

UC Berkeley

L2 Journal

Title

Writing the Translingual Life: Recent Memoirs and Auto-Fiction by Russian-American and Russian-German Novelists

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85t9d1xh>

Journal

L2 Journal, 7(1)

Author

Wanner, Adrian

Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/L27122756

Peer reviewed

Writing the Translingual Life: Recent Memoirs and Auto-Fiction by Russian-American and Russian-German Novelists

ADRIAN WANNER

Penn State

E-mail: ajw3@psu.edu

One of the more remarkable developments in translingual literature over the past decade has been the rise of a new wave of Soviet-born authors writing in languages other than their native Russian. Autobiographical elements have always figured prominently in their fiction, and some of these authors have recently crossed the boundary into non-fiction by writing memoirs. The process of writing in a second language about becoming a writer in a second language gives these books a particular self-referential quality. This essay surveys the latest memoirs and auto-fiction (published 2012-14) of five Soviet-born immigrant novelists in the U.S. and Germany—Gary Shteyngart, Lena Gorelik, Lara Vapnyar, Olga Grjasnowa, and Maxim Shrayer. It argues that constructing a narrative of the self for a foreign audience serves as a crucial step in the gestation of a translingual novelist. This narrative urge often predates the actual mastery of the new language. Rather than as the result of an already-achieved acquisition of a new linguistic medium, telling one's story in a non-native language emerges as a means toward language learning and integration.

INTRODUCTION

One of the more remarkable developments in translingual literature over the past decade has been the rise of a new wave of Soviet-born authors writing in languages other than their native Russian. This phenomenon has come about mainly as a consequence of the massive Jewish exodus from the Soviet Union and its successor states. By the turn of the millennium, more than a million Russian-speaking Jews had relocated to Israel, about half a million to the US, and approximately 200,000 to Germany. While maintaining Russian as the preferred means of communication with family members and fellow émigrés, a significant number of these immigrants have become successful novelists in the languages of their host countries.¹ This is particularly true in Germany and the United States: following the best-selling debuts of authors like Wladimir Kaminer (*Russendisko*, 2000) and Gary Shteyngart (*The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, 2002), “Russian-German” and “Russian-American” literature has become a trendy new brand in the palette of ethnic and multicultural fiction.

Autobiographical elements figure prominently in many of these stories. For example, the narrator of Kaminer's *Russendisko* and his many subsequent books is called “Wladimir Kaminer” and is seemingly identical to the author, while the heroes of Shteyngart's novels share many characteristics with the author both in physical appearance and biography. More generally, an autobiographical stance is a particularly prevalent feature of immigrant literature, where the narrative of the spatial and cultural displacement becomes a journey of

the transformed self. Despite these autobiographical elements the earlier writings of these Russian immigrant novelists were all located within the generic domain of fiction

More recently, however, several of these authors have crossed the boundary into non-fiction. The latest books of Gary Shteyngart, Lena Gorelik, and Maxim Shrayer invite the reader to identify the first-person narrator with the real-life author. By adhering to what Philippe Lejeune (1975) has dubbed the “autobiographical pact” between memoirist and audience, these writers are making explicit what had been a motivating factor for their literary production all along. As this article will argue, the original creative impetus of these authors was the urge to tell their personal life story in the newly acquired linguistic medium of their country of immigration. Disposing with the conventions of fictionality, their latest books present the immigrant self to the readers of the host society without a novelistic screen. Other Russian immigrant authors, while not (yet) directly engaging in autobiography, write nevertheless in a strong auto-fictional vein.² In particular, they use fictionalized representations of immigrant storytellers as a symbolic enactment of their own status as translingual novelists.

The present article will address these issues by analyzing the latest books (published 2012-14) of five Soviet-born immigrant writers in the U.S. and Germany. Two of them—Gary Shteyngart and Maxim Shrayer—have recently published memoirs. Lena Gorelik is the author of a polemical essay drawing on her own life experience. Lara Vapnyar’s and Olga Grjasnowa’s books, while remaining within the generic realm of fiction, overlap with the other authors in that they present a partially autobiographical account of a Russian-Jewish immigrant who has to come to terms with living in a new language.

