of their identities in divergent ways. As the novel suggests, tensions arise when Jews for whom religion and ethnicity align consider theirs to be the "real" and superior manifestation of Jewishness. Alik confronts this hierarchy when interacting with Reb Menashe. The artist initially invites the rabbi into his loft as a retort to his Russian Orthodox wife's request that he see a priest before dying. What begins as a facetious request for equal religious representation becomes an uncomfortable situation when Alik encounters the serious rabbi. Describing the rabbi, Ulitskaia underscores his differences from Alik. More specifically, Reb Menashe has deep cultural and territorial roots. Unlike the border-crossing Alik, the rabbi is proud of being *sabra*, a native born Israeli, who has "lived in Israel practically without ever leaving it" prior to this visit to New York.[45] The rabbi's view of Jewish identity, which he does not hesitate to articulate to Alik, is essentialist and determinist. One the one hand, he believes that Jewishness is inborn. On the other hand, he postulates that one who is born a Jew has a responsibility to become a real Jew through religious indoctrination. Jews who fail to

45 Ulitskaia, *Veselye,* 111.

fulfill this responsibility for reasons beyond their control are “captive children,” or prisoners of foreign influence and cultural ignorance. The rabbi suggests that it is through the guidance of other Jews, such as himself, that a captive child can return, through conversion, to a Jewish identity. In the rabbi's view, Alik, being a captive Jew, is a “nobody [*nikem*],” even “not a Jew [*vy ne yavliaetes' evreem*].”[46] According to the rabbi, Alik's identity lies so far beyond the Jewish prototype that he cannot even be an apostate.

Alik neither disputes nor confirms the rabbi's accusations. The artist's view of his own Jewishness is not based on conventional criteria. In other words, he does not think of identity in terms of origins or boundaries. As a result, he cannot provide evidence for his cultural authenticity. The novel portrays Alik's identity as being fluid and situational. We learn that in the USSR, Alik changed his name from the more Jewish name, Abraham, in order to avoid being targeted as a Jew. Within the time-frame of the novel, it is when others try define him or threaten his Jewish identity, that he calls himself “a Jew” or “a clever Jew [*umnyi evrei*].”[47] Because Alik sees his identity as contextually-based, he believes that when facing death, a Jew can seek advice from a rabbi despite being detached from Judaism. Moreover, Alik considers himself to be a responsible agent. At one point, he claims that he has had many, possibly too many, choices in his life.[48] This self-assessment is in sharp contrast with the rabbi's paternalistic view of Alik as a captive child. Whether Alik or the rabbi is the real captive child becomes unclear when the rabbi states, “I was born a Jew...I have been a Jew since the beginning and will be one until the end.”[49] On the other hand, the rabbi admits, Alik has three choices, to remain “a nobody,”

46 Ibid., 112, 111.
47 Ibid., 85.
48 Ibid., 111.
49 Ibid., 112.

become a Jew or even become a Christian, according to the wishes of his Russian Orthodox wife. The juxtaposition between Alik's insistence on his agency and the rabbi's refusal to recognize it, points to the miscommunication between ex-Soviet Jews and the American and Israeli Jews who attempt to "judaize" the immigrants. In fact, the specific issue of non-halakhically Jewish ex-Soviet immigrants and conversion to Judaism has been debated heatedly at the turn of the twenty-first century in Israel, with some leaders of the rabbinate proposing mass conversion as the solution to the problem of integrating numerous non-Jewish Jews into a Jewish state.[50]

Though she paints their differences in sharp relief, Ulitskaia ultimately prevents readers from seeing the rabbi and the secular Jew as polar opposites. As Benjamin Sutcliffe observes, Ulitskaia's fiction, particularly *A Merry Funeral* and *Daniel Stein, Translator*, promote reconciliation.[51] In *Funeral*, readers glimpse, if not the reconciliation, then at least a temporary rapprochement between thick and thin Jews. Alik and the rabbi may have "nothing in common" but they "underst[and]" each other to the point of making a "connection," presumably because of their shared style of speaking in ironical and round-about statements typical of Jewish anecdote.[52] They fail to come to agreement on the issue of identity, and Alik remains unswayed, but before leaving, the rabbi drinks vodka with the rest of the guests, momentarily blending into the environment. Still, to reconcile Alik's and the rabbi's identities, we have to go beyond Ulitskaia's narrative. "Message of the Non-Jewish Jew," Isaac Deutscher's famous essay on the dynamic relationship between observant Jews and secular Jewish heretics,

50 Ellenson and Gordis, 154.
51 Benjamin Sutcliffe, "Liudmila Ulitskaia's Literature of Tolerance," *The Russian Review* 68 (2009): 495-509.
52 Ulitskaia, *Veselye*, 110-111.

provides a lens for decoding *Funeral*'s attempt to promote non-hierarchically-based tolerance between "thick" and "thin" Jews. Alik's encounter with the rabbi powerfully evokes Deutscher's parable about a rabbi who regularly converses with, and even takes lessons from, a heretic. The anecdote embodies Deutscher's thesis that heretics or "non-Jewish Jews" belong to, rather than outside of, Jewish culture. As an artistic outsider type, Ulitskaia's Alik evokes the image of the Jewish heretic who provokes and puzzles religious leaders. Just as Deutscher implies that rabbinical Judaism has pushed secular heretics beyond the periphery of Jewish culture, Ulitskaia portrays the rabbi as failing to see the value and relevance of Alik's cultural identity. Unlike the rabbi in Deutscher's story, who learns from the heretic, Reb Menashe views himself as the teacher and Alik as a heathen and a child. In Deutscher's view, religious Jews and non-Jewish Jews have a responsibility to recognize the mutually-constitutive nature of their relationship. Ulitskaia presents a similar idea by stressing the need to get beyond the Self-Other dynamic between self-proclaimed "real Jews" and ex-Soviet "heathens."

Ulitskaia's dramatization of two competing identity interpretations overlaps not only with Jewish criticism but also with theories of identity inspired by other diasporic cultures. Stuart Hall's distinction between two approaches to diasporic cultural identity helps appreciate the value of Ulitskaia's juxtaposition of the ex-Soviet Jew and the rabbi. According to Hall, one method of conceptualizing cultural identity involves focusing on "one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common."[53] Hall, who focuses on Afro-Caribbean identity, cites

53 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 435.

Négritude as an example of the first method, which stresses cultural essentialism and historical continuity. In Ulitskaia's narrative, it is the rabbi who subscribes to the idea that he and Alik share a common heritage that the artist fails to acknowledge. Alik, on the other hand, embodies what Hall designates as the second theory of cultural identity, which "recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'."[54] This interpretation of identity emphasizes that it is "the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute...[the] 'uniqueness'" of a cultural community.[55] In contrast to the rabbi, who is firmly rooted on Israeli soil, Alik is defined by discontinuities with the FSU, Western Europe, his artistic homeland and his unmentioned memorial homeland, Israel.

By portraying Alik as a a tolerant community-builder, *Funeral* privileges the character's manner of discontinuous self-positioning over the rabbi's essentialism. In this way, Ulitskaia's novel echoes Hall's preference for the second view of cultural identity, despite his acknowledgement of the first view's history of empowering minority and subaltern groups. According to Hall, the second view more accurately reflects historical change, which results in fractures to cultural identities. Alik's disaggregated and situational identity embodies the changes to Jewish identity that took place in Soviet culture. The Soviet nationalities policy redefined ethnic identity in ways that not only compartmentalized ethnic groups within the USSR, but also produced compartmentalized individuals who learned to separate religion and ethnicity. As Judith Kornblatt shows in her ethnographic work on Jewish to Christian conversion, as a result of "the complete

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.

divorce of religious from national identity," Soviet-educated Jews often conceive of their Jewishness as "something genetic."[56] Viewing their Jewish identities as inborn has made Russian-speaking Jews hungry for choices, but also surprisingly well-positioned for choosing and creating new identity combinations. Kornblatt supports this idea through case studies of converts who construct their hybrid Jewish-Christian identities "without the dissonance that it might create for American or even Western European Jews."[57] Interestingly, for Alik, who claims the power to choose his identity, the ultimate choice is a negative one. Alik decides not to choose, and not be chosen as a Christian or a Jew, but to die as a captive child who occupies a third space, between religion and secularism.

Though Alik refuses religious transfiguration, he symbolizes not only the transformation of Jewishness in the USSR but also the "constant transformation" that, according to Hall, affects "everything which is historical."[58] Even on his deathbed, Alik is a portrayed as being in flux rather than in the process of decay. As the narrator describes, "his hands and his feet lay passively and lifelessly, even to the touch, they were neither dead nor alive, but suspiciously transitional, like setting plaster."[59] It is notable that Ulitskaia chooses plaster rather than another material, such as marble, to describe the process of Alik's degeneration, given that plaster is known for its ability to remain flexible after setting. Similarly, Alik remains a dynamic and form-shifting persona even in death. His transition from life to death is thus not the ultimate, irreversible cross-over offered by the priest and the rabbi. Alik symbolically returns from the dead to attend his own wake, where he addresses his friends through a previously taped recording. Alik's

56 Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen*, 33.
57 Ibid.
58 Hall, "Cultural Identity," 435.
59 Ulitskaia, *Veselye,* 70.

presence instantly changes the atmosphere of the loft, proving that he still has an impact on his commune. The funeral in the novel thus becomes "a merry funeral," as the title indicates. In other words, the funeral becomes a celebration of Alik's legacy and continued ability to shift forms and subvert social norms. In addition, after his death, Alik is metaphorically reborn as a successful artist. His gallery, which previously wished to disassociate itself from the artist, suddenly decides to acquire all of his paintings.

For all of its insistence on Alik's autonomy, *Funeral* portrays identity as a negotiation between communities rather than a completely personal expression of choice. Ultimately, Alik is symbolically initiated into both religions, Christianity and Judaism. First, Alik is Christened by his wife, who baptizes him shortly after his passing. Confirming the legitimacy of her gesture, the Russian Orthodox priest exclaims, "everything [is] God's will."[60] Then, the Orthodox Jews eagerly reclaim Alik as a member of their flock. Moments before Alik's coffin is lowered into the earth, a group of Orthodox Jews descends upon the cemetery from a bus labeled "Temple of Zion." These religious men, led by Reb Menashe, who "had decided to take care of this poor 'captive child,'" perform a collective recitation of the Jewish mourning prayer, the *Kaddish*.[61] Thus, even though Reb Menashe tells Alik, "you have a choice. You can be nobody," he ultimately cannot recognize the artist's choice not to be religious.[62] In the end, religious Jews and the Russian Orthodox alike take possession of Alik's identity, assigning to him the legal (in the religious sense) statuses that he wished to avoid by remaining "unaffiliated" [*bespartiinogo*].[63] *Funeral*, in this way, suggests that an individual's

60 Ibid., 167.
61 Ibid., 173.
62 Ibid., 112.
63 Ibid., 76.

attempts at self-definition is subject to diverse re-interpretations that depend on personal and communal biases. In other words, Alik's identity becomes a text that yields conflicting readings, breaking down and re-structuring traditional categories in the process.

In his death, Ulitskaia's protagonist is "neither Jew, nor gentile," nor Christian. Yet, in some sense, he is all of the categories at the same time. In this way, he responds to the dilemma articulated earlier in the novel, by the rabbi and the priest. Leaving Alik's apartment after their initial consultations, Reb Menashe and Father Victor share a taxi. The moment inspires the priest to pay tribute to the Jews, but to also suggest that both men are living in "new times," when individuals of different cultures, ethnicities and religions can intermix in order to produce "a new people [*novogo naroda*]."[64] This realization inspires the priest to exclaim, "We are living in a new time: neither Jew, nor Greek, in the most literal sense! [*ni iudeia, ni ellina, i v samom priamom smysle*]"[65] To the rabbi, however, this vision means the production of more captive Jews, more blurring of boundaries and more Jewish cultural dilution. Not surprisingly, he responds by saying "that's it, that's the most important thing for you, no more Jews."[66] Ulitskaia suggests that the choice between preserving Jewish difference and erasing it, along with other kinds of difference, is a false dilemma. There are alternative positions, such as Alik's, which is based on a double negation, and such as Stein's, which, as I argue in the following section, is based on double choosing.

Ulitskaia's fiction implicitly reminds us that we can either fear or appreciate

64 Ibid., 119.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.

cultural disaggregation. On the one hand, we can believe that the separation of ethnicity and religion threatens the integrity of the Jewish community by weakening the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. It is also possible to view disaggregated identities as inevitable products of historical change. As Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin claim, "diasporic identity is a disaggregated identity."[67] This is because unlike the rabbi in Ulitskaia's novel for whom all cultural aspects are fused, diasporic subjects cannot occupy their land, practice their religion, speak their language, and live predominantly among their people, all at once. Rather, they are defined by the "dissociation" of these factors and the "mixing" of diasporic, host and other minority cultures.[68] Disaggregated diasporic identities, as a result, disrupt what Elana Gomel calls "the ideological trinity" of the nation state – "one people, one land, and one language."[69] By denaturalizing the connections that support this trinity, disaggregated subjects illustrate the possibilities of disavowing or combining cultural affiliations. The flexibility of disaggregated identity expressions indeed threatens the Jewish prototype, and helps us think beyond the Jew versus non-Jew, and the Jew versus non-Jewish Jew, dichotomies.

A Christian Jew

It is better to remain a captive child than become a Christian, suggests Reb Menashe in *Funeral*.[70] However, Jewish religious law has a complex view of Jewish converts to other religions. While condemning the act of apostasy, Orthodox rabbis

67 Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 721.
68 Ibid.
69 Elana Gomel, *The Pilgrim Soul: Being Russian in Israel* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2009), 123.
70 Ulitskaia, *Veselye*, 112.

recognize Jewish apostates as Jews in most respects.[71] An apostate is, therefore, another kind of non-Jewish Jew. Israeli immigration laws on the other hand, locate converts outside of the Jewish prototype, in part, because of the religious convert whom Ulitskaia fictionalizes in *Daniel Stein, Translator*. The novel explores the ambiguous position of apostates in Jewish culture, illustrating again how identity outliers inadvertently define, but also deconstruct, prototypical models of Jewishness. Thus, while *A Merry Funeral* critiques the view of religiously-unaffiliated Jews as heathens, *Daniel Stein, Translator* challenges the idea that a Jew who converts to another religion is an apostate and a non-Jew.

Ulitskaia's accused apostate, Daniel Stein, is a mystical guru with shades of Vladimir Solovyov, Martin Buber and Alexander Men – a well-known Russian Orthodox priest with Jewish origins. Most notably, Stein is based on Oswald Rufeisen, a Polish-Jewish convert to Christianity and Carmelite monk who attempted to establish a congregation in Israel in the 1960's.[72] Ulitskaia's novel features a highly fictionalized adaptation of Rufeisen's biography, which is weaved together with the stories of numerous other characters who are immigrants, converts, native Israelis and Arabs. Similarly to Rufeisen, Stein grows up in Poland, where he participates in Zionist youth groups. During WWII, he survives in part by translating for the Germans, joins the partisans, helps numerous Jews escape deportation, and spends a period of time hiding

71 Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion," *Representations* 85, no. 1 (2004): 21-57. According to Boyarin, "at the stage of the 'definitive' formulation of rabbinic Judaism in the Babylonic Talmud, the Rabbis . . . propos[ed] . . . the distinct ecclesiological principle: 'An Israelite, even if he [sic] sins, remains an Israelite . . .' Whatever its original meaning, this sentence was understood throughout classical rabbinic Judaism an indicating that one cannot cease to be a Jew even via apostasy" 22.

72 For more on Oswald Rufeisen, see Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen* (New York, 1990).

out in a convent. Finally, like Rufeisen, Stein eventually immigrates to Israel, assuming that he would fit the criteria of the Law of Return. After being denied citizenship on the grounds of his Catholic affiliation, Stein sues but loses in a famous court case that I discuss later in the chapter. In this way, Stein fails to be recognized as a Jew in the eyes of the Jewish state and the state resolves, for its purposes, the ambiguous place of the religious convert in Jewish culture.

Although Stein's identity is not as directly influenced by Soviet legacies as the identities of the other characters that I analyze in this dissertation, his struggles strongly evoke Russian Jews' attempts to gain acceptance as Jews in Israel. However, unlike Stein, who was recognized as a Jew according to the *halakha,* but not according to the state, ex-Soviet Jews have come into conflict with the Orthodox rabbinate, whose members have the power to decide issues of "marriage, divorce, and burial" in Israel.[73] Stein's experience particularly relates to the case of Lev Paschov, an immigrant from the FSU and Israeli soldier who was killed in 1993 and initially prohibited from being buried in a military cemetery. Paschov, who was the son of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother, never fully converted to Judaism and therefore could not be buried together with other Jews. After much controversy and public debate about his Jewish status, Paschov was re-buried in the military cemetery, but, according to Ellson and Gordis, "at its edge."[74] This gesture is symbolic of the larger tendency to locate ex-Soviet Jews at the limits of the prototypical Jewishness. Similarly to Paschov, Ulitskaia's protagonist stands at the border between Jew and non-Jew, weakening the border's solidity with his presence. Thus, Ulitskaia continues to explore issues of identity that concern Jewish immigrants from the

73 Ellenson and Gordis, 7.
74 Ibid., 1.

Soviet Union, but also moves beyond them to tackle the larger conceptual problem of determining the cultural authenticity of diasporic subjects.

Ulitskaia relies on translation in her attempt to revisit the question of what defines Jewish identity in *Daniel Stein*. Playing with translation's symbolic and practical dimensions allows the author to mediate her novel's divisive subject-matter. More specifically, Ulitskaia recasts the religious convert as a translator and portrays evolutions of diasporic Jewish identity as acts of translation. The novel particularly evokes theories that treat translation broadly, as interpretation, communication and cross-cultural interaction.[75] More specifically, Ulitskaia's focus on Stein's work as a translator parallels the work of scholars who closely examine the figure of the translator, which continues to remain invisible and subservient to the author of the original text. In fact, Ulitskaia's adaptation of Rufeisen's biography significantly expands his role as a translator of languages while also exploring how his other roles literally and symbolically depend on translation practices.[76] Even the novel's title suggests that her Stein is, above all else, a translator, encouraging readers to regard his actions as translation choices. Furthermore, Ulitskaia's portrayal of Stein as a Christian Jew, as opposed to a Jew who abandoned his identity to become a Christian, undermines the original/interpretation dichotomy and hierarchy, which are often imposed on literary texts. Scholars of translation, including Lawrence Venuti and George Steiner, extensively critique the binary tendency to oppose the original to its translation and to characterize the translation as subservient and inferior

75 See for example, Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

76 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

to the original.[77] Just as Venuti and Steiner question the notion of an original text, Ulitskaia problematizes the idea that a Christian Jew has an original, Jewish, identity that becomes lost in the process of conversion to an identity that must be, by definition, inauthentic or false. By advocating for the translatability of identity, Ulitskaia subverts the contradictory tendency to view Jewishness as inborn and to divide Jews into real and symbolic. Similarly to *Funeral*, *Daniel Stein*, brings together competing interpretations of Jewish identity and shows that identity negotiations are deeply connected to territorial positioning. Because *Daniel Stein* takes place in Israel, the novel deals with issues of belonging and national allegiance in an especially urgent way, recalling Rubina's Israeli fiction, particularly *Here Comes the Messiah!*.

Daniel Stein defies categorization but fits roughly into the the genre of historical metafiction. In other words, the novel references historical events and figures, but presents them through fabricated documents and dramatized encounters. Moreover, *Daniel Stein* expresses, in the form of authorial interjections, self-awareness about its status as a fictional narrative based on nonfictional accounts. Ulitskaia's hybrid text embodies what Naomi Seidman refers to as the "narrative approach to translation," a method of examining translation from a multidisciplinary perspective and within a historical context.[78] According to Seidman, sociohistorical conditions influence and consequently manifest in the labor of the translator. She suggests that thinking about translation in terms of anecdotes and stories makes it possible to appreciate it as an

77 For example, Venuti claims, "both foreign text and translation are derivative: both consist of diverse linguistic and cultural materials that neither the foreign writer nor the translator originates," in *Translator's Invisibility*, 17-18. See also, George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

78 Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9.

embodied practice. Ulitskaia implicitly agrees with this claim by combining first and third-person stories about Stein's attempts to translate languages, ideologies, and his self. By the same token, she again implicitly echoes Hall's belief that "cultural identities have histories" and "therefore "undergo constant transformation."[79]

Whereas, in *Funeral*, the history of Alik's identity is shaped by the experience of growing up Jewish in the USSR and gradually crossing borders before coming to New York, Stein's identity undergoes its most extreme transformations during the Nazi occupation. Finding himself in Gestapo-ruled territories, Stein makes the morally ambiguous choice of giving up his Jewish identity for that of a gentile. He constructs a narrative about this act of translation decades later, in an address to German students. Recalling his flight, Stein says, "As I walked I thought that if I cannot conquer my fear, I will not survive. My fear would give me away. It was Jewish fear – the fear of being Jewish, of looking Jewish. I decided that only by ceasing to be Jewish would I be able to survive. I had to become [*stat'*] like the Poles and Belarusians."[80] Stein succeeds, not only in passing effectively enough to be given translation work for the Gestapo but also in "becoming" a Slav. This is a more radical version of Alik's abandonment of his Jewish name in order to escape Soviet anti-Semitism. Moreover, like Alik, Stein comes to experience his Jewish identity as being situational and performative rather than biological in nature. The performance depends on Stein's ability to speak several Slavic languages and German with native fluency. These linguistic skills cause him to work for a group whose goal is the destruction of Jews. Taking on his role as translator between the Nazis and the Belorussians, Stein even dons a disguise in the form of a uniform. He recalls, "I

79 Hall, 435.
80 Liudmila Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain perevodchick* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006), 99.

removed from myself the last of my 'Jewish heritage' [*evreiskoe nasledstvo*]—the clothes of the murdered Jews from police storage. Now I wore the black police coat with gray cuffs and collar, riding-breeches, boots and a black cap, but without the image of the skull."[81] Yet Stein's change of clothing not only costumes him, but creates a rupture with his Jewish cultural identity. With this scene, Ulitskaia suggests that a Jew can indeed choose to not be a Jew anymore, to give up his Jewish heritage, thus de-essentializing Jewishness.

While working among individuals who treat Jewishness as a racial attribute, Stein redefines his Jewish identity as a voluntary expression of connectivity to other Jews. In other words, rather than viewing his Jewishness as an inborn trait, or an authentic self hidden under non-Jewish artifice, Stein re-imagines identity as membership in a community. This is why in order to re-establish his connection to other Jews, Stein does not simply reveal his "true identity" but engages in activities that benefit the Jewish community. As the character explains, "that was the only way; by doing something for others, I was able to save my conscience, my sense of self [*svoiu sovest', svoiu lichnost'*]."[82] Using misinformation and mistranslation, Stein succeeds in saving numerous individual Jews, including residents of the Emsk ghetto. Stein becomes a trickster, which Seidman suggests, is a translator type. According to Seidman, stories of translation sometimes follow the "trickster narrative," which involves a translator who exploits linguistic skills while engaging in political and social causes.[83] The trickster-translator necessarily occupies a gray ethical zone when using mistranslation for the

81 Ibid., 102.
82 Ibid., 101.
83 Seidman, *Faithful Renderings*, 8.

benefit of a threatened group. Like other trickster-translators, Stein forces us to re-think the traditional assumption that an ethical translation is a faithful translation. For this protagonist, being faithful to his culture requires engaging in inaccurate interpretation and in fashioning himself as a gentile.

Within their respective modes, Ulitskaia and Seidman suggest that a translation's authenticity must be judged within its sociohistorical context. When subjected to narration, translation becomes "a performance taking shape within a field of asymmetrical power relations," according to Seidman.[84] This performance expresses "a political negotiation...[that] appears not strictly as a linguistic exercise but also in a variety of relational modes: translation as...risk, as assimilation, as treason, as dislocation, as survival."[85] These relational modes characterize Stein's performance as a trickster-translator, stressing the power asymmetry between Jews and Nazis. Moreover, as an agent positioned between the subjugators and the subjugated, Stein demonstrates what Seidman calls the "asymmetrical double-situatedness" of translation.[86] Thinking about Stein as a doubly-situated subject who must perform in an asymmetrical field, the zone of the Nazi occupation, lends moral value to his acts of linguistic mistranslation and disguise. In this way, Ulitskaia justifies East European Jews' attempts to translate themselves into gentiles for the purposes of preservation during and after WWII. Stein's performance of gentility can even be seen as a more extreme version of Alik's transformation from Abraham. Alik and Stein, therefore, remind Ulitskaia's ex-Soviet Jewish readers about their own, or their parents', attempts to become Russian by changing their names and avoiding attachments

84 Ibid., 32.
85 Ibid., 9.
86 Ibid.

to other Jews or Jewish culture.[87] Ulitskaia's work offers a way of interpreting these gestures as manifestations of the asymmetrical double-situatedness of Soviet Jews who had to constantly negotiate between their identities as Soviet citizens and Jewish ethnic minorities. Considered under this framework, we can view these self-translations not gestures of betrayal, or signs of inauthenticity, but as attempts at survival.

Daniel Stein echoes Seidman's equivalence between translation and survival by suggesting that linguistic, cultural and personal translation not only changes Jews but guarantees the survival of their cultural identities. However, the tendency to associate survival and translation also recalls Walter Benjamin's argument in "The Task of the Translator" that a translation plays a key role in the continuation, and thus survival, of the original text in what he refers to as its "afterlife."[88] As Benjamin claims, the original and its translation have "a vital connection" based on the idea that "by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation."[89] Translation and its original are thus locked in an interdependent relationship. In a similar fashion, Stein's survival as a Jew during the war is dependent on his ability to be read as a non-Jew. To legitimize his translation into a Gestapo officer, Stein must maintain his status as a member of the Jewish community. Being positioned as a Jew and a non-Jew makes Stein experience Benjamin's claim that the original and translation share a "vital connection."[90]

87 There are no available statistics on how many Jews Russified their names in the Soviet Union. However, scholars frequently refer to the phenomenon of Jewish name-changes. For example, according to Yitshak Arad, "...it is not always possible to identify as Soviet Jew by name. Many Jews have 'Russian' names or names common among other peoples – either the result of a long process of assimilation, mixed marriages or the desire, for a variety of reasons, to hid their Jewish identity. Many changed their names during the war in fear of what might happen should they be captured by the Germans." Yitshak Arad, *In the Shadow of the Red Banner: Soviet Jews in the War Against Nazi Germany* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2010), xv.

88 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 2007), 71.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

Stein carries this idea into his next major act of translation, which again involves his self.

The novel portrays Stein's self-translation into a Christian Jew as an expression of agency and yet another act of survival. Stein moves between Judaism and Christianity through interpretation, and, as a result, experiences the regeneration of his cultural identity. Such a representation disrupts the more traditional treatment of religious conversion as being equivalent to apostasy and infidelity. Stein chooses to convert while hiding in a monastery, after being unmasked by the Gestapo. He spends the period preceding the conversion studying the Gospels and struggling with a crisis of faith that causes him to question, "Where was God when they shot to death five hundred people from the Emsk ghetto? Where is God during all these events that befell my people? How to live with divine justice?"[91] These questions become resolved when Stein applies the teachings of the Gospels. He explains, "And then it was revealed to me, that God was with the suffering. God can only be with the suffering and never with the murderers. He was killed together with us. The God suffering alongside the Jews was my God [*Stradaiushchii vmeste s evreiami Bog byl moi Bog*]."[92] Finally, Stein states, "I realized that Christ was indeed the Messiah and that His death and resurrection were indeed the answers to my questions."[93] In this way, he translates between Judaic and Christian narratives by interpreting Jewish suffering through the iconography of the crucifixion and by seeing Christ as the Messiah. With his declaration, "The God suffering alongside the Jews was my God," Stein blurs the line between the original and the translation, making it unclear whether he sees the God of the Jewish Scriptures manifested in Christ or vice

91 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 229.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.

versa. In this way, Ulitskaia represents Stein's conversion as a translation, but avoids reinforcing the notion that "Judaism is the 'original' of which Christianity is a 'translation.'"[94] Christianity and Judaism are neither hierarchical nor contradictory in the novel.[95] In his translation, Stein rediscovers equivalences between the two religions, such as that of Jesus and Messiah, but also creates a new, hybrid Christian Jewish identity. This is to say that Stein's Christianity is not simply an attribute layered onto his Jewishness, which would consequently remain as his *original* identity. As I mentioned in the opening of this section, according Judaic law, a Jew remains a Jew despite conversion. Thus, in the eyes of Orthodox rabbis, Stein would always be a Jew, despite his wish to also be a Christian. By portraying Stein's conversion as a translation, Ulitskaia attempts to resist this tendency to view Jewish identity as an inherited and unalterable condition.

While *Funeral*'s Alik desires to remain unaffiliated, choosing neither Christianity nor Judaism, Stein decides to choose both religions simultaneously. As a Christian Jew he is once again doubly-situated, yet this time, without the asymmetry that characterizes his experience of working for the Gestapo. This version of double situatedness is analogous to the phenomenon of double chosenness that Kornblatt describes in her study of Russian-Jewish Christians. In fact, Rufeisen is one of the case studies in her ethnography. Yet the majority of Kornblatt's subjects are Soviet educated Jews, *evreii*, who feel that they simultaneously choose, and are chosen, by both religions. In other words, they have a sense of double belonging that relates to the feelings of double diaspora and double

94 Seidman, 8.

95 There is an extensive body of scholarship on early Christianity in the field of Religious Studies that emphasizes the overlaps and fluidities between Judaic and Christian theological constructs and practices. For example, see Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

allegiance described in Rubina's novels about transnational Russian-Israelis. As I mentioned my analysis of *Funeral*, Kornblatt correlates the lack of dissonance experienced by Christian Russian Jews about their identities. Ulitskaia's Stein shows a similar comfort with disaggregation when he self-identifies as "a priest by profession, but by nationality, a Jew."[96] In fact, it is precisely the fragmented nature of an apostate's identity and (religious) status that troubled the Israeli Supreme Court that decided Rufeisen's case, with the presiding judges insisting, "Judaism is a status, and status is *indivisible* [my italics]."[97]

As Kornblatt points out, identity markers are separate but strongly related, and even inter-related, for the converts. More specifically, Kornblatt's case studies claim to come to Christianity "through Judaism," which suggests an interpretative process where agency and history interplay.[98] Ulitskaia's Stein follows a different path, coming to Judaism through Christianity. While living in Israel, he becomes more and more engaged with Jewish scriptures, attempting to form theological bridges between Judaism and Christianity. He also carries on his task as a translator by learning new languages and translating religious texts. Ulitskaia even establishes an equivalence between Stein's role as a translator and his role as a priest. According to one of the characters, "first, for ideological reasons, he [Stein] worked for the Gestapo in order to save people from the clutches of the devil. Then, he converted to Christianity in order to save people from the

96 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 82.

97 Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, pre-1948 to the Present*, 2d ed. (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2008). The excerpts of the ruling state, "The dominant opinion in Jewish law is that an apostate is a Jew in all regards, with (perhaps) the exception of some peripheral laws...The opinion is unacceptable that even according to the religious ruling the apostate is not a total Jew but only a 'partial Jew,' a half, a third...the opinion is unacceptable on principle. Judaism is a status and status is indivisible; we have found such an arithmetical division only in the case of a slave who has two masters," 173.

98 Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen*, 10.

clutches of the devil, yet again."[99] With this comparison, the novel suggests that Stein's transformation into a Christian is not an act of apostasy but an attempt to be faithful to his role as interpreter and guide.

Isaac Gantman, a surgeon and survivor of the Emsk ghetto, is the character who articulates the equivalence between Stein's different incarnations as a translator. Gantman in another individual in the novel who consciously negotiates his Jewish identity. Haunted by the Jewish Question his whole life, Gantman, attempts to find answers using a secular approach. In fact, Ulitskaia uses this character to suggest that religion is not the only vehicle for self-translation. Similarly to *Funeral*'s Alik, Gantman strives to figure out the content of Jewishness outside of racial, religious or nationalist frameworks. This desire to re-interpret Jewish identity is borne of his frustration with the underlying paradox of racial identity – that it is both inborn and imposed from without. It is notable that Gantman expresses the problems with existing constructions of Jewish identity using the Soviet terms *eveistvo* and *natsional'nost'*, thus creating equivalences between all essentialist definitions of Jewishness. He writes in his diaries,

> My whole life, I have been preoccupied with the question of personal freedom [*lichnoi svobody*]. It has always appeared to me as the greatest blessing. Throughout my long life, I have maybe succeeded in taking a few steps toward freedom, but what I definitely have not been able to deal with, what I have not been able to escape, is my nationality [*natsional'nost'*]. I could not stop being Jewish...Jewishness [*evreistvo*], without a doubt, is more encompassing than Judaism [*iudaizm*]. The twentieth century saw a pleiad of atheist Jewish intellectuals, but they were sent to the gas chambers together with their religious brethren. Thus, to the outside world, blood turned out to be the ultimate proof. No matter how Jews identify themselves, ultimately, it is the others who identify them. A Jew is one whom non-Jews consider a Jew.[100]

99 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 24.
100Ibid., 19-20.

Interestingly, the word “freedom” comes up numerous times in the testimonies of Kornblatt's study. Her subjects claim to find freedom “in Christianity” and although they do not say freedom from what, we can logically to assume that it is, at least in part, from their *natsional'nost' – evreistvo*.[101] Gantman, who is not pulled toward religion, attempts to connect Jewish identity to something altogether removed from Jewish ritual and genetics – a manner of critically engaging with oneself. In the diaries, Gantman sketches out some thoughts that resemble Deutscher's writings on the figure of the non-Jewish Jew. Gantman writes, “What is the defining characteristic of Jewish identity? A focused self-reflexive intellectualism.”[102] Thinking specifically of Stein, Gantman wonders, “Could it be that it is this ability to 'belong to an idea' that is the defining characteristic of being Jewish? Our heightened intensity.”[103] This extremely loose and de-essentialized definition of what it means to be a Jew represents Gantman's attempt to think outside of prototypical Jewishness. The fact that Gantman dies by his own hand makes him into a tragic character, who does not achieve the kind of post-Holocaust afterlife enjoyed by Stein. At the same time, Gantman provides the necessary balance to Stein's mysticism and leads us back to Alik, by also choosing an unaffiliated identity.