As examples of translingual life-writing, these books contain many of the themes that one has come to expect from transnational immigrant narratives: cultural disorientation stemming from traumatic dislocation, intergenerational conflict, maladjustment to an unfamiliar environment, assimilationist aspirations held in check by the pull of the source culture. In that sense, these stories can be associated with the wider genre of what Jan Walsh Hokenson has defined as “intercultural autobiography,” in which “writers face the new problem of expressive interculturalism or the narrated self experienced now as conjuncture *between* languages and cultures” (1995, p. 92). A prominent earlier example of an immigrant memoir dealing with the unsettling experience of having to recreate one’s self in a new language was Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* (1989). As Mary Besemeres has argued in her valuable study *Translating One’s Self* (2002), “life-writing by language migrants can challenge the monolingual, monocultural assumptions of contemporary literary theory and philosophy of language alike” (p. 278). Given the status of these authors as successful creative writers in an acquired, non-native idiom, their memoirs and auto-fictional works are bound to contain revelations about their development as translingual writers. The process of writing in a second language about the process of becoming a writer in a second language gives these books a particular self-referential quality.

The first three writers discussed here (Gary Shteyngart, Lena Gorelik, and Lara Vapnyar) all give an account of the transformative nature of intercultural, translingual storytelling. By contrast, Olga Grjasnowa’s novel highlights an immigrant heroine who, despite superior linguistic abilities, is unable to narrate her own story (with baleful consequences for herself). Maxim Shrayer, finally, subordinates the urge for translingual storytelling to the strong affirmation of a Jewish identity, which makes the shift from Russian to English a much less traumatic experience than it was for the other writers.

GARY SHTEYNGART

Gary Shteyngart, the author of the memoirs *Little Failure* (2014), is undoubtedly the most prominent Russian-American novelist active today, which makes the title of his book intentionally self-ironic and coy. Born in Leningrad in 1972, Shteyngart moved with his parents to New York at age seven. One could be tempted to read his autobiographical narrative as a validation of a traditional and, by now, rather shopworn trope: the tale of the hapless, destitute immigrant who, through a combination of persistence, hard work, and sheer luck, succeeds beyond his wildest dreams in his new American incarnation. More interesting, surely, is that Shteyngart was able to realize the American Dream through his talent as a storyteller. A major theme—perhaps *the* major theme—of his memoirs is the account of the author's own gestation as a translingual writer.

Little Failure relates, in more or less chronological order, the history of Shteyngart's family in the Soviet Union; his childhood in Leningrad; the immigration to the U.S. via Vienna and Italy; his education at the Solomon Schechter School in Queens, Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan and Oberlin College; and his emergent success as a writer with the acceptance of his first novel by a major publisher. A constant theme throughout the book is Shteyngart's love-hate relationship with his overbearing and abusive parents, who react to his career choice with consternation and alarm. "Little Failure" (*Failurchka*) is the condescending Russian-English nickname that his mother concocts for Shteyngart, while his father calls him "Snotty" (*Sophyak*). Shteyngart's growing literary fame does little to redeem him in his parents' eyes. "I read on the Russian Internet that you and your novels will soon be forgotten," his father informs him (p. 40), for example. The protagonist's persona of a neurotic Russian-Jewish-American nebbish is familiar to anyone who has read Shteyngart's three previous novels, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002), *Absurdistan* (2006), and *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). Nevertheless, in his latest book, Shteyngart achieves a new poignancy by honing in on the dark reality behind the clownish façade. His comic antics, so we learn, are the coping strategies of a tormented and conflicted personality. Humor, according to Shteyngart, is "the last resort of the besieged Jew, especially when he is placed among his own kind" (p. 111).