Stein, Gantman and Alik represent different versions of the non-Jewish Jew literary type. Yet all three share awareness of their disaggregated identities. This awareness of their own fragmentation, and consequent inability to conform to any single model of a unified Jewish identity, makes the characters' attempts to identify as Jews compelling. By centering her narratives on individuals who critically engage with what it means to be a

101 Kornblatt, 9.
102 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 20.
103 Ibid., 24.

Jew, Ulitskaia promotes an unconventional view of cultural authenticity. Yet her view overlaps with a larger paradigm shift within and beyond Jewish Studies on the issue of identity boundaries. Stuart Charmé, who participates in the debate, advocates for abandoning binary hierarchies, arguing that a Jews are "authentic" or "truthful" when they recognize the "instability" of all identities, Jewish and non-Jewish.[104] Analyzing self-reflective writings by contemporary Jewish intellectuals, Charmé concludes that "one can be a Jew only by realizing that one cannot be a Jew in an essentialistic sense" and that "[p]art of authentic Jewish identity is to assume the role of an identity problematizer."[105] Ulitskaia echoes these sentiments in her tendency to elevate such identity problematizers as Alik, Stein and Gantman and to satirize such traditionally-minded Jews as Reb Menashe. In this way, Ulitskaia claims that no Jew can claim to be correct or pure in his or her strategies of identification. In other words, her fiction implies that when it comes to Jewish identity, there are many translations, but no original and no *ideal* translation.

A Land that Is Not Home

Stein is the most radical of Ulitskaia's identity problematizers because his gestures of self-expression challenge Israel's official definition of a Jew and the state's identity in relation to Jewish religious law. Yet, from the outset, it is Stein who experiences the brunt of the challenge. This begins the moment that Stein arrives in Israel and encounters immigration officials. As Stein explains in a letter to one of his friends, the authorities interpret him to be a Christian and therefore a non-Jew because of his cassock and cross,

104 Charmé, "Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Jewish Identity," 148.
105 Ibid., 149.

and despite his self-identification as a Jew. In other words, Stein expects to take advantage of the Law of Return by undergoing *aliyah* and receiving full Israeli citizenship, but is impeded from doing so. For this reason, his homecoming proves to be a frustrating and disappointing experience. As Stein recounts, "My vision of this country, which I loved so much from a distance, did not correspond to reality at all."[106] For Stein, just like for Rubina's heroine in *Messiah*, the myths of homeland and return become shattered upon arrival. Rubina's heroine, the writer N., is troubled by the dissonance between accomplishing her legal "return" and feeling homeless. In Stein's case, the situation is flipped. He is eager to experience *aliyah* and is forbidden from "returning" in the manner available to other Jews by state authorities. In this way, Ulitskaia joins Rubina in her critique of Israel's status as a home for all Jews and its depiction of immigration as a smooth homecoming.

Ulitskaia does not dramatize the Supreme Court trial that ultimately decides Stein's case. Perhaps this is because of the heatedly-debated and well-documented nature of Rufeisen's trial, *Rufeisen v Minister of the Interior* (1962).[107] The case continues to have name-recognition among Israelis, instantly evoking the question "Who is a Jew?." Ulitskaia, however, focuses on Stein's reflections on the event. Stein's confessions in the novel clearly communicate his investment in compelling Israel to recognize him as Jew. He is particularly interested in promoting the state's tolerance other Jewish Christians, specifically future immigrants who would also want to call the state their home. Stein clarifies in his letter that he still enjoys legal residency and access to citizenship through

106 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 81.

107 Bernard S. Jackson, "Brother Daniel: The Construction of Jewish Identity in the Israel Supreme Court," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 6, no. 17 (1993): 115 – 46; and Marc Galanter, "A Dissent on Brother Daniel," *Commentary* (1963): 10 –17.

naturalization. What bothers Stein is having "no right to call myself a Jew in Israel," especially, he adds, because other countries, including Germany and Poland, accept his self-labeling as a Jew.[108] His official papers in Israel read "nationality not established."[109] The same was true for Rufeisen, whom the court declared "a nationless person" and "not a member of the Jewish nation."[110] In doing so, the state contradicted Jewish religious law, in order to re-define Jewishness within its geopolitical boundaries. Ultimately, Rufeisen's manner of identification challenged Israel to renegotiate the Law of Return and thus impose limitations on its status as a home for all Jews. In Ulitskaia's novel, Stein's struggle to gain Israeli citizenship lays bare the intersection of identity and territory in Jewish conceptions of belonging. Moreover, his experience illustrates that in Israel, definitions of Jewish place and selfhood are especially connected. This is not surprising given the state's self-definition as a Jewish territory and its accompanying belief that Jews who reside beyond its boundaries are in exile.

In contrast to the other fictional characters that I closely analyze in this dissertation, Stein indeed perceives himself to be an exile and longs to reverse his diasporic status. As Ulitskaia shows, Stein's attachment to Israel is traceable to his pre-war youth, when he belonged to Zionist groups that instilled in him attachments to the idea of a Jewish land. Stein's desire to put down roots in Israel is due not only to his Zionism, but also to his belief in religious syncretism, which requires yet another major translation project. Stein, who preaches, that "It is precisely the Judeo-Christian church that offers the opportunity for dialogue between the three strains—Judaism, Islam, and

108 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 82.
109 Ibid.
110 Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, *Israel in the Middle East*, 174.

Christianity," perceives Israel as the ideal setting for establishing his ecumenical congregation.[111] His attempt to establish a Judeo-Christian congregation in what is commonly treated as the home of all three religions, expresses a desire to return to the source. Translation once again plays a role in Stein's plans, as he believes, "We must return to the church its original pluralism. Between the many Christian congregations, speaking all of the languages of the world, we must find a place for a Judeo-Christian practice."[112] For his part, Stein learns Hebrew and Arabic and dedicates his time to translating liturgical texts from one language to another. Yet one gets the sense that Stein is not merely searching the "pure language" that, according to Benjamin, exists between all languages and emerges particularly in the translation of holy works.[113] Stein's obsessive return to translation hides behind it an attempt to create a more inclusive, more home-like, religious institution.

Ulitskaia's novel suggests that despite Stein's efforts to unite displaced and outsider individuals in Israel, he ultimately forms a community that is, in certain aspects, rootless and cosmopolitan. Ulitskaia, however, emphasizes the impermanence of this community by showing that when Stein dies, the congregation dissolves, much like the atmosphere in Alik's apartment, whose members are bound to scatter after the artist's death. While it functions, Stein's congregation, which begins in an Arab church, takes on some of the characteristics of a communal apartment, attracting such individuals as Hilda Engel, a German who arrives in Israel to do humanitarian work, and Musa, a Christian Arab who becomes one of Stein's closest friends in Israel. In addition to fostering his

111 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 159-160.
112 Ibid.
113 Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 80.

version of the "friendship of nations" ideal, Stein creates an international atmosphere around himself by working as a tour guide for visitors to Israel. He becomes the quintessential local and outsider at the same time. As a "nationless" individual, Stein ends up living in the diaspora in Israel, much like the Russian Jews who consider themselves exiles after their immigration. Ulitskaia's portrayal of Stein's attempts to fit into Israeli society on his own terms, and repeatedly failing to do so, offers a critique of the state's attitudes toward immigrants and other individuals who do not conform to its concepts of Jewishness. In other words, *Daniel Stein* undermines Israel's claims of inclusivity toward all Jews. The novel specifically challenges the image of Israel as a home for Jewish exiles by showing the state's inability to accept Jews' transformations in the diaspora. In hindsight, Stein's story gains a level of irony when one considers Israel's willingness to accept many non-halakhic Jews, as well as non-Jews, from the USSR in order to grow its population during the Great Aliyah.

The novel makes an even more radical statement when it attacks Israel's myth of homeland by suggesting that some Jews can never feel at home in a state that has rendered another people, the Palestinians, geopolitically homeless. This critique emerges from Gantman's experience as an immigrant in Israel. In his recollections, Gantman paints himself as a European secular intellectual did not embrace Zionism, being "nauseated by nationalist ideology – in any form."[114] Still, he and his wife Esther decided to immigrate to Israel after the war, settling in the village of Ein Karem. The couple was happy living in the state for about a decade, until Gantman found out that one of his patients and friends, a young Arab, once lived with his family on the very same land

114 Ulitskaia, *Daniel' Shtain*, 20.

where the Gantmans built their home. The idea that their first home stood on the land that the Arab family had to flee in 1948 troubled Gantman and Esther. Their attempt to put down roots in Israel become instantly tainted. Gantman, reacted by simultaneously wishing that he was not Jewish and wishing to flee Israel, thus ripping up his new roots. As Gantman explain, "I made an effort to break, if not with being a Jew, then with the Jewish land, and moved to Boston."[115] It is important to note that this decision to live in voluntary exile is coupled by Gantman's desire to be "nobody [*nikem*]," which calls back to Alik's desire to be a "nobody" in *Funeral*. Gantman confesses, "in my youth, I wanted to not be a Jew, but a European, then, on the contrary, – not a European, but a Jew. At that moment I wanted to be nobody."[116] After settling in Boston, Gantman simply learns to accept that "for a long time now, there has not been a place where a Jew can feel at home in the full sense of the word."[117] Therefore, rather than proclaiming Boston as his new home, Gantman learns to embrace his rootless status, even enjoying some of the "freedom" that eluded him for the majority of his existence.[118]

By choosing to be in exile after reversing his diaspora status in the eyes of the Jewish state, Gantman becomes a Jew belongs to the *aliyah* and the *yerida*, the Hebrew term for the movement of "descent" or emigration from the state. In other words, he becomes doubly diasporic, as a member of the Jewish diaspora and the Israeli diaspora. I explore this double position deeper in the next chapter when analyzing David Bezmozgis' *The Free World*. Ulitskaia's inclusion of this brief but politically-laden episode allows her to represent Palestine as a place of competing land-claims, as opposed to an

115 Ibid., 23.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid., 24.
118 Ibid.

unequivocally Jewish homeland. In fact, Gantman's interaction with the Arab youth evokes a leitmotif in displaced Palestinians' testimonies, of identifying the places where their homes used to stand. *Daniel Stein*, therefore, implicitly reminds its readers that the day of Israeli independence is also marked as the day of catastrophe [*nakba*] by Palestinians who were forcefully expelled from the land on which they resided. When Gantman articulates the controversial comparison that "Jews became Israelis and, in a certain sense, Arabs became Jews," the novel suggests the irony of building a Jewish state at the cost of rendering Palestinians nationless.[119]

For whom is Israel home? Ulitskaia tackles the question from different angles and through at least two different characters in *Daniel Stein, Translator*. With Stein's story, Ulitskaia illustrates that Israel has failed to provide a home for all Jews. Still, Stein's attempts at coalition and community-building communicate the novel's sense of hope and investment in a more inclusive and more multicultural Jewish existence in the Middle East. Gantman's story, on the other hand, suggests that Israel must strive to be home not only to Jews but also to Palestinians and that its failure to do so inhibits Jews' sense of belonging. As the novel shows, Israel is a place where diverse interpretations of home come into conflict, sometimes leading to disenchantment, failed integration, and dreams of exile. Through both characters' stories, Ulitskaia suggests that self-positioning occurs in cultural and geopolitical contexts simultaneously. This has been especially true for Jews since Israel's creation and since their mass displacement from formerly communist territories. Both events have made it impossible to contemplate the question of who Jews are without also thinking about where Jews dwell and where they belong.

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119 Ibid., 20.

Conclusion

Elana Gomel observes that "in trying to describe the essence of the secular Jewish identity, many writers resort to negatives: this *not* what it is."[120] Indeed, when analyzing the varieties of Jewish identity that lie beyond center of the prototype, we tend to rely on negative language, using the such terms as non-Jewish, non-halakhic, non-practicing. This has been especially true about Jews from postcommunist Europe, who have come to embody what it means to be Jewish and non-Jewish at the same time. We tend to talk about what these subjects lack, or do not do, such as keep kosher, go to synagogue, or speak a Jewish language. As a result, the identities of postcommunist Jews, have come to be regarded as false translations (of an original Jewish identity) that bear the loss of Judaic content. Zvi Gitelman claims that "historically, the most salient cultural content of the Jewish ethnic group was Judaism," and laments that "the content of Jewishness is shifting in many instances away from Judaism, but not toward anything substantive, such as language, kinship patterns or territory."[121] In other words, Jews as a translational community are moving away from the source material, Judaism, and presumably toward nothingness, with Russian Jews, along with other secular Jews, being at the forefront of this movement. Gitelman would have to agree with Ulitskaia's rabbi, who regrets a world in which there are "more captive children than real Jews."

In the novels that I analyze in this chapter, Ulitskaia exposes the essentialist biases that compel religious and political gatekeepers to view Jews as captive children. In *A*

120 Gomel, *Pilgrim Soul*, 91.
121 Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine*, 22.

Merry Funeral, she presents Alik, a Jewish "nobody," who is so far outside the fold as to not even be an apostate. Yet, using this character, the author shows that a negative position is a fluctuating but substantive position shaped by Soviet-Jewish history. Her symbolically-homeless, religiously-unaffiliated Jew is the linchpin of a community composed of decentered Jews and non-Jews. His flexibility ultimately allows him to be claimed by multiple identity groups. It is no accident that Ulitskaia's non-Jews are culturally plentiful, larger-than-life individuals. In *Daniel Stein, Translator*, she challenges her readers with a character who consciously moves in and out of the boundaries of Jewishness through the processes of linguistic and cultural translation. Stein's and Alik's cultural shifts occur within geopolitical spaces where each character lacks citizenship. These characters confirm the idea that Jews are shifting away from direct affiliations with Judaism and clear territorial allegiances, in addition to language, and kinship patterns. Yet, as Ulitskaia shows, cultural shifts, like translations and like diasporic travel, involve backward and forward movements that are influenced by a community's historical past, and by its heretics' desire to become "a new people." Thus, what appears to be the gradual dilution of a cultural identity is, in fact, its inevitable regeneration. Ulitskaia's attempts to explore the substance of seemingly negative Jewish identities provide a bridge into the next chapter, in which I discuss double negations of identities and homelands in the works of the North American writers Gary Shteyngart and David Bezmozgis.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Diasporas Without Homelands:

David Bezmozgis' *The Free World* and *Gary* Shteyngart's *Absurdistan*

"In short, I am homeless, because there are so many homelands that make their home in me."

– Vilém Flusser, "Taking Up Residence in Homelessness"

"I am a serial dissident. A rootless cosmopolitan, as they used to say," declares Lyova, one of the characters in David Bezmozgis' 2011 novel *The Free World*.[1] With this statement, the novel proves that the phrase "rootless cosmopolitan" remains in the collective memory of Soviet-educated Jews. Yet while evoking Stalin's campaign against cosmopolitanism, Bezmozgis also re-contextualizes its catch-phrase within the history of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. Lyova, the Soviet-born Jew who temporarily resides in Italy, one of the transit points of Jewish migration in the 1970s and 1980s, assumes the label of a "rootless cosmopolitan" in order to justify his decision to emigrate from Israel, his adopted country. Aligning himself with the Soviet Jews accused of national disloyalty under Stalinism, Lyova uses the phrase to articulate his stance against the patriotism and "thirst for home" demanded by Israel from its citizens.[2]

Bezmozgis' repurposing of the phrase parallels my efforts to re-interpret rootless cosmopolitanism as a short-hand for the intersecting issues of identity and location that haunt Russian-speaking Jews at the turn of the twenty-first century. Throughout this chapter, I identify other, more implicit, literary explorations of rootless cosmopolitanism

1 David Bezmozgis, *The Free World* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2011), 275.
2 Ibid.

in contemporary fiction by authors from the former Soviet Union (FSU) who are currently based in North America, where they publish in English. I pair Bezmozgis' *The Free World* with Gary Shteyngart's 2006 novel, *Absurdistan*, which also features a subtextual reclamation of diasporic rootlessness through a character who rejects home in the form of a nation-state. Engaging the novels in a dialogue, I illustrate that both authors examine how the concepts of dislocation, belonging, community and dispersion interplay in the minds of Russian-speaking Jews who choose to settle in North America instead of Israel.

US-based Shteyngart and Canadian-based Bezmozgis belong to an unofficial cohort of Anglophone writers who depict the second most common geographical trajectory of Jews from the FSU.[3] Their recent efforts to depict the Russian-Jewish immigrant experience in English has been interpreted by some critics as a "return" to the theme of Jewish "uprooting" in American literature and as a sign of the renaissance of Jewish American literature.[4] These critics argue that, by dealing with themes of cultural and linguistic difference and assimilation, and by portraying Jews as outsider figures within mainstream American culture, ex-Soviet writers carry on a literary tradition begun

3 These Anglophone authors are connected by their treatment of Russian-Jewish immigrant themes rather than by institutional affiliations. They include Lara Vapnyar, Anya Ulinich, Sana Krasikov, Irina Reyn and Ellen Litman, among others. For an analysis of these authors as Russian Jews, see Adrian Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers: A New Paradigm for Jewish Multiculturalism?" *MELUS: Multiethnic Literature in the US* 37, no. 2 (2012): 157-176. According to Mark Tolts, between 1989 and 2009, 326,000 Jews immigrated to the United States while 998,000 immigrated to Israel. Mark Tolts, "Demography of the Contemporary Russian-Jewish Diaspora," Conference on Contemporary Russian-Speaking Jewish Diaspora, Harvard University. Cambridge, MA. November 13-15, 2011.

4 Donald Weber, "The New New-world Voice: A Generation of Writers From the Former Soviet Union is Poised to Inherit the Throne," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, June 4, 2004, http://forward.com/articles/5775/the-new-new-world-voice/.
In the article Weber suggests that such authors as Shteyngart and Bezmozgis respond to what has come to be known as the "Howe Doctrine," or Irving Howe's 1977 warning about the decline of the theme of immigration in Jewish American literature. For a more critical reading Russian-Jewish-American fiction's relationship with the Jewish-American literary tradition see, Adrian Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers: A New Paradigm for Jewish Multiculturalism?"

by such authors as Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Sholem Asch and Philip Roth. In fact, Russian-Jewish-American writers bridge several traditions of immigrant fiction. Their self-conscious nostalgia for Russian culture, and sense of irreversible alienation from a country radically transformed since their departure, recalls Russian émigré literature written in the host language by Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky and Andreï Makine, among others.[5] Shteyngart and Bezmozgis fit equally well into the expansive fields of US immigration literature and transnational diaspora literature. The two writers' treatment of cultural hybridity and geopolitical mobility overlaps with the work of such writers as Junot Díaz, Zadie Smith and Jhumpa Lahiri. However, in this chapter, I focus on Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' contributions to the subject of Jews and diaspora in the post-Soviet moment. I suggest that examining Shteyngart and Bezmozgis alongside the Russian-language authors Dina Rubina and Liudmila Ulitskaia allows us to appreciate the cross-cultural and translingual nature of the ongoing literary conversation about the relationship between Jewish spaces and selves.

Shteyngart and Bezmozgis' inability to stay confined within a single literary category correlates to their tendency to subvert categorical conceptions of diaspora. Synonymous to paradigmatic or prototypical, categorical definitions of diaspora, according to Stéphane Dufoix, are based on key criteria "designed to differentiate between 'true' and 'false' diasporas."[6] William Safran's model of diaspora, which derives its criteria from the Jewish prototype, or "archetype," represents a prime example of the

5 For example, see the comparison between Shteyngart and Makine in Adrian Wanner, "Russian Hybrids: Identity in the Translingual Writings of Andreï Makine, Wladimir Kaminer, and Gary Shteyngart," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 3 (2008): 662-681.

6 Stéphane Dufoix, *Diasporas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22.

categorical approach.[7] According to Safran's methodology, all other diasporas must be compared to the Jewish case. One of the key criteria that consistently appears across categorical definitions is "[the] persistence of a collective memory concerning the homeland" among members of the diasporic group.[8] On the other hand, what Dufoix calls "oxymoronic" conceptions of diaspora propose that cultural dispersal and its resulting transnational community need not rally around a unique center.[9] These theories of diaspora recognize that "'diaspora' often fails to present the workings of the thing it ought to best describe: the relationship to...a 'referent-origin,'" the "referent-origin" being the source of scattering, or homeland.[10] As a result, proponents of oxymoronic theories tend to re-imagine the homeland as being "ductile" or "liquid," rather than "solid," and discourage the idealization of literal returns.[11] *The Free World* and *Absurdistan* implicitly endorse oxymoronic theories by introducing readers to immigrants who subscribe to a view of a diaspora that devalues the referent-origin, or national homeland. As I illustrate throughout the chapter, Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' novels confront the "referent-origin" problem by portraying the return to the diasporic center, be it Israel or the FSU, as undesired or permanently deferred.

The notion of diasporas without referents, as it appears in *The Free World* and *Absurdistan*, advances beyond Rubina's idea of multiple homelands and Ulitskaia's argument for a more pluralistic Jewish state in *Daniel Stein, Translator*. However,

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7 Ibid., 23.
8 Ibid., 22.
9 Dufoix applies the label "oxymoronic" to the theories of diaspora sketched out by such scholars as Stuart Hall, James Clifford and Paul Gilroy. Ibid., 23-28.
10 Ibid., 3.
11 Robin Cohen, "Solid, Ductile and Liquid: Changing Notions of Homeland and Home in Diaspora Studies," *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent on a New (Dis) Order*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg (Boston: Brill, 2009), 117-135.

Ulitskaia's *A Merry Funeral*, which focuses on ex-Soviet Jews who maintain a community in New York, relates directly to *Absurdistan* and *The Free World*, which feature self-consciously rootless Russian-speaking Jews who elect to live in the United States. As I illustrate in this chapter, Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' novels introduce readers to intellectuals who voluntarily exile themselves from the FSU and Israel by choosing American residency. In this way, the novels critique the association between diaspora and involuntary exile in Jewish culture. Moreover, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis portray immigrants' refusal engage in literal or symbolic diasporic returns as authentic expressions of their cultural identities. I also illustrate that the pro-diaspora motif employed by both authors echoes with the work of their Jewish American literary predecessors, including Philip Roth. I refer to Roth's 1993 novel, *Operation Shylock*, in the last section of this chapter.

This chapter is divided into three sections, “Neither Here Nor There,” “Between Promised Lands” and “From Prisoners of Zion to Voluntary Exiles.” In the first part, “Neither Here Nor There,” I discuss the double negation of Israel and the FSU as the homelands of Russian-speaking Jews in *The Free World* and *Absurdistan*, respectively. I show that each novel's author dramatizes the deferral of homeland through the use of Russian-Jewish immigrant characters who become trapped in intermediary spaces, or transit zones, where they are forced to contemplate their national allegiances. I pay close attention to the novels' rootless cosmopolitan figures who break allegiance with the FSU and Israel and view the US as an alternative space for Russian-speaking Jews, particularly those seeking belonging without nationalism. Examining *Absurdistan*, I identify an attempt to remap a diasporic center onto a cosmopolitan city, New York,

rather than a nation-state. In the chapter's second section, “Between Promised Lands,” I discuss how *The Free World* and *Absurdistan* represent Russian-speaking Jews' encounter with American Jewish constructs of diaspora and Jewish identity. I focus specifically on how Shteyngart and Bezmozgis portray American Jews' ambivalence toward Israel and the mutually-beneficial relationship between the United States and the Jewish state. I suggest that while *The Free World* and *Absurdistan* make the case for viewing the United States as the appropriate setting for rootless cosmopolitans, they also highlight the unresolved attitudes toward diaspora among Jewish Americans. In the final section of the chapter, “From Prisoners of Zion to Voluntary Exiles,” I propose that both novels center but also re-imagine the voluntarily exiled intellectual, using this figure to emphasize the importance of critical voices in the evolution of Jewish thinking about diaspora.

The Free World and *Absurdistan* do not speak for Soviet-Jewish immigrant communities in North America. Similarly to Rubina and Ulitskaia, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis do much more than document or reproduce the beliefs and biases espoused by Russian-speaking Jews. Using Russian-speaking Jewish experiences of migration, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis imagine postnational and anti-essentialist models of identity and territory. The figure of the Jew who rejects both birthplace, in the FSU, and memorial homeland, in Israel, allows each author to illustrate how diasporic individuals embody decentered views of diaspora. Finally, I show that despite their specific engagement with Russian-Jewish migration, *Absurdistan* and *The Free World* participate in a larger movement of imagining new forms of stateless belonging.

Neither Here nor There

In contrast to Rubina and Ulitskaia, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis, who publish in English, have a tenuous connection to the Russian-language cultural spheres in Israel, the FSU and even North America. However, this does not prevent the Anglophone authors from taking a strong interest in the question of how post-Soviet Jews situate themselves in relation to the FSU and Israel during and after immigration. Similarly to Ulitskaia and Rubina, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis illustrate that Russian Jews feel simultaneously connected to and alienated from Israel and the FSU. *The Free World* and *Absurdistan* emphasize that rootless cosmopolitans are united not only by their sense of proximity, but also by geographical and ideological distance from both birthplace and memorial homeland. Consequently, the two novels frame the condition of double diaspora as a double negation.

The Free World tells the story of the Krasnanskys, a Jewish family that leaves Soviet Latvia to join a community of "Jews in Transit" in Rome where it awaits approval for immigration.[12] This prolonged interruption to their journey causes the family members to struggle in choosing their destination-point – between Israel, Canada and the United States – after their initial plan to come to Chicago falls through. Like Rubina's "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden," *The Free World* takes place during Brezhnev's term, in the late 1970s, and dramatizes a debate on the meaning of exile and home for Soviet Jews. Bezmozgis expands the conversation by introducing other characters into Krasnansky's circle and thus setting up a community-wide polemic between rootedness and

12 In the novel, "Jews in Transit" is the name of the Russian-language weekly newspaper in Rome and shorthand for the immigrant community. The majority of the Krasnansky family settles in the coastal community of Ladispoli, which has come to be associated with Russian-Jewish migration of the 1970s and 1980s. For another literary work that depicts ex-Soviet Jews in Ladispoli, see Maxim D. Shrayer, *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

rootlessness. The two characters that most powerfully embody this polemic are Samuil, the Krasnansky patriarch who reserves his loyalty exclusively for the Soviet Union, and Lyova, the family's acquaintance and fellow immigrant who takes an uncompromising stance against national rootedness.

Similarly to Rubina's use of Grisha, Bezmozgis relies on Samuil to link a sense of rootedness in the USSR with membership in a generation that came of age of during WWII and lived through the anti-Semitic campaigns in the war's aftermath. A die-hard believer and former party-member, Samuil believes that East-European Jews should consider the Soviet Union their homeland. This sense of fidelity to socialism and the Soviet cause is directly tied to Samuil's early disenchantment with Judaic traditions. Samuil internalizes early on the idea that "a Hebrew poem never saved a Jew from a pogrom," or that national pride in the form of cultural expression is futile in the face of institutional anti-Semitism. As a result, he spends his youth fearing for his safety.[13] Samuil embodies the trajectory traced by Yuri Slezkine in *The Jewish Century*, that of the Jew who joins the socialist ranks in order to save himself from both persecution at the hands of non-Jews and from his own sense of cultural particularism. For Samuil, the trajectory begins during World War II, when he makes the decision to join the Red Army, thus saving himself from Nazi invaders.[14] After this experience, Judaism and socialism

13 Bezmozgis, *The Free World*, 143.

14 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Speaking of the revolutionary generation, Slezkine argues, "For those who wished to fight, there was but one army to join. The Red Army was the only force that stood earnestly and consistently against the Jewish pogroms and the only one led by a Jew," 169. During WWII, such Jewish authors as Peretz Markish, David Bergelson and others who would eventually become victims of the campaign against cosmopolitanism, were instrumental in glorifying the efforts of the Red Army, promoting the Soviet master narrative of the Great Patriotic War. For an analysis of Soviet Jewish authors who eulogized the Red Army, see Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

become mutually exclusive to him, with socialism usurping Judaism as his new "religion." Slezkine refers to this process as the "Jewish conversion to non-Jewishness."[15] In his old age, Samuil, the decorated veteran, insists that Jews are indebted to the Soviet Union and therefore looks upon his family members as ungrateful traitors. He continues to exalt Stalin's greatness and even responds with the platitude, "some mistakes are inevitable," when he is reminded of the death of the Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam per Stalin's orders.[16]

The novel portrays Samuil's religious commitment to the party as the logical outcome of a double-bind recognized by many Soviet Jews who felt that they could only survive as Jews by giving up their Jewish self-identification, or "*natsional'noe samosoznanie*," to echo Rubina's story. Samuil shows some awareness of this predicament when he tells the Orthodox rabbi who lives with the immigrants in Rome, "had I applied myself to your torah, I would not be here today. The NKVD would have put me on a train, or the Germans in a pit."[17] Samuil's otherwise blind fidelity to the USSR causes Samuil to categorically reject the idea of uprooting or re-rooting in another country. Similarly to Rubina's Grisha, Samuil detests the traditional Jewish diasporic myth of homeland and scoffs at the idea of repatriation. He goes so far as to refer to Israel as "the grave," and when his sons bring up the subject of their "ancestral homeland," they sense that "Zionists! - Samuil's unspoken epithet [swelling] above them with dark wrath."[18] The elder Krasnansky's negative attitude toward Israel likely stems from the Soviet vilification of Zionism, which became normalized during the anti-cosmopolitan

15 Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 254.
16 Bezmozgis, *The Free World*, 78.
17 Ibid., 238.
18 Ibid., 50.

campaign and returned under Brezhnev. Bezmozgis thus suggests that, for members Samuil's generation, the association between Jews and cosmopolitanism carries with it residual stigma and trauma, causing them to profess their rootedness in the USSR. In fact, Samuil is more rooted in the Soviet Union than his ethnically-Russian daughter-in-law, Polina, who chooses to live as a stranger in a foreign country by willingly following her Jewish husband abroad.

Yet Samuil also becomes a symbol for Soviet Jews' aspiration toward rootless cosmopolitanism when he expresses the desire to be mobile, capable of uprooting and choosing his dwelling place. In one of the novel's most lyrically-rendered scenes, Samuil observes children playing at the beach and muses, "what did it matter to them where they were? How were they different from the birds who landed in one place or another, unmoored by allegiances or souls? What troubled them?."[19] Looking at the sea, he continues, "this was the Mediterranean. From here one could sail to Greece or Israel. His own father and grandfather, trapped and murdered in their Ukrainian shtetl, had only dreamed of such a wonder."[20] It is not merely Italy's transitory environment for Soviet immigrants, but the Mediterranean's symbolic status as a geographical cross-roads between Africa, Europe and the Middle East, that inspires Samuil's wish for free movement. Still, the novel effectively illustrates that Samuil cannot shed his loyalty to the USSR. Symbolically, his inflexibility ultimately prevents him from surviving immigration with his family. He dies in Italy from a heart attack, just before his family receives approval to move on to their adopted country. Bezmozgis' novel, in this way, confirms Grisha's worry about the older generation of Soviet Jews who would not survive

19 Ibid., 63.
20 Ibid., 63.

immigratio, like the enslaved generation of Jews in the Old Testament that had to perish before the younger generation could enter the Promised Land. By dying in Italy, one of the metaphorical deserts of the Soviet Jewish migration, Samuil becomes forever suspended within the purgatory of statelessness. His unwavering attachment to his Soviet home thus becomes futile and tragic.

The Free World establishes a similarly critical stance toward the other characters who exhibit idealistic commitments to territorial rootedness. Through Samuil's wife, Emma, and Jewish daughter-in-law, Rosa, Bezmozgis explores another kind of nostalgia, in this case, about an imagined ancestral homeland. I analyze their newfound Zionism in the next section of this chapter, where I discuss the influence of American Jews on Russian-Jewish concepts of homeland. Ultimately, it is Samuil's burial to the sounds of the International that signals the emergence of a new kind of cosmopolitanism embodied by his sons' generation. Though Alec and Karl Krasnansky make casual references to Israel as their "ancestral homeland" and express some entitlement toward it, they show almost no genuine investment in the myths of homeland and return. To them, "The ancestral homeland will always be there," in other words, as a last resort for immigration.[21] Neither son expresses longing or affection for the USSR or for Israel. Their time in Rome is characterized by apathy, in Alec's case, or self-centered economic opportunism, in Karl's case. *The Free World* uses these characters to show the alienation of some Soviet Jews from any concept of home and their consequent ability to feel detached from the FSU and Israel. Unlike the characters in Rubina's fiction, who are plagued by the double diaspora, double home problem, Alec and Karl can avoid the

21 Ibid., 50.

dilemma and choose a truly adopted home – Canada, which is not connected to myths of homeland or return for Soviet Jews.

In contrast to the disengaged Krasnansky brothers, Lyova, who enters the narrative when he sublets one of his rooms to Alec and Polina, articulates a carefully-formulated stance on national belonging that deliberately negates the myths of homeland and return. It is during a conversation with the Krasnansky family that Lyova redefines what it means to be a rootless cosmopolitan for Russian-speaking Jews of the late-Soviet moment. Unlike the other "Jews in transit," Lyova comes to Rome with the goal of continuing his migration rather than achieving a first and final homecoming. A Jew from Kishinev, Moldova, Lyova is an Israeli national who no longer wishes to remain in his host-land. He also refuses to return to the USSR. By breaking allegiance from both places, he trades in aspirations toward home for asylum in the United States. Lyova, who has experience with Soviet and Israeli citizenship, occupies a special position that permits him to critique both of his potential homelands. Through his interactions with the Krasnanskys, the readers learn that Lyova is an atypical immigrant who, having made *aliyah,* regrets his decision. Explaining the reasons behind his intention to emigrate for the second time, Lyova says about Israel,

> To live there, you need to love it. The country asks a lot of you. If you don't love it, you should leave. That's me. I also loved it, but then I saw some things and I didn't love it anymore. I said to myself, Time to go. I didn't want to have to see those things again, and, even more, I didn't want my son to have to see them."[22]

The phrase "those things" refers to Israeli military actions against the Lebanese and then the Palestinians in Gaza, in which Lyova participated as a soldier. In both the Soviet

22 Ibid., 125.

Union and in Israel, Lyova had to defend the state and its territories through obligatory military service. During the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Lyova successfully distanced himself from the violence he contributed to by relying on his disaggregated identity as a Soviet Jew. He saw the violence as Soviet-sanctioned and therefore separate from the actions of his own people, the Jews. However, in Israel, territory, military violence and Jewishness were interconnected for Lyova and he found himself overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility for Israeli actions. To disentangle himself from this commitment to the state, Lyova uprooted once again, thus giving up the dream of dwelling within a territory belonging to his people.

Lyova's proactive attempt to reverse his *aliyah* symbolizes resistance to Israel's immigration rhetoric and to Zionism's insistence on diaspora reversal. In response to the moral struggle of being an Israeli citizen, Lyova embraces the kind of rootlessness that evades Samuil. When articulating his stance, Lyova relies on Soviet concepts, evoking events in the history of Soviet Jews. In addition to using the phrase rootless cosmopolitan, Lyova calls himself a "serial dissident, "a seeker of happiness," and a "Prisoner of Zion."[23] In this way, Lyova creates a pastiche of Soviet terms, all of which have to do with Jews and territorial allegiance. When applying these terms, Lyova blends together old meanings and creates new ones. As I claim in the introduction to this chapter, Lyova decontextualizes the phrase "rootless cosmopolitan," using it to describe a modern-day Wandering Jew who embodies a "serial dissident" by refusing to be a citizen of a state whose policies he cannot endorse. In the same conversation, Lyova directly makes a pun on, and consequently assigns new signification to, the phrase "Prisoner of

23 Ibid., 275.

Zion." Explaining his immigration status to the Krasnanskys, Lyova says, "You've heard of Prisoners of Zion? Jews punished for Zionism? I'm the other kind of Prisoner of Zion. No country will take me."[24] "Prisoners of Zion," "refuseniks," or *otkazniks* in Russian, were Jews who were refused departure from the USSR for Israel, particularly in the 1970s. Because Lyova uses the phrase to describe his geopolitical sense of imprisonment in Israel and his desire to emigrate from the state, he inverts its original application to Jews who wished to immigrate *to* Israel. Thus Lyova simultaneously affirms and disavows his connection to such refuseniks as Natan Sharansky, who came to symbolize Soviet Jews' struggle for autonomy in choosing their place of residence and who was a committed Zionist.[25] At the same time, Lyova alludes to the new meaning of the term refusenik in Israeli culture. More specifically, the term currently refers to conscientious objectors who refuse to serve in the Israeli army.[26] Finally, Lyova's usage of the phrase "seekers of happiness" directly references the 1936 Soviet propaganda film, *Iskateli schastia*, which depicts a Jewish family that migrates to Birobidzhan, the Jews' official Soviet homeland. Lyova, however, evokes the film's title ironically, suggesting the persistence of Jewish wandering in the face of Soviet and Zionist attempts to territorialize Jews.