Shteyngart claims that a writerly avocation came to him early in his life. Encouraged by his grandmother, who rewarded his efforts with a piece of cheese per page written, he composed his first novel in Leningrad at age five, entitled *Lenin i ego volshebnyi gus'* (*Lenin and His Magical Goose*) (2014, p. 60-61). The relocation to America two years later put an end to his budding career as a Russian novelist and initiated a period of linguistic confusion. At Solomon Schechter School in Queens, he had to contend not just with one but two unfamiliar languages simultaneously (English and Hebrew). As we learn from his memoirs, the young Igor-turned-Gary is slow to learn either of them and ends up isolated and derided by his classmates, who treat him as a social misfit. A turning point, however, comes when he decides to compose a novel *in English*, fittingly entitled *The Challenge* (sic). A sympathetic substitute teacher invites him to read from his novel to the class at the end of every English period. This allows the young Gary to recalibrate his position vis-à-vis his classmates. In his own words:

Don't get me wrong. I'm still a hated freak. But here's what I am doing: I am redefining the terms under which I am a hated freak. I am moving the children away from my *Russianness* and toward storytelling. [...] With my newfound lesser brand of hate comes the responsibility that will haunt me for the rest of my life. The responsibility of writing something *every day*, lest I fall out of favor again and be restored to Red Gerbil status. (p. 151)

Shteyngart's subsequent career as a writer follows from this initial jolt. He adapts the comic personality of the antelope "Gary Gnu" and composes the "Gnorah," a parody of the Torah and a "hatched job" directed at the Judaic indoctrination imposed on him at school. His status among his classmates gets upgraded from "unclubbable fruitcake" to "tolerated eccentric." As he observes in retrospect: "The Gnorah marks the end of Russian as my primary tongue and the beginning of my true assimilation into American English" (p. 161).

Shteyngart's Hebrew School personality of a verbal entertainer and jester sheds light on his general development as a translingual novelist. It is through writing fiction in English that English became his primary tongue, rather than the other way around. This "true assimilation" has led Shteyngart to an extraordinary mastery of his adopted language. Not only has he lost any trace of a foreign accent, but he has developed a sensorium for stylistic nuance and a gift of linguistic observation unmatched by most native speakers of American English. For the most part, his language conforms to that of an American-born speaker of English and features no obvious linguistic hybridity (except when rendering the broken English discourse of Russian native speakers). He does, however, engage in occasional "insider jokes" that are accessible only to a bilingual reader. For example, the monolingual American audience of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* is left in the dark about the fact that "Jan Zhopka," the Communist leader of the fictitious East European country depicted in the novel, has his name derived from the Russian word for "asshole."

As Shteyngart points out in *Little Failure*, the particular circumstances of his upbringing sharpened his talent for observation and play-acting. In a moment of introspective self-disclosure, he notes: "The years of being shunted, of observing from behind a language barrier, of listening from a bedroom adjoining my parents' and trying to figure out a way to douse the flames, have produced a calculating, attention-seeking mammal of few equals" (2014, p. 262). These words should put the reader on guard: with all its seeming honesty and revelation of an unvarnished self, *Little Failure* remains nevertheless a calculated, attention-seeking verbal performance.

Shteyngart's numerous public appearances also create the impression of a carefully staged act. This includes the self-deprecating trailer for *Little Failure*, which has nothing to do with the actual content of the book (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowt9Wq7zYU0>). Shteyngart as a public persona always remains "in character," but the stand-up comedian coexists at times uneasily with the tragic existentialist. Only at the very end of *Little Failure*, when Shteyngart visits his city of birth together with his parents, does the comic mask seem to slip off. The story concludes on a note, if not of forgiveness, then at least of understanding, with the word "Amen" appearing in Latin, Hebrew, and Cyrillic characters above a photograph of Shteyngart's parents looking relaxed and serene.

LENA GORELIK

In retrospect, the kindly schoolteacher (identified only as “Ms. S”) who coaxed the young Shteyngart into reading his English-language “novel” to his classmates assumes a pivotal role in his story by launching both his assimilation into the English language and his career as a translingual writer. Interestingly, the Russian-German novelist Lena Gorelik relates a very similar episode. Born in Leningrad in 1981, Gorelik immigrated together with her parents to Germany at age eleven. In her autobiographical novel *Meine weißen Nächte* (*My White Nights*) (2004), Gorelik describes the initial shock and confusion of her fictional alter ego, Anja, who is thrown into a German school with almost no knowledge of the local language and is treated with condescension and neglect by her teachers and classmates. The salvation comes when “Herr Wolf,” a friendly fourth-grade teacher, encourages her to write a story in German about her city of birth and share it with her classmates in a newly formed “Writers Club” (Anja first has to look up the word *Schriftsteller* [writer] in a dictionary to understand its meaning). The title of the story that she ends up writing, *Meine weißen Nächte*, is identical with the title of Gorelik’s first novel published in 2004. In her latest book, a polemic against German xenophobia, Gorelik revisits this same episode once again and describes it as a turning point in her life, since it enabled her to make the German language “her own” (2012, p. 19).

After publishing three successful novels, Gorelik, like Shteyngart, has moved from fiction to non-fiction. Her book *Sie können aber gut Deutsch!* (*Your German Is Really Good!*) bears the polemic subtitle “Why I don’t want to be grateful anymore for being allowed to live here, and why tolerance doesn’t help us further.” Gorelik expresses resentment at her own status as a *Vorzeigeanländer* (literally, a “foreigner for show,” a term with similar implications as the American “model minority”). In particular, she resents being complimented for her good German and makes clear that she has become fed up with being touted as a role model for other immigrants, mainly Muslims, who are judged to be insufficiently willing to integrate. Even though German is now undoubtedly her dominant language (as American English is for Shteyngart), both Gorelik and Shteyngart underline how their transnational background sets them apart from monolingual German and American writers.

Her experience of integration through creative writing has led Gorelik to reach out to immigrant children in Germany. As she reports in her latest book, she has been visiting various schools at the invitation of an organization that tries to foster German language competence among non-native speakers through encounters and workshops with established writers. Gorelik is appalled, but not surprised, by the German teachers who consider the correct handling of grammar and spelling the main criterion in judging their students’ writings and thereby stifle and discourage their fledgling translingual creativity. As she points out, a bilingual background enriches rather than diminishes the appeal of a work of literature. Allegedly faulty German usage according to official norms can nevertheless create beautiful, haunting images, and “German texts, when they are written with the help of other languages, are frequently more engaging (*berührender*)” than those written by a native speaker (Gorelik, 2012, p. 110). This sounds like a general plea for translingual creativity. Gorelik claims, for example, that an apple is described more compellingly if one closes one’s eyes and mentally conjures up the word “apple” in a different language. While she is disappointed by the dismissive attitude of many German teachers toward their immigrant students, she is impressed by one teacher who confessed to have learned a lot about the German language from the writing efforts of her foreign-born pupils.

LARA VAPNYAR

Unlike Shteyngart and Gorelik, Lara Vapnyar migrated to her new linguistic environment not in childhood, but at an adult age. Born in Moscow in 1971 and living in New York since 1994, she has published two collections of short stories and two novels. Several of Vapnyar's plots feature a female immigrant heroine who entertains an American-born lover with stories about her former life in Communist Eastern Europe, symbolically enacting, as it were, Vapnyar's own role as a self-exoticising translingual writer who presents her culture of origin to an audience of American readers.³

This same master plot is repeated in Vapnyar's latest novel, *The Scent of Pine* (2014). Lena, the protagonist, is a frustrated 38-year-old Russian immigrant woman stuck in an unhappy marriage and a dead-end career as an adjunct lecturer at a Boston community college. At an academic conference devoted to the "Aesthetics of Oppression," nobody shows up for her presentation on "Sex Education in the Former Soviet Union" (which can be read as a wry self-parody: Vapnyar's first story published in the *New Yorker* in 2003, "Love Lessons—Mondays, 9 A.M.," was precisely about that topic),⁴ but she does meet Ben, a divorced and soon-to-be-remarried professor of graphic novels, with whom she starts an affair. With her husband and two children conveniently visiting relatives in California, she follows Ben to his rustic family cabin in Maine. The romance between Lena and Ben serves as a framing device for a second narrative: the account of Lena's adventures as a counselor in a summer camp run by the Ministry of Defense in the waning years of the Soviet Union. This story too involves "sex education," manifested both in the camp authorities' quixotic crusade against masturbation and other hormonal temptations as well as in the budding erotic feelings that the virginal Lena develops for various soldiers at the camp (and, for a furtive moment, for her female roommate). There is also a mystery of sorts, which is resolved in a surprising and somewhat implausible plot twist at the novel's end when it turns out that the life-narrative that Lena had constructed for herself was based on delusions and misunderstandings.