As a self-proclaimed permanent seeker, Lyova shows how a Russian-speaking

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24 Ibid., 54.

25 Natan (aka Anatoly) Sharansky became a major *refusenik* figure after he was denied an exit visa to Israel in 1973 and imprisoned in the Gulag four years later. In 1986, Sharansky was allowed to immigrate to Israel, where he became an activist and politician. For more on his involvement in the Soviet emigration movement, see *A Second Exodus*, *The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 215-223; and Anatoly Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, trans. Stefani Hoffman (New York, NY: Random House, 1988).

26 For more on the re-appropriation of the term "refusenik" and the new refusenik movement, see Ariel Dloomy, "The Israeli Refuseniks, 1982-2003" *Israel Affairs* 11, no. 4 (2005): 695-716. According to Dloomy, the refusenik movement became organized during the 1982 war in Lebanon, the same war that Lyova refers to in *The Free World*.

Jew can map out new trajectories that do not involve the act of returning. When asked whether he would return to the USSR or Israel, Lyova opts out of the dilemma, claiming that he considers return to either place to be "pathological."[27] He concedes that the experience of migration, with its uncertainties and hardships, inspires in immigrants the desire for home. Yet this desire, which he implies can never be fulfilled, also guarantees the immigrants' restlessness and alienation. Lyova's conclusion that yearnings for repatriation are pathological resembles the claim that return is impossible, to either Israel or the FSU, from *Here Comes the Messiah!*. The writer N. and Lyova thus come to accept the idea that they "can't literally go home again," as articulated by Stuart Hall.[28] The difference lies in each character's attitude toward this conclusion. While Rubina's heroine is deeply troubled and even emotionally incapacitated by the impossibility of her homecoming, Lyova finds comfort in permanently deferring returns to his homelands. Moreover, for Bezmozgis's character, the realization leads to further border-crossing. As I state in the second chapter, Rubina resolves the problem of Russian-Jewish homelessness in her later works, *The Syndicate* and *On the Sunny Side of the Street.* These novels show similar characters who find belonging in multiple homes, in Israel and the FSU, and who re-conceive of *aliyah* as an individual spiritual ascent. Bezmozgis' character, on the other hand, expresses the desire not for double homeness but for double homelessness or permanent double diaspora.

Recalling Isaac Gantman's story from Ulitskaia's *Daniel Stein, Translator*, *The Free World* tackles the subject of emigration from Israel, a process referred to as

27 Bezmozgis, *The Free World*, 277.
28 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 437.

"descent," or *yerida* in Hebrew. By electing to undertake *yerida*, Lyova, like Ulitskaia's Gantman, becomes a member of another diaspora, composed of Israelis who emigrate from Israel. As I state in the chapter on Rubina, quoting Majid Al-Haj, "Jews who immigrate to Israel are called *olim* – ascenders; those who emigrate are called *yordim* – descenders."[29] In other words, *aliyah* and *yerida* are value-laden and antithetical concepts in Israeli culture. By departing from his adopted country, Lyova comes to occupy the seemingly paradoxical position of being an ascender and a descender, or a member of the *aliyah* and of the *yerida* populations at the same time. Moreover, by choosing to descend, after having ascended, and thus reversing his attempt at diaspora reversal, Lyova disrupts the teleological nature of Israel's immigration narrative and its idealization of repatriation. Lyova's doubly-diasporic position challenges Israel's "dualistic approach to emigration."[30] In fact, Lyova is situated between three diasporas – Jewish, Soviet and Israeli. His anti-linear path of migration, much like the back and forth movements in *The Syndicate,* illustrates that the terms "exile" and "return" cannot remain distinct for individuals shaped by multiple experiences of dislocation. Yet, in contrast to Rubina's narratives, Lyova's trajectory is oriented specifically to avoid return. He moves from one country to another with the ultimate goal of ending up in a place that he does not come from and therefore cannot return to – the United States.

While Lyova is the most vocal of the novel's deracinated characters, he is not the only cosmopolitan who advances the polemic between rootedness and rootlessness. *The Free World* features another immigrant character, Josef Roidman, who voices a

29 Majid Al-Haj, *Immigration and Ethnic Formation in a Deeply-Divided Society: The Case of the 1990's Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 37.

30 Steven J. Gold, "Israeli Emigration Policy," *Citizenship and Those Who Leave: The Politics of Emigration and Expatriation,* eds. Nancy L. Green and François Weil (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 283.

deterritorialized sense of self. Roidman, who shares Samuil's background and generational status, does not think of his identity in terms of national allegiances. He describes himself as "a short, old, one-legged, stateless Jewish optimist."[31] A modern-day Wandering Jew, Roidman works as a street musician who travels with his violin case and one other bag. Having lost his wife to illness and his son to immigration, Roidman is unbound by territorial or genetic connections. Like Samuil, Roidman suffers from health problem that promise to trap him in Italy's purgatory. Both characters belong to the generation of Jews who cannot enter their Promised Land, and indeed neither successfully exits out of Italy. With them dies their generation's particular brand of socialist internationalism, thus making way for a new form of cosmopolitanism. It is the other Krasnanskys and Lyova who enjoy the privilege of escaping to North America. Bezmozgis resolves the polemic between rootedness and rootlessness by letting the nationally unattached members lead the way out of the geopolitical limbo. Lyova's character, in particular, leaves readers with the impression that he will continue disseminating his interpretation of rootless cosmopolitanism in the United States, coming to embody the kind of stateless eccentric that Ulitskaia introduces in *A Merry Funeral*.

Absurdistan, which takes place on the eve of September 11th, 2001, is separated by two decades from *The Free World*. However, Shteyngart's narrative suggests that even in the post-Soviet moment, Russian-speaking Jews are captives of geopolitical limbos. The satirical novel takes its name from its setting, Absurdistan, an ecologically and politically dystopian state that is rich in oil reserves, torn by interethnic conflict between its factions, the Sevo and Svani, and exploited by foreign occupation. This alien landscape becomes

31 Bezmozgis, *The Free World*, 197.

purgatory to Misha Vainberg, the Soviet-born, American-educated narrator-protagonist who, having been exiled to the Russian Federation, attempts to return to the US as an immigrant. Like all of characters in *The Free World*, Misha finds himself temporarily stateless and forced to struggle logistically and ideologically in his attempt to gain national asylum. In the process, he, too, comes to re-evaluate his national commitments. Like Lyova, Misha rejects Russia and Israel as his national homelands and expresses the desire for permanent residency in the United States. A cosmopolitan who has the means to dwell in any nation-state, Misha yearns to make the United States his home, despite the fact that it is the only nation-state in the world to deny him citizenship on the grounds of his oligarch father's criminal activities. Misha's obsession with America echoes both past and new portrayals of America as an alternative Zion, a counter-part to the ideal of the Promised Land in the Middle East. In this way, Shteyngart revives and re-interprets the oxymoronic notion that a Jewish cultural center exists *in* the diaspora.

Addressed from Misha's point of view, the narrative is a "love letter to the generals in charge of the Immigration and Naturalization Service."[32] As the quote suggests, *Absurdistan* relies on hyperbole and irony, painting its characters in broad strokes and ridiculing all of them, including the protagonist. Misha, a lazy, arrogant and ideologically idiosyncratic hero, modeled, in part, on Ivan Goncharov's Oblomov, is a symbol for unexamined privilege. Yet it is this privileged position that allows Misha to speak in a blunt, politically-incorrect and earnest manner. Having received an elite liberal education at the invented Accidental College, Misha perceives himself as a post-nationalist, leftist intellectual – "a sophisticate and a melancholic," to borrow a phrase

32 Gary Shteyngart, *Absurdistan* (New York: Random House, 2006), 14.

that appears throughout the novel.[33] This background causes Misha to confront questions of about his cultural identity and territorial allegiance eagerly but also clumsily. Misha's desire for immigration is not motivated by what scholars of Russian-Jewish immigrants refer to as socioeconomic "push" factors.[34] His extreme privilege winks at the emergence of Russian-Jewish business tycoons in the post-Soviet moment, embodied by such individuals as Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Roman Abramovich, and makes Misha an atypical member of the post-Soviet diaspora. In contrast to the image of the typical FSU immigrant, Misha, like Lyova, is pushed from the FSU exclusively by social, cultural and ideological factors.

It would seem that the son of a Russian-Jewish oligarch would have no qualms about calling the Russian Federation his home. Yet Misha experiences his trip back home, to the FSU, as an exilic condition that he instantly desires to reverse by returning to his adopted country, the US. Through this character's inability to re-integrate, Shteyngart suggest that the persistence of Soviet concepts of ethnic identity, as well as anti-Semitism, cause Jews to lack a sense of belonging in post-Soviet Russia. Misha's experiences prior to and following his college years in the United States, prove to him that his fellow ex-Soviets will always see him as a Jew. However, Misha initially learns about the rigidity of Soviet identity categories from his Jewish father, who tells his son on the eve of his departure for the US, "You'll never be an American. You'll always be a Jew...Jew, Jew, Jew."[35] Misha's father, a thoroughly assimilated "Russian gangster," in

33 "Accidental College" may refer to any small liberal arts college in America. It is, however, probably a pun on Occidental College and a reference to Shteyngart's alma mater, Oberlin College.

34 On "push factors," see Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration and Conflict* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007); and Larissa Fialkova and Maria Yelenevskaya*, Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007).

35 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 17.

this way, attempts to transfer the Soviet essentialist approach to identity that he has so clearly internalized to his son. After returning to the FSU as a college-educated adult, Misha is reminded of the importance of ethnic categories when the individuals he encounters greet him by immediately asking who he is by nationality [*natsional'nost'*]. Identifying his nationality, Misha becomes vulnerable to open expressions of anti-Semitism and rehearsals of Jewish stereotypes. At a certain point, Misha even declares "In Russia, even the sun has a distinctly anti-Semitic disposition."[36] Though hyperbolic, the statement hints at the normalcy of cultural intolerance in everyday interaction in the FSU. One such interaction occurs at the American embassy where Misha becomes involved in a physical altercation with ethnic Russians who provoke him with anti-Semitic comments. After exchanging punches, Misha appeases the Russians by drinking with them and thus becoming a stereotypical Russian alcoholic rather than a stereotypically "dry" Jew.

Misha's visit to post-Soviet Russia thus reminds him of the double pressure to embody one's distinct ethnic identity and, at the same time, the Russian cultural ideal. This social pressure to be Russian becomes evident to Misha on another occasion, when after spending the night with a couple of Asian students who come "from some godforsaken Eskimo province...but...[smell], in a typical Russian manner, of dill and sweat," Misha realizes, "Some multiculturalism! Even our Asians are Russian."[37] In his characteristically offensive manner, Misha zeroes in on the tension in post-Soviet Russian culture between the prevalence of rigid ethnic categories and the expectation of assimilation, embodied by the "Asian" students who succeed in smelling "Russian," just

36 Ibid., 44.
37 Ibid., 56.

as Misha succeeds in smelling and thus passing for Russian when he drinks vodka. It is this tension, the novel implies, that makes dwelling in the FSU undesirable for the culturally marginal.

In addition to showing why Russian-speaking Jews feel pushed to leave the FSU, *Absurdistan* focuses on the elements that pull immigrants toward their adopted countries, specifically the promise of being able to occupy multiple identity categories. Misha is initially drawn to the United States having "heard from a distant cousin in California that one could be both an American and a Jew and even a practicing homosexual in the bargain."[38] Though lacking in eloquence, Misha speaks for a new, post-Perestroika generation of Russian-speaking Jews, and other minorities, who yearn for cultural pluralism and consequently idealize American culture.[39] For Shteyngart's protagonist, academic exile in the United States indeed offers the freedom of being more than just a Jew and thus breaking with the cultural homogeneity of his childhood in the US. After spending time in the US, Misha comfortably combines different identity labels, calling himself a "porky Russian lover," "a fat Russian Jew," an "American trapped in a foreigner's body," "American Jew," or a "secular Jew." For Misha, cultural disaggregation becomes a voluntary process that allows him to experience identity as a fluctuating, situationally-based process. Shteyngart's protagonist develops the habit of juggling identity markers while living in New York City, where the phrase "Russian Jew" is common-place rather a contradiction in terms, as it is in the Russian language. Notably, Misha learns how to engage in self-fashioning while forming relationships with other

38 Ibid.

39 For an analysis of multiculturalism in *Absurdistan*, see Steven Lee, "'Borat,' Multiculturalism, "Mnogonatsional'nost,'" *Slavic Review* 67, no. 1 (2008): 19-34.

ethnic minorities, specifically his culturally-mixed diasporic girlfriend, Rouenna, who proudly describes herself as "Half Puerto Rican. And half German. And half Mexican and Irish. But...raised mostly Dominican."[40] Rouenna's hybrid manner of self-positioning causes Misha to cry tears of happiness. While Shteyngart parodies Misha's tendency to exoticize American minorities, the novel also portrays his ethnic fetishism as a reaction against Soviet conceptions of multiculturalism. The Russian-American writers of Shteyngart's generation do not manifest the nostalgia for the Soviet "friendship of nations" cultural policy that appears in the novels of Rubina and Ulitskaia that I treat in this dissertation.[41] This is not to say that writers like Shteyngart idealize American multiculturalism. On the one hand, Shteyngart's fiction often points to the dissonance between the institutional racism and the glorification of ethnic pluralism in American culture. On the other hand, *Absurdistan* suggests that, for the Russian-speaking Jews who feel locked within the limits of Soviet *natsional'nost'* categories, and particularly the category *evrei*, the US offers a more welcoming environment than post-Soviet Russia.

Like Bezmozgis' Lyova, Misha disrupts the expectations of fidelity toward Israel placed on Russian-speaking Jews by Jews and non-Jews alike when he actively disassociates himself from the Jewish state. Throughout the novel, Shteyngart shows other characters assuming a natural connection between Misha and Israel, which Misha questions and de-naturalizes in response. In the country of Absurdistan especially, Misha is forced to articulate his stance toward the state that those around him immediately identify as his national homeland. Misha tries to correct what he sees as their

40 Ibid., 32.

41 For another example of a fictional work that critiques Soviet multiculturalism, see Anya Ulinich, *Petropolis* (New York: Viking, 2007).

misconception by stating, “Israel is not my country. New York is.”[42] Regardless of this declaration, the leaders of the Sevo ethnic group elect Misha, a self-proclaimed multiculturalist, as an unofficial ambassador to the Jewish state, which they view as proxy to the United States. Prior to this experience in Absurdistan, Misha enjoyed the privilege of dismissing Israel as “a small, heavily Jewish country on the Mediterranean coast,” that seemingly lacked relevance to his existence.[43] His condescending attitude also appears in his description of the state as being, “once a source of pride and inspiration...now populated largely by aggressive Middle Eastern people whose bizarre lifestyle is throughly incomparable with our own.”[44] “Our own” in this case refers to the lifestyle of American Jews and indicates Misha's sense of alienation from Israel.

Absurdistan mocks, but also explains, Misha's desire to completely transcend national associations and be a post-national subject, or in his words, “a deeply secular Jew who finds no comfort in either nationalism or religion.”[45] Though naive, his position makes sense as a response to his father's misplaced nationalist zeal. As Misha explains, Boris Vainberg, also a completely secular Soviet Jew, attempted to compensate for his lack of a Jewish education by becoming a a die-hard Zionist and a refusenik. As a result, his father “lived in an abstract world where the highest form of good was not child rearing but the state of Israel.”[46] Predictably, Boris' idealistic commitment to Zionism crumbled at the actual encounter with the state. Just like the staunch Zionists, or “the fervent patriots” described in *Here Comes the Messiah!,* Boris could not reconcile the

42 Ibid., 251
43 Ibid., 21.
44 Ibid., 269.
45 Ibid., viii.
46 Ibid., 234.

myths surrounding Israel with the actual state.[47] As a result, Misha's father came to dismiss Israel as "a goofy, unsentimental country, its sustaining mission nearly as banal and eroded as our own."[48] Despite this disappointment, while he lived, Boris made every effort to transform his son into a stereotypically "real" Jew. Misha's negative reaction to these efforts manifests in his vacillation between indifference and outward hostility toward Israel. In this way, *Absurdistan* portrays the anti-Zionism of young cosmopolitans like Misha as a reaction to the uncritical nationalism of their parents.