Reminiscing about one's life and shaping it into a narrative told to a stranger, as well as to oneself, becomes the dominant issue of Vapnyar's book. In this sense, while *The Scent of Pine* is not strictly speaking a memoir, it could be described as a kind of "meta-memoir."⁵ The book opens with several fragments printed in italics. As we later find out, they are reminiscences of the main character, Lena, exemplifying different ways in which "the story would come" to her (2014, p.1-2). The act of storytelling is also foregrounded in the literary intertexts that accompany the narrative: the required reading materials that Lena and her roommate, both students at the Moscow Pedagogical Institute, bring with them to the camp include *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron*, and *Arabian Nights*. In telling her camp story to Ben during the long road trip to Maine, Lena assumes the role of a modern day Scheherazade. The act of storytelling, as she explains to Ben, is a way of "cheating time"—while *The Canterbury Tales* are "about telling stories with the purpose of suppressing time, killing it so the journey seemed faster," the *Arabian Nights* are "about telling stories to stretch time, to make it stop so that you don't die" (p. 61). Lena, then, realizes that telling her camp story becomes the means to perpetuate her romance with Ben in a moment of arrested time: "Lena couldn't help but feel a jolt of pain. The camp story will be over sooner or later. As will the story of Lena and Ben. If only she could learn some of Scheherazade's storytelling magic and make it last" (p. 94). The idea of staving off death through storytelling resembles

Shteyngart's technique of staving off his peers' insults through storytelling in front of the class—in both cases the narrative impulse assumes a far-reaching existential urgency.

The most important literary influence on *The Scent of Pine*, however, is neither the *Arabian Nights* nor *The Canterbury Tales*, but Vapnyar's fellow Russian writer Anton Chekhov. The plot of a wistful adulterous affair trailing off into an uncertain non-ending recalls Chekhov's "The Lady with the Pet Dog" (1899), while Lena's deceptive feelings upon arrival at the summer camp—described as "anticipation of happiness," "certainty of happiness" and "inevitability of happiness" (p.12)—echo Petr Trofimov's famous "premonition of happiness" in *The Cherry Orchard* (1904, p. 566).

The fact that Lena tells her life story in English certainly adds another layer of distance between the act of narration and her former self. Interestingly, it turns out that Ben, too, has foreign roots as the son of a Romanian immigrant. What draws the two lovers together, more than any obvious sensual passion, is perhaps a common sensorium for immigrant alienation and nostalgia, which, in Ben's case, seems to have been passed on from father to son. Lena's life in America, just like the time spent at the Soviet summer camp, didn't quite live up to the "anticipation of happiness:"

She'd lived here for thirteen years, and in that time her relationship with her adoptive country had gone through several stages. Originally, she had imagined America as a land steeped in adventure, which filled her with panicky adoration. Then there was the incomprehension and dejection which characterized her first months in America, when everything had seemed so strange and hostile: the scenery, the climate, the people. Everybody seemed to participate in a complicated game based on very particular rules. But eventually, she stopped looking at Americans as a unified mass. They were all lonely to a certain degree, they were all strangers to a certain degree. (p. 16)

From published interviews with Vapnyar (see, for example, Shuster, 2007), it is quite obvious that she is relating here her own experience as a Russian immigrant to the US. The same situation applies to many of Vapnyar's fictional characters, including the heroine of her earlier novel *Memoirs of a Muse* (2006), who is able to overcome her initial linguistic disorientation and loneliness by telling her American neighbors vignettes about Moscow and her studies in the history of Russian daily life. This act of storytelling lends Vapnyar's protagonist a new confidence in her acquired language. As she puts it: "I knew that my English was muddled and awkward, but it was such a joy to talk in it, or possibly to talk at all, that I embarked on more stories on nineteenth-century Russian habits" (Vapnyar, 2006, p. 160). Shteyngart reports a similar break-through moment in *Little Failure* when he recites for the first time his own literary composition to his classmates: "As I'm reading it, I am hearing a different language come out of my mouth. I do full justice to the many misspellings ("the Earth cir-culed the moon"), and the Russian accent is still thick, but I am speaking in what is more or less comprehensible English" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 150).