As the novel illustrates, the rebellion against Israel and Zionism by post-Soviet Jews is also an expression of frustration with Israel's attitude toward what it considers to be its Jewish exiles. Shteyngart explores the fraught relationship between Israel and the Jews who do not consider themselves beholden to the state through Misha's encounter with a Mossad agent. As the official ambassador to Israel, Misha meets the Mossad agent in order to negotiate on Sevo's behalf. However, the conversation between the two men quickly devolves from Sevo-related concerns into the issue of Misha's and his father's Jewish identities and responsibilities toward the state. Misha identifies himself as a "new man...that ain't got no racial memory," but defends his father in front of the "Mossadnik" by saying "my papa loved Israel," so much so that "he gave three million dollars to some rabbi who wanted to drive the Arabs into the sea."[49] The Mossad agent responds to Misha by calling Boris Vainberg "just another Russian gangster," and unapologetically says about Israel, "we're not required to *love* it...Just to make sure it exists."[50] In this way the

47 Dina Rubina, *Vot Idet Messia!* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), 218.
48 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 234. "Our own" in this case means Russian.
49 Ibid., 304. Boris Vainberg reminds of such billionaire Russian-Jewish figures as Lev Levaiev, who generously fund Jewish organizations, including Chabad in Israel and the FSU. See Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 47.
50 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 304-305.

Mossad agent unintentionally justifies Misha's lack of fidelity to Israel. *Absurdistan* suggests that the state's simultaneous demand for unconditional support from diaspora Jews and lack of concern with their political allegiances or moral reservations renders it difficult for an individual such as Misha to consider it his homeland. The other problem revealed by the encounter between between Misha and the Mossad agent is Israel's predominant perception of Russian-speaking Jews as Russians. The novel suggests that just as in the FSU, Misha and his father would always be Jews, in Israel, they would always be Russians – the phenomenon that Rubina and Ulitskaia tackle in detail in their fiction.

In *Absurdistan*, the question of whether Jews can maintain a community in exile without affiliating with Israel receives an answer in the form of an imagined utopian world that is unveiled at the end of Misha's hold-over. After escaping Absurdistan but before embarking on his voyage to the West, Misha spends a brief period of time hiding and "going native" among the "Mountain Jews," a tribal people loosely based on the Mountain Jews of the Caucasus. The Mountain Jews' agricultural utopia allows Shteyngart to ridicule the Soviet construction of a Jewish agricultural Promised Land in Birobidzhan, as portrayed in *The Seekers of Happiness*, the film that Lyova references in *The Free World*. While the Mountain Jews imagined in *Absurdistan* initially inspire in Misha a search for cultural authenticity, they eventually expose him to oxymoronic aspects of diasporic culture that blend the authentic with the artificial. These Jews are neither "the People of the Book" nor "descendants of the original Babylonian exile."[51] However, they have a replica of the Wailing Wall that suits the demands of their lifestyle.

51 Ibid., 329.

The fact that the Mountain Jews have their own Wailing Wall in the diaspora testifies to their cultural self-sufficiency, or their lack of dependency on Israel as an authentic diasporic center that gives their community meaning. Moreover, their seemingly artificial cultural relics and simulacrum-like world are reminiscent of Alik's loft in *A Merry Funeral*. Much like Alik's home, the Mountain Jews rely on the kinds of alternative and potentially portable rooting strategies that Caryn Aviv and David and Shneer describe in their study of Jewish rootedness.[52] Replicas, such as the Wailing Wall, thus allow the Mountain Jews to never have to pilgrimage to Israel, and to remain rooted in the diaspora.

Though they hold some casually xenophobic opinions about their neighbors, the Mountain Jews in *Absurdistan* get along with the surrounding Muslim population, presumably in contrast to Israelis. The Mountain Jews' tolerance also extends toward their own children who have chosen voluntary exile. *Absurdistan*'s Mountain Jews, like the actual people in Central Asia, experience the problem of brain drain to the United States. Yet despite this, when their children return, the Mountain Jews "welcome them back, and kiss them and love them like they haven't stabbed [them] through the heart."[53] As one of these individuals explains, as if addressing Misha personally, "for us it's simple. If you're a Jew, even if you're a sophisticate and a melancholic, you will always find a home here."[54] The Mountain Jews' ability to offer a sense of home to their self-exiled children falls into sharp contrast with Israel's demands for unconditional support, as expressed by the Mossad agent. Even though Misha "can't help feeling comfortable

52 David Shneer and Caryn Aviv, 5.
53 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 324.
54 Ibid.

among this strange offshoot of [his] race," he ultimately leaves them behind, departing for New York – a choice that I analyze in the next section of this chapter.[55]

Readers never witness Misha Vainberg's arrival in America. *Absurdistan* ends with an image of Misha in an internet cafe, writing to Rouenna about his desire to live in New York and his dreams about their future together. Thus the novel defers its migrating protagonist's homecoming. Bezmozgis, similarly to Shteyngart, chooses to keep Lyova's future in the USA and the Krasnanskys' in Canada beyond the pages of the novel. By preventing their audiences from witnessing these characters' integration, both authors present migration as an undetermined process. Moreover, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis reassert the elusive nature of immigrant arrivals and homecomings. By bracketing off Misha's return to his adopted city-as-homeland and Lyova's arrival in his new home, *The Free World* and *Absurdistan* reflect their characters' ambivalence toward the concept of home. At the same time, both novels leave their readers to contemplate whether the United States can indeed live up to their characters' dreams of finding an alternative Promised Land, in which they could dwell as rootless cosmopolitans.

Between Promised Lands

For Samuil's generation, "the free world" was the socialist world, which promised East European Jews that they would "become free from Jewishness – and thus Free."[56] Yet, as the title of Bezmozgis' novel suggests, by the late-twentieth century, Russian-speaking Jews would associate "the free world" with the West and freedom with

55 Ibid., viii.
56 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 152.

emigration. For Lyova, the promise of freedom lies not in a utopia but in "the country with the fewest parades," which he hopes to find in United States.[57] *Absurdistan*'s Misha shares the same investment in America. His eventual departure for New York asserts that a modern-day deterritorialized Jew cannot put down roots in a pastoral utopia, such as that inhabited by the Mountain Jews, but can find home in gritty, immigrant-filled New York. *Absurdistan* and *The Free World* thus show Russian-speaking Jews mapping the concept of home onto their chosen place of exile, the United States, and, in the process, subverting the dichotomy of homeland and exile. However, both novels also suggest that subjects who reject their place of birth and their national homeland must still confront American notions and attitudes surrounding Israel, the Soviet Union, and its emigrants. Each novel refers to the ambivalences that characterize American Jews' strategies for self-location, suggesting that the US may not be as "free" for ex-Soviet Jews as it initially appears.

Since Israel's establishment, Israeli and American Jews have heatedly debated the nature and limits of their relationship. Members of both groups have placed special emphasis on the questions of whether American Jews should be considered exiles in relation to Israel, and of how Americans should express allegiance to the Jewish state. Israel's immigration data confirms scholars' assessment that American Jews have predominantly avoided making *aliyah*, in other words, participating in return migration.[58] According to Michael Galchinsky, American Jews "are among the first Jews in two thousand years to have had the option to literalize the notion of 'return' and...for the most

57 Bezmozgis, 278.

58 The percentages of immigrants to Israel from the United States are noticeably low compared to other countries. For more detailed information, see Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), "Statistical Abstract of Israel, 2011," http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st04_04&CYear=2011.

part they have chosen not to be 'gathered in.'"[59] Moreover, prominent leaders within American Jewish institutions have successfully countered the attempts of Israeli leaders to label American Jews as exiles and have firmly positioned the United Sates as the homeland of American Jews.[60] However, scholars of American Jews largely agree that, since 1967, the insistence on the practical and spiritual necessity of the Jewish state has been a central and binding feature of the Jewish-American community.[61] Therefore, while on the one hand, American Jews have demarcated the US as their homeland, they have also consistently argued that their identity hinges on the existence of their spiritual homeland in the form of a nation-state, Israel. As Shteyngart and Bezmozgis show, the complexity and inconsistency of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel confounds Russian-speaking immigrants who lack certainty about the location of their homeland.

The Free World and *Absurdistan* suggest that Israel's centrality in mainstream Jewish American culture and consequent pressure on Americans to maintain a constructive relationship with the state suggests problems for Russian-speaking Jews who come to America in order to escape the homeland dilemma. Moreover, the novels point to another major source of misunderstanding between immigrants and hosts, namely that American Jews tend to view Russian-speaking Jews as being in need of rescue and re-

59 Michael Galchinsky's "Scattered Seeds: A Dialogue of Diasporas," *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism Insider/Outsider: Jews and Multiculturalism,* eds. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998), 201-202.

60 I refer here to the 1950-51 debate between the Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the president of the American Jewish Committee, Jacob Blaustein. The controversy began when Ben-Gurion accused American Jews of living in exile and encouraged them to come to Israel. Blaustein responded that American Jews "vigorously repudiate any suggestion or implication that they are in exile...To American Jews, America is home," in Jerold S. Auerbach, "American Home or Jewish Homeland?: The Ben-Gurion – Blaustein Debate Reconsidered," *Forum: on the Jewish People, Zionism, and Israel* 49 (1983): 60.

61 See, for example, Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States* (University of California Press, 2004), 320-330. According to Diner, "intense support for Israel helped shape the contours of American Jewish life in the decades following 1967," 323-4.

indoctrination into Jewish culture. In other words, ex-Soviet Jews need to be made into real Jews who can recognize their real homeland – Israel – even if they end up immigrating to the United States. The themes of exodus and captivity recur throughout Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' narratives, recalling Reb Menashe's view of ex-Soviet Jews as "captive children" in *A Merry Funeral*. Bezmozgis and Shteyngart illustrate that to American Jews, Russian-speaking immigrants are territorial and cultural prisoners who have been trapped within the Soviet state, from which they indeed could not emigrate, and within secular Soviet concepts of Jewish identity.

Bezmozgis' characters, who closely interact with members of such immigration agencies as HIAS and Joint, show that the prolonged process of emigration consists of not only shedding their attachments to their country of birth, but also of entering into a new relationship with what is presented as their real homeland.[62] The immigration agencies include Jews of various religious denominations, including Orthodox and Reform, all of whom are united by what they see as their mission to remake Soviet Jews into real Jews, in part, by emphasizing Israel's centrality to Jewish culture and encouraging them to choose Israel as their destination point. By the late 1970s, numerous Soviet Jews who were granted exit visas for Israel, expressed an interest in coming to the United States instead their arrival in their transit countries, such as Italy. These immigrants quickly earned the name "dropouts," or *noshrim* in Hebrew. According to Yehuda Dominitz, the dropout phenomenon came to signify "betrayal," "offense" and "a slap in the face of the Jewish homeland" on the part of the immigrants, as well as a

62 HIAS is the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Joint or JDC is The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

"failure" on the part of Zionism.[63] This is to say that the decision to go to America, or Germany or Canada, on the part of Russian-speaking Jews, took on ideological significance regardless of their actual motivations. *The Free World*, which is set in 1978, takes place when the "dropout phenomenon" was at one of its peaks.[64] The Krasnansky brothers, through not dropouts themselves, represent the hesitation of Russian-speaking Jews about Israel. Moreover, Lyova is essentially a belated dropout, given that he seeks to redirect his path of migration.

A sense of anxiety about the dropout phenomenon pervades Bezmozgis' novel, which shows American and Israelis attempting to use cultural immersion to promote a Zionist agenda. In *The Free World*, immigrant life revolves around Club Kadima, the organization that puts on festivities, lectures and Hebrew classes. Yet it is obvious that the club's main mission is to declare to the immigrants, "there is no longer any reason for a Jew to say 'Next year in Jerusalem' – 'this year in Jerusalem!'[65] In this and other ways, the agencies teach immigrants to approach the diasporic myths of homeland and return literally. Some of the members of the organization go further, promoting Israel's territorial occupation and expansion. At one point in the novel, a Lubavitcher rabbi from Brooklyn lectures to the immigrants,

> for the first time since the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews [are] once again masters over Greater Israel, the portion that the almighty had promised to Abraham...Thus it [is] absolutely forbidden for Begin to surrender any of the sacred land to the Arabs. God's covenant [inheres] in every stone and every shrub.[66]

63 Yehuda Dominitz, "Israel's Absorption Policy and the Dropout Phenomenon," *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Resettlement*, ed. Noah Lewin-Epstein, Yaacov R'oi and Paul Ritterband (New York: Frank Cass, 1997), 118.
64 For detailed statistics of dropout rates, see Ibid., 119.
65 Bezmozgis, *The Free World*, 257.
66 Ibid., 238-239.

The rabbi's efforts do not work on such immigrants as Samuil, Roidman or the Krasnansky bothers, but they do capture the minds of some, including the Krasnansky matriarch, Emma, and their Jewish daughter-in-law, Rosa. Under the influence of the agencies, these women quickly "rediscover" their Jewish cultural roots and with them, the idea of Israel as their homeland. Using Emma and Rosa, *The Free World* suggests that Soviet Jews become de-cosmopolitanized during their migration process and under the influence of American and Israeli Jews. After attending and socializing with the rabbi, Rosa begins to "[spin] Zionist fairy tales," saying that "only in Israel would they be able to work according to their professions."[67] Bezmozgis' novel portrays Soviet Jews like Emma, and especially Rosa, as hastily and naively adopting traditions that previously held little meaning in their lives. Through these characters' indoctrination, the novel shows that the myths of homeland and return are not essential aspects of diasporic Jewish existence but acquired beliefs that depend on ritualized reinforcement.

The Free World illustrates that in addition to embracing Israel, immigrants had to denounce the Soviet state and relinquish any alignment to the party. What the novel suggests is that Soviet Jews were discouraged from seeing themselves as doubly diasporic, in other words as belonging to the Soviet Jewish diaspora. Rather, they were expected to make a complete break with their Soviet homeland. In Bezmozgis' novel, HIAS requires its employees to collect testimonies from potential immigrants about their persecution in the Soviet Union. These confessions are meant to serve as first-hand accounts of state-sanctioned anti-Semitism and to function not only for the purpose of attaining refugee statuses for the immigrants but also for creating the an overarching

67 Ibid., 116.

Exodus narrative about Jews from the Soviet Union. What *The Free World* does not represent but inadvertently foreshadows is that despite convincing the US immigration authorities with their narratives of plight, Russian-speaking Jews would continue to be viewed as dropouts. As Steven J. Gold argues, in the United States, members of Jewish immigration and social service agencies often criticized the ex-Soviets for their decision to come to the United States instead of Israel, even directly calling them "*noshrim.*"[68]

Absurdistan also represents the immigrants' sense of pressure to live up to the Sharansky-inspired image of the emigrant as "Prisoner of Zion." Shteyngart's novel satirizes Americans' desire to perceive Russian-speaking Jews as refuseniks, or Soviet dissidents who harbored strong desires to live in their national homeland. For example, the American Jews who encounter Misha at his liberal arts college instantly become intrigued by him, with one of them gushing, "I know about you...You're the son of that refusenik Boris Vainberg. You're the real deal. You're like a part of history."[69] The reader, on the other hand, who knows Misha's father to be an unrepentant criminal and an emotionally abusive parent, recognizes the mythology behind this undeserved praise. In *The Free World*, Lyova demythologizes the figure of the refusenik by using the phrase descriptively, to articulate his sense of captivity in Israel. For Lyova, being trapped within Israel is equivalent to being trapped in the Soviet Union. Yet it is clear that Lyova also underestimates the mutually-constructive relationship between Israel and the United States. As the other kind of refusenik, Lyova cannot possibly embody the "Prisoner of Zion" whom American Jews would hope to encounter. Thus, the novel suggests that the

68 Steven J. Gold, "Community Formation Among Jews from the Former Soviet Union in the US," *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Resettlement*, 276.
69 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 175.

rootless cosmopolitan will have to respond to the disappointment of his hosts as he attempts to integrate into his new adopted country.

In addition to influencing the immigrants' territorial and political allegiances, the immigration workers in *The Free World* attempt to reshape the identities of Soviet Jews. Bezmozgis, in this way, represents a well-documented divergence on the part of American and Soviet Jews on the question of what defines Jewishness. According to Hasia Diner, "American Jews, particularly through the federations and other social-service agencies, took on the project of 'judaizing' the immigrants who did not necessarily want to go through this process and certainly not on the terms presented to them by American Jews."[70] As Diner also illustrates, American Jews predominantly situate their identities within an institutional religious framework even when avoiding religious practices.[71] On the other hand, Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants predominantly affirm that they are Jews "by nationality" and view Jewishness as an inherited identity, even after adopting the kinds of religious rituals practiced by American Jews.[72] In other words, the terms and categories employed by Jewish Americans and Russian Jews often differ despite shared behavior patterns. In *The Free World*, Bezmozgis portrays American and

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70 Hasia Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 317-318. Also see, Steven J. Gold, "Community Formation Among Jews from the Former Soviet Union in the US," 261-284.

71 According to Diner, in the aftermath of WWII, with increasing suburbanization, Jewish life in America became more centered around the synagogue, a situation that contributed to the articulation of Jewish identity in religious terms in the United States. However, Diner also points out that despite the increasing institutionalization of Judaism via the synagogue, "Generally speaking, the social part of synagogue life inspired members much more than the religious part. American Jews did not evince high levels of religiosity. Most had moved away from traditional observance of kashrut and Sabbath restrictions. Few attended weekly services," *The Jews of the United States*, 292.

72 See Paul Ritterband, "Jewish Identity Among Russian Immigrants in the US," *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Resettlement*, 325-344. According to Ritterband, "Whereas American Jews might well be inclined to define themselves as members of a religious group, the reality is that their behavior does not conform to religious tradition, even the liberal Jewish religious tradition, to which they give nominal loyalty...when it comes to ritual behavior, there is little difference between the ex-Soviet Jews and the more settled New York Jews," 329.