The heroine of Vapnyar's *The Scent of Pine* is more linguistically confident, of course, having lived in the U.S. already for thirteen years, but she too suffers from a kind of immigrant insecurity. Like several others of Vapnyar's fictional alter egos, she achieves a sense of purpose and is able to carve out a home for herself in her adopted country and language by becoming the teller of her own story—even though this story, as Vapnyar also makes clear, is inevitably a construction based on voluntary and involuntary obfuscation, self-projection, and imagination.

OLGA GRJASNOWA

Olga Grjasnowa's German debut novel *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (*A Russian Is Someone Who Loves Birch Trees*), published in 2012 by the prestigious publisher Hanser Verlag, provides a counter-example and contrast to the books discussed thus far. If Shteyngart's, Gorelik's and Vapnyar's autobiographical prose contains figurations of the translingual writer as a successful storyteller, Grjasnowa's fictional heroine could be called a translingual non-writer and non-storyteller. Grjasnowa was born in Baku in 1984 and immigrated to Germany with her parents in 1996. Maria (Masha) Kogan, the novel's protagonist and first-person narrator, also hails from Azerbaijan and arrived in Germany in 1996 as a Jewish refugee thoroughly traumatized from witnessing the anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku. Cerebral, hardworking, and linguistically gifted, Masha soon achieves a perfect, accent-free command of German as well as fluency in a bewildering array of further languages, including Arabic. Nevertheless, she remains alienated from German society, and, like Gorelik, she resents her status as a "Vorzeigausländer" and is annoyed when people compliment her on her good German. Masha has a German boyfriend, but, in spite of his insistence, she is reluctant to tell him about her past in Baku and the circumstances of her immigration to Germany. After the boyfriend dies from the injuries incurred in a soccer accident, Masha relocates to Israel, where she also fails to fit in. Her fluent knowledge of Arabic, paired with ignorance of Hebrew, causes universal bafflement. After an unsuccessful relationship with a lesbian Israeli peace activist, Masha suffers a mental breakdown. We last see her in a Palestinian refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, where she is overcome by her traumatic childhood memories of ethnic strife in Baku.

Compared with the immigrant characters discussed earlier, Masha has a seeming advantage: she is able to learn foreign languages easily and quickly. We never see her struggling with an unfamiliar idiom. Her difficulties do not stem from a lack of linguistic skills, but from her inability—presumably as a result of her traumatized psyche—to engage in meaningful verbal communication and self-expression. Her compulsive learning of new languages looks like a desperate attempt to find the "home" that she never had in the first place. Almost instinctively, she always gravitates toward the stigmatized "other," be it Armenians in Azerbaijan, Turks in Germany, Palestinian Arabs in Israel, or homosexuals everywhere. Her linguistic prowess sets her apart from other immigrants, but it fails to make her feel at home. Her chosen profession of interpreter deserves particular attention as a symbolic embodiment of her plight. Interpreting makes her a cultural mediator, but also deprives her of a voice of her own—condemned to merely repeat what other people say, she never gets a chance to make German, or any other of her languages, her own through an act of creative storytelling. Of course, this is where the fictional character Masha differs from her creator Olga Grjasnowa. The latter, thanks to her talent as a storyteller, has emerged as the latest Russian-German literary star with a growing international reputation (an English translation of her novel appeared in January 2014).

MAXIM SHRAYER

It would surely be perilous to generalize from Shteyngart, Gorelik, Vapnyar, and Grjasnowa about the "typical" experience of the translingual Russian-Jewish writer. Maxim D. Shrayer's recent book *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* (2013), a sort of prequel to his earlier *Waiting for*