Israeli Jews working for immigration agencies as actively attempting to correct for what they perceive to be the cultural differences between themselves and the ex-Soviets. The Orthodox rabbi in the narrative acts as the main agent in the process of converting ex-Soviets from "thin" to "thick" Jews. Notably, his strategy consists of making the immigrants recognize their status as Jews and helping them translate their identities into religious terms. To Samuil, the rabbi says, "You are not a believer but you are still a Jew. You carry within you the holy spark."[73] Samuil, who understands his identity to be purely secular in nature, responds, "These terms are meaningless to me...I am Jewish by nationality."[74] Even after Samuil explains why it would have been dangerous for him to retain a connection to Jewish culture in the Soviet Union, the rabbi insists, "if you had applied the strength of your convictions to the torah, I don't doubt that you could have been a great rabbi today."[75] The exchange closely mirrors the one that occurs between Reb Menashe and Alik in Ulitskaia's novel. Both cases involve a religious leader who sees the secular Soviet Jew as a captive child and therefore not a free agent. The Soviet Jew is thusly situated on the margins of Jewish culture, but is also enticed to return to the fold. Through its representation of the two men's encounter, *The Free World* makes clear that Samuil, like the other Jews in Italy, is perceived by American and Israeli organizations as a works-in-progress that require grooming into prototypical or "real" Jews before they can arrive in their new homelands.

The conflict between stereotypically "thin" Russian-speaking Jews and "thick" Jews takes on comically and grotesque proportions in Shteyngart's novel. On the eve of

73 Bezmozgis, *The Free World*, 237.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.

his arrival in America, the multicultural society of his dream, Misha is subjected to the process of becoming a "real" Jew on his body, through a circumcision ordered by his father and performed by American Hasidic Jews. The protagonist's interaction with the Hasids quickly reveals that they consider him a prisoner of Soviet secularism who requires redemption. Misha is, therefore, perceived similarly to Samuil and Ulitskaia's Alik, as a captive child. The Hasids even use the same term when they announce to Misha, "You're a captive of the Soviet Union. We are making a Jew out of you."[76] Unlike Alik, who is only partially brought back into the fold in the Kaddish ritual, Misha is subjected to a conversion that is corporeal, violent and involuntary. The rabbis ignore Misha's objections to the circumcision and take special pleasure in the task, which is preceded by a rowdy vodka drinking ritual. When Misha cries out, "Look at me! I am a captive! By you!" the Hasids carry on, calling him Moses and proclaiming, "you're helping lead the Soviets out of Egypt."[77] Similarly to Ulitskaia, Shteyngart plays with the idea of Russian Jews as captives by portraying them as struggling to exercise agency over their identities, and being disempowered by religious Jews. Jewish authenticity and dislocation, specifically in the form of an exodus thus intersect in *Absurdistan* as they do in *The Free World*. Relying on a grotesque aesthetic, *Absurdistan* highlights the difficulties of cultural and territorial border crossing for Russian-speaking Jews who dream of finding freedom in the West. Misha ultimately does not fully cross over into the category of a "real" Jew. The circumcision goes awry and he suffers from an infection that permanently disfigures his genitals, thus leaving evidence of his incomplete transition. This horrific outcome suggests the immoral and traumatic effects of

76 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 22.
77 Ibid., 23.

"judaization" on Russian-speaking Jews.

It is not only religious characters who fail to recognize Russian Jews as responsible agents in *Absurdistan*. Secular American Jews, including Misha's best friend, Alyosha-Bob, also view Jews from the FSU as captives whose identity is determined from without. It is Alyosha-Bob who initially fetishizes Misha's refusenik heritage, treating it as a grave and exotic condition. On the other hand, Alyosha-Bob views his own Jewish identity in strictly voluntary terms. He is so comfortable in his cultural position that he can mix and combine religious and cultural markers, treating them as tools of personal expression. For example, at one point, Alyosha-Bob begins to don an "Orthodox cross and a Jewish c'hai" with the intention of "adding some religious meaning to his life."[78] Alyosha-Bob also "enhances" his identity through cultural appropriation. He uncritically adopts a hip-hop cadence and other cliché manifestations of urban black American culture. Through this character, Shteyngart alludes to the hypocrisy of American Jews who engage in acts of self-fashioning while attempting to impose prototypical Jewish identities onto Russian-speaking immigrants who may themselves want to embrace their cultural hybridity.

Shteyngart further parodies the unexamined privilege of American Jews through Misha's Jewish American analyst, who objects to Misha's attempts to illegally immigrate to the United States. In response, Misha fumes to himself,

> *You son of a bitch...How dare you suggest that I shouldn't avail myself of every last chance to get out of Russia when your own great-grandparents probably bribed half the czar's men in the Pale of Settlement and then sneaked out in a mail bag, just to make sure their descendants could lounge on a fine walnut-trimmed Eames chair on the corner of Park Avenue and Eighty-fifth Street, issuing half-baked censorious statements*

78 Ibid., 160.

> *to the insulted and injured and collect US$350 an hour for the privilege?*[79]

Misha's internal dialogue communicates a sense of frustration with American Jews' inability to recognize their socioeconomic advantages in relation to Russian Jews or to respect Russian Jews' choices about their dwelling places. In this case, the analyst takes for granted his ability to call America home, while judging Misha, who is not a stereotypical refusenik, for his efforts to come to the US by any means necessary.

The tensions between American Jews and Russian-speaking Jews in *Absurdistan* and *The Free World* throw into question America's potential to be an alternative space for rootless cosmopolitans seeking a home but not a homeland. America has long been mythologized as the other Jewish Promised Land or "New Zion." By insisting on their rootedness in the United States, and claiming the country as their homeland, Americans have successfully asserted their right to not undergo return migration to Israel. Shteyngart however, suggests that rather than pledging allegiance to a nation-state, diasporic subjects can root themselves in cosmopolitan centers. Misha expresses this third option when declaring, "Israel is not my country, New York is." The statement contains within it a category mistake, specifically the confusion between city and country. Yet this very slippage creates a new equivalence that is in tension with the nation-state model of citizenship. Misha's paradoxical declaration thus embodies an anti-nationalist conception of an identity grounded in a diverse city. Shteyngart even echoes his character's

79 Ibid., 156.

philosophy himself when confessing in an interview, "I really don't think of myself as an American. More so, I think of myself as a citizen of New York, which is the one place in the country where I feel loved and coddled and safe."[80] *Absurdistan*, as well as Shteyngart's other novels, including *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002), indeed exhibit a notable shift in attitude toward New York when compared to previous examples of Russian émigré fiction.[81] As Yasha Klots observes, past émigré depictions of the city portray it as being constantly in flux and inclusive, but also ahistorical and horrific. Shteyngart's fiction, on the other hand, tends to be centered on protagonists who are "at home" in New York.[82] Yet, rather than using their characters' comfort with the city to signal their assimilation, Shteyngart's novels attempt to shift as well as re-imagine Jewish diasporic centers beyond the boundaries of nation-states. In this way, Shteyngart participates in a lager trend of thinking about Jewish belonging in terms of multiple or de-centered centers. For example, David Shneer and Caryn Aviv describe New York as the "new Zion of the Jewish world," referring to "its complexity, density, and sheer cacophony of Jewish voices, institutions and cultures."[83] They offer this glorification of the city as a means for resisting attempts to orient diaspora Jews, regardless of where they come from or dwell, exclusively around Israel.

However, *Absurdistan* celebrates New York less for being a center for Jews, than for being a home for rootless cosmopolitans of all cultural backgrounds. As imagined by Shteyngart, the city represents an ideal environment for those who wish to not only re-

80 Dave, "Gary Shteyngart Looks like He's Up to No Good," *Powells Books Blog*, http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/gary-shteyngart-looks-like-hes-up-to-no-good-by-dave/.
81 Yasha Klots, "The Ultimate City: New York in Russian Immigrant Narratives," *Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 1 (2011): 38-58.
82 Ibid., 47.
83 Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews*, 137.

interpret their identities beyond Soviet and Israeli models, but also to form lateral connections with other minorities. Shteyngart's protagonist desires to return to New York in large part because he wants to re-establish his relationship with Rouenna, "a Bronx mixed-raced girl."[84] As Misha exclaims, "In what other country would we have found succor together? In what other country could we have even existed?."[85] In *Absurdistan*, New York, with its different cultures and customs is more of a "new Babylon" than a "New Jerusalem." When describing his beloved adopted city, Misha says, "it's like having the whole world on one small island."[86] The evocation of Babylon re-connects Shteyngart with Ulitskaia's and Rubina's celebrations of multiculturalism and Russian-Jewish hybridity in *A Merry Funeral* and *On the Sunny Side of the Street*. As I argued in the chapter on Rubina, the image of Babylon is re-appropriated in post-Soviet Jewish fiction to connote positive aspects of diaspora, such as multilingualism and cultural intermixing. Shteyngart's decision to center his protagonist within a Babylonian New York thus fits into a larger literary effort to not only re-locate, but also to re-make diasporic centers.

From Prisoners of Zion to Voluntary Exiles

By deciding to settle in the US, Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' characters, specifically Misha and Lyova, choose to make their home away from the FSU and Israel and therefore in exile. However, their version of exile does not have the "overwhelmingly

84 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 35.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 324.

negative connotations" that have accompanied the term *galut* in Jewish culture.[87] By portraying their post-Soviet characters as autonomously displaced, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis resist the more traditional representation of Jewish diaspora as an undesired condition or curse. In another sense, the two novels challenge the diaspora/homeland dichotomy by showing individuals for whom supposed homelands, Israel and the FSU, become places of discomfort and alienation. Shteyngart and Bezmozgis' tendency to interchange terms and referents to create conceptual paradoxes of diaspora is reminiscent of Rubina's and Ulitskaia's representations of the homelessness of homecomings and homelands. Yet, significantly more so than Ulitskaia or Rubina, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis gesture toward the political potential of what Shaul Magid calls "voluntary homelessness."[88] Derived from Edward Said's and Shalom Noah Barzofsky's writings on exile, Magid's theory of voluntary homelessness "reenvisions...[exile] as a positive category for Diaspora Jews living alongside but not in the shadow of the State of Israel."[89] In this way, Magid proposes to undermine the "hierarchy" of Israel and the diaspora, which has caused diaspora to play "a subservient...or peripheral role in contemporary Jewish history."[90] Shteyngart and Bezmozgis implicitly endorse this theory of voluntary homelessness by relying on characters who are doubly diasporic and who deliberately refuse to live in the shadows of the two countries that they are expected to view as their homelands.

The connection between voluntary exile and intellectual engagement appears in

87 Barbara Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 98.
88 Shaul Magid, "In Search of a Critical Voice in the Jewish Diaspora: Homelessness and Home in Edward Said and Shalom Barzofsky's Netivot Shalom," *Jewish Social Studies, New Series* 12, no. 3 (2006): 193-227.
89 Ibid., 194.
90 Ibid., 211.

Magid's essay as well as Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' novels. Referencing Edward Said's writings on the "expatriate intellectual," Magid stresses this figure's power to negotiate between the diaspora community and the memorial homeland. According to Magid, the self-exiled intellectual has a special responsibility to offer "critical reflection, both of the home and the state of homelessness."[91] Bezmozgis similarly suggests that exile enriches intellectuals, often causing them to take on roles as cultural guides, translators and artists. For example, Lyova, though not a stereotypical intellectual, is a self-proclaimed "serial dissident" and an *intelligent* in the Soviet sense. While living in Rome, Lyova, similarly to Daniel Stein, displays cultural adaptability by working as a tour guide, speaking multiple languages and establishing relationships with local merchants and important community members. Lyova stands apart from the other immigrants by being the most local and the most cosmopolitan member of Soviet-Jewish community. Like Misha, Lyova enjoys wearing multiple identity masks. When he first meets Alec and Polina, he introduces himself by announcing, "In Kishinev, I was Lyova. In Netanya, I was Arieh. Here I'm Luigi."[92] Lyova's flexibility and ability to transform himself are accompanied by his willingness to offer "critical reflection" on home and exile, as he does to the Krasnanskys when explaining his decision to live outside of Israel and the Soviet Union.

The Free World's other stateless agent, Roidman, also finds an intellectual and artistic outlet while residing without citizenship. His critical reflection takes the form of an opera about Fanny Kaplan, the Jewish political activist who attempted but failed to assassinate Lenin. With Kaplan as its heroine, the opera presents a counter-history that explores the overlap between Jewish traditions and revolutionary ideals. Therefore, *The*

91 Ibid., 204.
92 Bezmozgis, *The Free World*, 52.

Free World implies that expatriate intellectuals, such as Lyova and Roidman, are not only suited for exile because of their adaptability and lack of nationalist attachments, but are also needed by Jewish communities for their insight and critical voices.

Shteyngart takes on a somewhat different approach, using Misha to not only foreground but also satirize the figure of the diasporic, and decidedly secular, Jewish intellectual. Shteyngart celebrates the figure of the intellectual by endowing Misha with a powerful and charismatic presence and casting him as the novel's first-person narrator. At the same time, the author prevents the reader from idolizing Misha by making him an intellectual manqué whose critical insight is offset by his hubris and decadence. On the one hand, Misha is a classic "aesthete," as he is well-versed in multiple subjects, including American liberal studies, Russian literature and even Jewish culture. He makes astute observations about American and Russian-speaking Jews and manipulates the prejudices of both groups. On the other hand, these talents do not warrant Misha's frequent comparisons of himself to such figures as Baruch Spinoza, Albert Einstein, and Sigmund Freud. In fact, Misha's idealization of modern, diasporic and secular Jewish culture frequently veers into religious intolerance, which Shteyngart satirizes. As the character declares, "I am very proud to be a Jew, but I am a secular Jew...the very best of Jews have been assimilated and free thinking. The bearded Jews you see at the Wailing Wall, rocking back and fourth, cowering before their god, those are fairly second-rate Jews."[93] Given Misha's culturally marginal position, it is no surprise that he aligns himself with the kinds of Jewish intellectuals that Isaac Deutscher labels non-Jewish Jews in "Message of the Non-Jewish Jew." Misha is himself a non-Jewish Jew who needs to be

93 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 251.

re-made into a real Jew according to the Hasids who circumcise him. This protagonist's over-identification with secular Jewish intellectuals makes sense as a response to his traumatic history with religious Jews. Moreover, like the figure of the non-Jewish Jew, Misha is both within and without Jewish culture. An expatriate intellectual, as theorized by Said and Magid, is a similarly liminal figure who stays beyond the borders of the national homeland without completely breaking away. For his part, Misha wishes to maintain a connection with the countries in which he does not wish to dwell, particularly the FSU. As he confesses, "I love Russia in my own way," and expresses a desire to establish a foundation called "Misha's Children."[94]

Being a composite of clichés, Shteyngart's protagonist lacks the self-awareness manifested by Bezmozgis' voluntary exiles. Still, and mostly in spite of himself, Misha offers a critical voice in the narrative, exposing the biases of the groups with which he identifies. According to Magid, "being homeless either by force or choice compels one to forge an identity through the lens of another."[95] Being constantly shaped by encounters with diverse groups, the voluntary expatriate is more likely adopt a culturally relativist perspective and thus resist "absolutizing narratives," including those that are nationalist in nature.[96] For Misha, living in Absurdistan and working as a minister of multicultural affairs leads him to inadvertently articulate a scathing critique of American Jews' reliance on absolutizing narratives in their attempts to promote "historical continuity" and what he coins as a "new tribalism."[97] More specifically, in the attempt to raise awareness for the Sevo cause among American Jews, Misha writes a grant proposal for the construction of

94 Ibid., 71.
95 Magid, "In Search of a Critical Voice," 202.
96 Ibid.
97 Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*, 270.

a Holocaust museum in Absurdistan. Though the proposal is meant to ignite and therefore exploit American Jews' emotional investment in the memorialization of the Holocaust, it also inevitably satirizes the centrality of the Holocaust in American Jews' efforts to create and maintain their community. In fact, being in forced exile in Absurdistan, causes Misha to cultivate a more critical attitude toward ex-Soviets, Israelis and Americans, including American Jews. After years of worshipping his Jewish American analyst to the point of imitation, Misha gains a more skeptical attitude toward socioeconomically-privileged American Jews. He confesses to the reader,

> I considered my knowledge of American Jews. They always seemed to feel alone and unloved, when, in truth, most of the American population just wanted to kiss them on their shiny noses, bake them a casserole, shoot them some one-liners over dinner, and possibly convert them to hasten the Second Coming.[98]

At the same time, Absurdistan's intermediary environment causes Misha to not only become more skeptical but also more committed to forging cross-cultural connections. As previously mentioned, Misha rushes back to the US in order to resume residence in New York as well as to rekindle his relationship with Rouenna, which dissolved after his return to Russia. The decision to re-establish his relationship to Rouenna symbolizes Misha's growth as a character. By rejoining his romantic partner, who is herself a member of multiple diasporas, Misha asserts the importance of transnational, cross-diasporic connections. These connections, the novel suggests, are necessary for subjects who desire to create a sense of home in exile and maintain their capacity for critical reflection.

Some scholars of Jewish Studies have attempted to convince Jews that they have a responsibility to maintain “constructive relationship” with their homeland, specifically

98 Ibid., 262.

with Israel.[99] However, as Magid argues, one of the most important contributions of self-exiled intellectuals is their ability to provide "a creative and constructive *critique* [my italics], both of the home they choose not to live in and their choice not to live there."[100] In this way, Magid implicitly supports Shteyngart's criticism of the idea that a diaspora Jew is "not required to *love* [Israel]...Just to make sure it exists." Magid, Shteyngart, and Bezmozgis agree that diaspora intellectuals become inevitably implicated in the affairs of their various homes and consequently must negotiate their allegiances. In *Absurdistan*, Misha cannot escape having to deal with Russians, Israelis and Americans, as all the countries are tied together in their attempts to exploit Absurdistan's natural resources and political corruption. Rubina makes the same point in *The Syndicate* when she illustrates that diasporic subjects who enjoy transnational mobility cannot avoid political entanglements with their multiple homes. Magid, however, goes further, describing his Jewish expatriate as a "Diaspora Zionist."[101] In other words, the voluntarily homeless subjects imagined by Magid can and should be critical while also recognizing Israel's status as their national homeland. The expat thus maintains a connection to the diasporic center from a distance and uses the distance to develop an analytical perspective that can ultimately be beneficial to the state.

On the other hand, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis attempt to move away from the center-periphery model of diaspora that lies behind Magid's theory by presenting characters who are not Zionists. Already, as doubly diasporic Russian-speaking Jews, Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' characters cannot pledge allegiance to one center or

99 See, for example, Michael Galchinsky, "Scattered Seeds: A Dialogue of Diasporas," 181.
100 Magid, 205.
101 Ibid., 204.

subscribe to a single narrative of displacement. Indeed, Lyova and Misha do not commit their energies to Israel's preservation. Lyova's emigration is precisely motivated by the desire to no longer be literally in service of the state's continued existence. This is not to say that the characters in *Absurdistan* and *The Free World* express anti-Israeli views. The act of embracing diasporic permanence need not symbolize Israel's negation, the novels suggest. In this way, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis continue the exploration of the Israel versus the diaspora dilemma that characterizes some of the now classic works of Jewish American fiction, including Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*.[102]

Roth's novel is about a Jewish American intellectual, a writer based loosely on Roth himself, who is caught working for and against Israel at the same time. More specifically, he participates in a covert operation carried out by the Mossad. In the meantime, his identity is co-opted by an impostor who uses the name Philip Roth name to promote an ideology of "Diasporism," which calls for a massive Jewish exodus out of Israel and ingathering in Europe. The discovery that he involuntarily works for Zionism and Diasporism causes the fictionalized Roth to become symbolically split or disaggregated into two irreconcilable halves – the half that seeks to preserve Israel and the half that seeks to destroy the state. Through the adventures of this symbolically bipolar protagonist, Roth portrays diaspora intellectuals, particularly American Jews, as captives in a "duopoly" between Israel and the United States and in a pro or against Israel polemic.[103] By highlighting similarities in the underlying principles of the two ideologies, including their emphasis on ingathering, cultural authenticity and territorialism, Roth

102 Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

103 According to Dufoix, "The creation of the State of Israel in May 1948 inaugurated the current 'duopoly' (1948 to the present). It is characterized by the coexistence of a state for the Jews and the maintenance of a non-Israeli Jewish identity now mainly centered in the United States," *Diasporas*, 7-8.

suggests that Zionism and Diasporism is a false dichotomy, but does not present an alternative option. This particular either-or fallacy continues to haunt discussions about Israel in the US and certainly relates to Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' narratives, which are about Russian-speaking Jews who are in the process of also becoming American Jews. In the attempt to move beyond the dichotomy *The Free World* and *Absurdistan* suggest that rather than to working for a homeland from a distance, a voluntary exile can choose to embrace the oxymoron of belonging to multiple diasporas without homelands.

Conclusion

The rootless cosmopolitans in *Absurdistan* and *The Free World*, particularly Lyova and Misha, differ from typical Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants because they enjoy significant autonomy over their paths of migration. Russian-Jewish immigrants of the late-twentieth century were highly discouraged from coming to the United States. Those who desired to settle in America were constrained by numerous logistical and ideological factors, such as their access to blood-relative sponsors and ability to furnish evidence of their persecution in the Soviet Union. Being labeled “dropouts” necessarily politicized the immigrants regardless of their political leanings or national attachments. Shteyngart's and Bezmozgis' narratives embrace and magnify the politics behind Russian-speaking Jews' choice to come to the US, portraying it as a form of double dissent from Soviet and Zionist narratives of selfhood and belonging. *Absurdistan* and *The Free World* suggest that America's seeming promise of rootlessness and of cosmopolitanism is much more attractive than the promise of citizenship for certain post-Soviet Jews. Yet, through

the use of characters who become vulnerable when living in geopolitical limbos, each novel carefully reminds its readers that in a world of nation-states, one cannot be literally stateless. Moreover, the fiction strongly suggests that going West is not equivalent to becoming free from Soviet or Zionist captivity. In choosing voluntary exile, Russian Jews also enter into a triangular relationship with American, Israel and the FSU.

Similarly to Ulitskaia and Rubina, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis depict immigration as a process shaped by encounters between different kinds of Jews and different theories of Jewishness. *The Free World* and *Absurdistan* dwell on the problems of identity categories and cultural translation that inhibit the mutual recognition between American Jews and Russian-Jewish immigrants. As both novels show, American immigrants no longer have to belong to the single category reserved for Jews in the Soviet Union, but can celebrate their identities as hyphenated Russian-Jewish subjects. Yet in the US, just as in Israel, post-Soviet Jews are set apart from other Jews, becoming Russians or non-Jewish Jews.

The immigrant who is a voluntary expatriate does not ignore these potentially denigrating labels, but plays with their historical and literal connotations. In this way, a modern-day Russian-speaking Jew can re-posses the concepts of the non-Jewish Jew, the captive child, the rootless cosmopolitan, the Prisoner of Zion, the refusenik, and the dropout, and co-opt them for new political agendas and conversations about identity and territory. As I argue in the previous two chapters, Russian-speaking Jews today enjoy greater cultural and geographical flexibility than ever before. This is especially true for the younger, more socioeconomically-privileged and acculturated generation, which can balance dual homeness with spiritual homelessness. However, as Shteyngart's and

Bezmozgis' novels show, for rootless cosmopolitans, greater mobility also means having to choose whether to maintain constructive or constructively critical relationships with their homes.

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to view the Soviet-Jewish diaspora and its culture as transitory phenomena. As the bibliography of this dissertation shows, between 1990 and 2010 Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants were the subjects of numerous studies by scholars across academic disciplines. The literature and film depicting the Third and Fourth waves of emigration clearly "had a moment" at the turn of the twenty-first century.[1] Thus far, the Soviet-Jewish diaspora has been represented in literary works and on screens primarily by its participants or first-hand witnesses. The dramatic decline of emigration from the FSU in the 2000s inevitably leaves us with the question of whether future generations of artists, who did not partake in the mass re-locations, will continue to examine the experiences of Russian-speaking Jews. Moreover, the figure of the Russian-speaking, specifically ex-Soviet, Jew that is so central to the literature that I analyze in this project, seems in danger of becoming irrelevant, perhaps even extinct. Speaking about the Jews who are still living in the FSU, Zvi Gitelman suggests that "the Jewish identities of Russian and Ukrainian Jews...may be uniquely the product of a Soviet environment that no longer exists."[2] The same could be stated about immigrants from the FSU, who are not only temporally, but also geographically removed from the Soviet environment. While it is true that immigrants continue to reproduce key aspects of the Soviet environment within their host-lands, they often end up creating hybrid spaces and institutions where one can hear Russian speech broken by English, or Hebrew, and Yiddish idiom, to echo *A*

1 Most of the filmmakers currently known for representing the Soviet-Jewish diaspora are Russian-Israeli. For more on this subject, see Olga Gershenson, "'Is Israel Part of Russia?' Immigrants on Russian and Israeli Screens," *Israel Affairs* 17, no. 1: 164-176.

2 Zvi Gitelman, "Jewish Identity and Secularism in Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine," in *Religion or Ethnicity?: Jewish Identities in Evolution,* ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 260.

Merry Funeral. The terms, concepts and narratives associated with life in the Soviet Union, and the process of emigration, continue to have an impact on how Russian-speaking Jews identify themselves today. Yet, as I show in this study, ex-Soviets use and, in the process, re-negotiate Soviet legacies within their new environments. In this way, they produce new identities that are indeed no longer uniquely Soviet, but also not uniquely American or Israeli, or Russian, or Jewish.

Though written in different languages and by authors of different generations, the fictional works in this dissertation are tied together by their detailed depictions of Russian Jews as Soviet citizens and as immigrants. Ironically, in the works of Rubina, Ulitskaia, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis, it is the specificity of the Soviet-Jewish experience that re-opens the larger debate about the relationship between identity and territory in Jewish culture. In addition to evoking Soviet Jews' persecution, the literature gestures toward Soviet policies regarding national minorities and multiculturalism, the re-categorization of Jewishness, and the numerous ways in which Jews were rooted and displaced within the Soviet Union. Post-Soviet writers show that these and other historical forces caused Russian-speaking Jews to develop concepts of Jewishness, home and exile that can be neither forgotten nor directly transmitted into their host-lands. As a result, immigrant "homecomings," to Israel or the United States, become characterized by ideological confrontations and mistranslations. Ex-Soviet Jews' specificity, or cultural difference, leads their Jewish hosts as well as the immigrants themselves to re-assess such fundamental questions as – What defines a Jew? What unites Jews as a community? Where do Jews belong? As post-Soviet writers show, in attempting to answer these questions, immigrants and hosts re-assert, but also re-draw, cultural and political

boundaries. In this way, as subjects of literary and academic studies, Russian-speaking Jews remind us more generally that identities and geographical spaces are constantly shifting, thus leading to the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and subcultures.

The rootless cosmopolitans that emerge from the literature of the Soviet-Jewish diaspora recognize that history, social context and cross-cultural encounters alter how individuals position themselves. Most importantly, rootless cosmopolitans acknowledge their own cultural disaggregation and spatial de-centeredness. As portrayed in the fiction, the fragmented identities of Russian-Jewish diasporic subjects manifest a complex and, at times, contradictory set of influences from Soviet, Jewish and host cultures. This cultural fragmentation correlates to the subjects' sense of deterritorialization, which results from their multidirectional movement, away from and toward their potential homes.

A rootless cosmopolitan need not express a clear political agenda. In fact, in the works of Rubina, Ulitskaia, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis, rootless cosmopolitans become "problematizers" who successfully undermine the dichotomous and prototypical theories of space and identity in spite of themselves, particularly when being challenged. Thus, a rootless cosmopolitan may be a writer who juggles her attachments to her two homes (in Israel and the FSU), a bohemian artist who refuses to be officially affiliated with Judaism, a Christian Jew, a double emigrant from the Soviet Union and Israel, or a post-Soviet Americanized Jew who says no to his homelands in order to re-root himself in New York. These subjects often define themselves in terms of what they are not – religious, patriotic, in touch with their national consciousness, at home. They even engage in double negations, with regard to territory or religious affiliation. These tendencies to refuse and dissent appear in the fiction as substantive and historically-

informed gestures. Moreover, despite relying on a variety of literary techniques to represent Russian-speaking Jews as deconstructed subjects, post-Soviet authors show that disaggregations between a people, territory, language, and religion result in hybrid identities and diasporas.

By emphasizing the positive aspects of disaggregation, Rubina, Ulitskaia, Shteyngart and Bezmozgis subvert, to varying degrees, the belief that diasporic existence leads to Jews' decline as a community. Negative judgements about Jews who choose not to be geopolitically rooted in Israel persist in the twenty-first century. In fact, it is currently American Jews who receive the most criticism about their preference to remain diasporic while maintaining a connection with Israel from a distance. The Israel/diaspora dichotomy continues to rise to the surface of public debates. For example, in 2006, the prominent Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua used his remarks to the American Jewish Committee to criticize the diasporic identities of American Jews and devalue diasporic existence. A week after the incident, Yehoshua even penned an op-ed in the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, titled "People without a land," in which he continued to chide American Jews for their ability to disaggregate identity from citizenship. According to Yehoshua,

> Jewish identity in Israel, which we call Israeli identity...this Jewish-Israeli identity has to contend with all the elements of life via the binding and sovereign framework of a territorially defined state. And therefore the extent of its reach into life is immeasurably fuller and broader and more meaningful than the Jewishness of an American Jew, whose important and meaningful life decisions are made within the framework of his American nationality or citizenship. His Jewishness is voluntary and deliberate, and he may calibrate its pitch in accordance with his needs.[3]

3 A. B. Yehoshua, "People Without a Land," *Haaretz,* May 11, 2006, http://www.haaretz.com/people-without-a-land-1.187451.

These comments re-enforce the connection between territorial rootedness and cultural authenticity established by Zionism. They also rely on the false dilemma of Israel versus the diaspora that writers like Shteyngart satirize in a style that recalls Philip Roth. The endurance of this dilemma, and with it the homeland/exile hierarchy, makes the rootless cosmopolitanism of post-Soviet fiction relevant to all Jewish groups that embrace their diasporic statuses. Interestingly, Russian-speaking Jews are currently viewed as patriots or allies to Israel. However, remembering their history as "dropouts" is useful for appreciating the diversity of the ways in which Jews have criticized or resisted the notion of "return" to their self-proclaimed homeland.

By promoting rootless cosmopolitanism, post-Soviet writers challenge the idea that Jews must be a people with a land, particularly a land in the form of an autonomous Jewish nation-state. The novels that I analyze in this dissertation deterritorialize Jewishness by re-examining the well-known myths and terms that were repurposed in constructing a teleological narrative about the mass emigration of Jews from the FSU. They include: homeland, return, exile, ingathering, homecoming, Promised Land, exodus and ascent [*aliyah*]. Soviet-Jewish immigrants, who are simultaneously attached to and alienated from at least two cultures and two centers quickly reveal that the aforementioned terms do not have obvious or unique referents. Moreover, the terms that are meant to contradict or negate one another may describe the same place or experience. Thus, Jerusalem, Moscow or New York may each be a site of exile and homecoming for the same diasporic subject. Moscow may be the home that one returns to after years of living as an immigrant in Jerusalem. Jerusalem may be the city from which one voluntarily exiles oneself in order to come to that *other* promised "land," New York.

These possibilities prove that Jews are not universally bound by their imagined memory of a single, absent center and by the dream to make that center real. The Jewish diaspora is not one. As literary and scientific case studies, ex-Soviet Jews illustrate that there are multiple paths of displacement and return, as well as multiple centers, sites of homelessness, and homes that do not necessarily involve the possession of land. On the other hand, FSU immigrants' struggles with citizenship and social acceptance make us think more critically about the ways in which (formerly) diasporic groups dwell within, occupy and partition space.

The fiction of the post-Soviet Jewish diaspora steers us away from thinking in terms of prototypes about diaspora as well as Jewishness. “Russian Jew” has long been a qualified, dichotomous, and hybrid identity. Scholars in the West have become accustomed to pointing out the ways in which Jews in the Soviet Union became Soviet or Russian, and secularized, or estranged, from Judaism. The rhetoric of loss characterizes these portrayals of Soviet Jews, who consequently appear to be not only different from other Jewish groups, but less representative, typical, authentic or “cultured” Jews. I show throughout this dissertation that by asserting, rather than denying, the Russian and other “non-Jewish” aspects of their identities, postcommunist Jews subvert the notion that a Jewish identity is an unalterable, singular and total identity, involving ethnicity, race, religion and culture. Rubina, Bezmozgis, and especially Ulitskaia and Shteyngart, introduce their readers to characters who refuse to be confined within one category – be it Russian, Jew, or Christian – but who also undermine essentialist models of Jewish identity by claiming their space within Jewish culture. They, as well as other post-Soviet writers, continue to test the limits of Jewishness. For example, in her novel *Petropolis*,

the Anglophone writer Anya Ulinich presents a completely de-essentialized Jew, born to a father with African origins and an ethnically-Russian mother. This character, Sasha Goldberg, is neither "genetically" nor culturally Jewish but grows up believing herself to be a Jew because of Soviet constructions of nationality and her Jewish name. Coming to America only complicated Sasha's strategy of identification, as she becomes forced to reconcile her Soviet Jewish identity with her newfound identity as an African American. The question of how to negotiate Jewishness with other racialized identities requires further attention from writers and scholars. In Israel, the identities of Mizrahim, Ethiopian Jews and Black Hebrews, currently challenge the state's "demands for homogeneity," inviting much-needed comparisons between Israel's cultural and racial minorities.[4]

"Rootless cosmopolitan," the phrase that reminds us of false accusations directed at Jewish intellectuals under Stalinism, now stands for a new, aspirational identity that threatens nationalist narratives. This is to say that the phrase no longer belongs to the past or to Russian-speaking Jews. In the age of globalization and mass migration, the phrase has more descriptive power than ever before. As a theory that encompasses issues of diasporic space and selfhood, rootless cosmopolitanism relies on dialogues between scholars of diverse disciplines. For example, the literature of the Soviet-Jewish Diaspora encourages conversations between Soviet Studies, Jewish Studies, Diaspora Studies and Cultural Studies by not only offering complex and at times ambiguous representations of diasporic experiences, but also by advocating for more cross-cultural diasporic

4 Mizrahim are Jews from countries with Arab and Muslim majority populations. Black Hebrews or Black Hebrew Israelites refers to groups based primarily in the US who consider themselves to be descendants of ancient Israelites. They are not recognized as Jews by Israel. For more on the latter group, see Fran Markowitz, Sara Helman and Dafna Shir-Vertesh, "Soul Citizenship: The Black Hebrews and the State of Israel," *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 2 (2003): 302-312.

affiliations. As I suggest throughout this dissertation, rootless cosmopolitanism relates to numerous other efforts to disrupt center-periphery approaches to diaspora and cultural identity. In keeping with this dissertation's critique of prototypical models, I suggest that Soviet Jews need not be considered the prototype of rootless cosmopolitanism. To repurpose the epigraph that opens this dissertation, “rootless cosmopolitan” has been a proper noun. Now it is a common noun.

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