America (2007), provides an example of a very different approach to translingual lifewriting. Published almost simultaneously with Shteyngart's *Little Failure* (2014), Shrayer's memoirs read like the antithesis to Shteyngart's in spite of the biographical overlap between the two authors: both were born in the Soviet Union as the single child of Jewish parents, suffered victimization by Russian anti-Semites, and ended up immigrating to the U.S. together with their parents. However, Shrayer and Shteyngart are polar opposites in the depiction of the relationship with their parents. While Shteyngart presents his family drama as an ongoing Freudian nightmare, Shrayer worships his *refusenik* parents with filial piety and unmitigated veneration. As he writes: "People no longer say such things without a tinge of irony or sarcasm, but there you have it: I had a happy childhood. I was loved, encouraged, and supported at everything, except dishonesty, cruelty and assimilationism" (2013, p. 7). The subtitle of Shrayer's book, "A Jewish Story," indicates the focus of his narrative: ceasing to adhere to one's Jewish identity would be, in Shrayer's value system, as morally compromising as being cruel or dishonest. It becomes obvious that Shrayer's father, unlike Shteyngart's, had no reason to worry that his son would "write like a self-hating Jew" (Shteyngart, 2014, p. 30, 33, 322). Jewish heroism and the quest for self-realization in a hostile environment, told indeed without any tinge of irony or humor, provide the overarching theme of Shrayer's memoirs.

Interestingly, the switch from Russian to English is not a traumatic event for Shrayer, possibly because his secure Jewish identity is not connected to any particular linguistic medium. Since the story of *Leaving Russia* takes place before the hero's immigration, we are not witnessing his arrival in America and the necessity to cope with the exigencies of a different linguistic environment. But it is fair to say that he arrived well prepared. His mother, a university lecturer in English, began to teach him that language in early childhood, a scene that Shrayer recalls with a sentiment of Nabokovian nostalgia. Later, he was schooled in one of the prestigious specialized English Language Schools in Moscow. Rather than an alien idiom that is being forced on an uncomprehending, traumatized immigrant child or young adult, English is presented in Shrayer's memoirs from the outset as a positively-valued language with warm emotional connotations. Shrayer calls it "my mother's tongue" (2013, p. 7). Writing in a second language, so he tells us, gave him the necessary "distance and perspective" to compose his memoirs (p. xix), but narrating stories in the non-native language does not seem to have had the same life-changing, existential urgency for Shrayer as it did for Shteyngart, Gorelik, or Vapnyar. It is perhaps no accident that Shrayer's main profession became that of an academic rather than a creative writer.

CONCLUSION

While the individual authors may differ considerably, the proliferation of recent books published by Soviet-born translingual writers in various parts of the world certainly testifies to the continued vitality of the phenomenon. As becomes clear, the Russian-Jewish-American and Russian-Jewish-German experience is a complex issue that does not allow for easy generalizations. The tripartite identity of these authors can be actualized and enacted in various ways, and even the fact of writing in an acquired language affects some writers differently from others. One could speculate that the experience of having a hybrid transnational background in their country of birth made Russian Jews particularly sensitive to issues of ethnic and linguistic "in-betweenness," even though, by the time of the Jewish mass emigration from the Soviet Union, the vast majority of them had been raised as

monolingual Russian speakers. Still, an awareness of past distinctiveness remained. Shteyngart refers to his grandmother, who arrived in 1930s Leningrad as a Yiddish- and Ukrainian-speaking teenager without any knowledge of Russian or city life, as a “true immigrant,” and he writes, “whenever I try to flaunt my hard-perfected English, whenever my new language comes pouring out of me, I think of her” (2014, p. 35).⁶

As we have seen, the act of storytelling, in particular the telling of one’s own life story, plays a crucial role in the content of many of the books under review here, which may account for the recent generic shift from fictional to non-fictional forms of life writing. Constructing a narrative of the self for a foreign audience serves as a crucial step in the gestation of the translingual novelist. Interestingly, this narrative urge often predates the actual mastery of the foreign idiom. Rather than as the result of an already-achieved assimilation and successful acquisition of a new linguistic medium, telling one’s story in a non-native language emerges as a means toward language learning and integration and as a quest for acceptance in the new environment.

At the same time, looking back at one’s beginnings from the current vantage point of successful acculturation becomes a way of stitching together a frayed identity, a way of healing from the traumatic experience of dislocation and transnational migration by creating a narrative space where the author’s various selves can coexist and enter into dialogue. For Russian Jews, whose complicated identity is often misunderstood by reducing it to either Russianness or Jewishness, this form of translingual life writing presents a particularly apt form of self-exploration and self-explanation. As Shteyngart puts it in *Little Failure*: “We Soviet Jews were simply invited to the wrong party. And then we were too frightened to leave. Because we didn’t know who we were. In this book, I’m trying to say who we were” (2014, p. 204).

REFERENCES

- Besemeres, M. (2002). *Translating one’s self: Language and selfhood in cross cultural autobiography*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Chekhov, A. (1899). The lady with the pet dog. In A. Yarmolinsky (Ed., Trans.), *The portable Chekhov* (pp. 412-433). New York: Penguin Books, 1975.
- Chekhov, A. (1904). The cherry orchard. In A. Yarmolinsky (Ed., Trans.), *The portable Chekhov* (pp. 531-594). New York: Penguin Books, 1975.
- Gorelik, L. (2004). *Meine weißen Nächte: Roman*. Munich: SchirmerGraf Verlag.
- Gorelik, L. (2012). “*Sie können aber gut Deutsch!*” *Warum ich nicht mehr dankbar sein will, dass ich hier leben darf, und Toleranz nicht weiterhilft*. Munich: Pantheon.
- Grjasnowa, O. (2012). *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag.
- Grjasnowa, O. (2014). *All Russians love birch trees*. (E. Bacon, Trans.). New York: Other Press.
- Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*. New York: Penguin.
- Hokenson, J. W. (1995). Intercultural autobiography. *Auto/biography Studies*, 10 (1), 92-113.
- Kaminer, W. (2000). *Russendisko*. Munich: Goldmann/Manhattan.
- Lejeune, P. (1975). *Le pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil.
- Rosenthal, R. (2014, February 18). Interview: Lara Vapnyar. *Tweed’s*, Retrieved from <http://tweedsmag.org/interview-lara-vapnyar/>
- Shrayer, M. (2007). *Waiting for America: A story of emigration*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Shrayer, M. (2013). *Leaving Russia: A Jewish story*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Shteyngart, G. (2002). *The Russian debutante’s handbook: A novel*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Shteyngart, G. (2006). *Absurdistan*. New York: Random House.
- Shteyngart, G. (2010). *Super sad true love story*. New York: Random House.
- Shteyngart, G. (2014). *Little failure: A memoir*. New York: Random House.
- Shuster, Y. (2007). Lost in Staten Island: Lara Vapnyar discusses the loneliness of the immigrant experience and writing as a cure. *The Birch*, 51-53.

- Vapnyar, L. (2003, June 16). Love lessons—Mondays, 9 A.M. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/06/16/love-lessons_mondays-9-am
- Vapnyar, L. (2006). *Memoirs of a muse: A novel*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Vapnyar, L. (2014a). *The scent of pine: A novel*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Vapnyar, L. (2014b, March 2). Soviet-Era Sex Ed. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/opinion/sunday/soviet-era-sex-ed.html
- Wanner, A. (2011a). *Out of Russia: Fictions of a new translingual diaspora*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Wanner, A. (2011b). The Russian immigrant narrative as metafiction. *Slavic and East European Journal*, 55 (1), 58-74.

¹ For a survey, see Wanner, 2011a.

² To be sure, the difference between autobiography and auto-fiction is not quite as absolute as one could assume, given that the protagonist's narrated self remains a verbal and literary construct regardless of genre. For example, Maxim Shrayer's earlier book *Waiting for America* (2007), ostensibly a memoir of his family's stay in Italy after leaving the USSR and before entering the U.S., freely mixes fact and fiction, since, as Shrayer argues, "fictionalization and poetization [...] are not—and should not be regarded as—the opposites of narrative truth-telling" (p. xi).

³ I have discussed this issue in my article "The Russian Immigrant Narrative as Metafiction," (Wanner, 2011b).

⁴ Vapnyar, 2003. In a further move to drive home the self-parody, Vapnyar published an op-ed on "Soviet-Era Sex Ed" (Vapnyar, 2014).

⁵ In an interview with *Tweed's* editor Randy Rosenthal Vapnyar mentions that she "went through a lot of the same stuff as Lena in the novel" (Rosenthal, 2014).

⁶ It is interesting to note that the lone non-Jewish author among the current generation of Russian-American immigrant writers, Olga Grushin, takes a very different approach to her own identity. Even though she writes exclusively in English, she defines herself clearly as a Russian writer, and both of her novels are situated in the Soviet Union rather than in a transnational immigrant milieu. For more on Grushin, see Wanner 2011a, p. 179-187.