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Articles

Homo ideologicus? Writing on the Fringes of Political Correctness in Russian Israel

Maria Rubins

The Rise of Russophone Literature in Israel

Since the 1970s, a period marked by a massive *aliyah*[1] of Soviet Jews to Israel, Russian-Israelis have created a distinct literary culture characterized by hybridity and translingualism. While most texts in this corpus are in Russian, they do not fall neatly into the categories of Russian metropolitan literature or literature of the global Russian diaspora. In their thematic repertoire, the range of human experience they reflect, and specific vocabulary they also claim affiliation within Israeli literature. Even those writers from the former Soviet Union who made a linguistic shift away from Russian continue to navigate between literary traditions; their Hebrew has inherited cognitive models and interpretive approaches characteristic of Russian culture, and they project a view of reality that is essentially dualistic or "contrapuntal" (in E. Said's terms[2]). Such works as Boris Zaidman's novels *Split Tongue* and *Hemingway and the Dead-Bird Rain*, Alona Kimhi's books *Victor and Masha*, *Weeping Suzanne,*

1 *Aliyah* literally means "ascent" in Hebrew, conjuring the image of ascending to Mount Zion. Historically, this term has been adopted instead of "immigration" to refer to various waves of Jewish influx into the land of Israel. The Israeli state guarantees the right of return to all Jews (including any person who can claim at least one Jewish grandparent). The most massive waves of *aliyah* from the USSR occurred in the 1970s and in the late 1980s-early 1990s, bringing the number of Russian speakers in Israel to roughly one million, and drastically changing the demographic, cultural, and linguistic profile of the country. The social and cultural dynamics of this community have been addressed, *inter alia*, in the following works: Larisa Fialkova and Maria N. Yelenevskaya, *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narrative to a Group Portrait* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007); *Russian Israelis: Social Mobility, Politics and Culture*, ed. Larissa Remennick (London: Routledge, 2011); Dina Siegel, *The Great Immigration: Russian Jews in Israel* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998); 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* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); *Every Seventh Israeli: Patterns of Social and Cultural Integration of the Russian-Speaking Immigrants*, ed. Alek Epstein and Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2007); Ze'ev Khanin, *From Russia to Israel – and Back? Contemporary Transnational Russian Israeli Diaspora* (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).

2 Cf. Edward Said "Reflections on Exile" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), pp. 173–186.

and *I, Anastasia*, or the original Hebrew poetry of Sivan Beskin represent an "accented," cross-pollinated version of Hebrew. This writing in-between the two tongues estranges both languages and at the same time establishes a dialogue between them and the cultural traditions they represent.

There has also emerged a category of writers who aim to create two simultaneous yet autonomous versions of their texts, one in Russian and one in Hebrew. The poet Gali-Dana Singer's creative practice of non-equivalent self-translation is reminiscent of Mikhail Epstein's concepts of *interlation* and *stereotextuality*.[3] Together with Nekod Singer, she edits the journal *Nikudotaim* (the title means "Colon" in Hebrew), which uses linguistic polyphony to promote an internal dialogue between Russian and Hebrew. Roman Katsman defines this strategy of juxtaposing non-identical Russian and Hebrew versions of the text as a "kind of virtual-conceptual performance of a multiplicity of languages that play with each other, replace each other, translate, and do not translate each other."[4] Russian-Israeli literature is thus a vibrant experimental field where several diverse literary traditions (Russian, Soviet, Jewish, Israeli) are fused and transcended. It presents a striking example of literary transnationalism.

In this article, drawing on various genres, including poetry, fiction, non-fiction, essays, and interviews, I propose to examine how the peculiar status of Russophone writers on the Israeli cultural scene reflects both the specificity of their work and the institutional approaches to cultural production.

"Ghettoization" or "Cultural Separatism": Locating Russian Israel on the Israeli Cultural and Ideological Map

Russian-Israeli writers are practically unknown in Israel. Few of their works have been translated into Hebrew and there is a persistent absence of interest in the literary dimension of the Russian *aliyah* on an institutional level. This lack of curiosity appears paradoxical if we consider the important role that Russian literature played in shaping modern Hebrew letters. Nearly the entire modern pantheon of Hebrew poets was Russophone, from Chaim Bialik to Leah Goldman, Natan Alterman, Avraham Shlonsky, Rachel, Alexander Penn, and many others. Their Hebrew writing was marked by adaptation to Hebrew

3 As Epstein argues, in the contemporary globalized cultural reality, with a marked increase in multilingual competence among both writers and readers, *trans*lation becomes *inter*lation: instead of creating a simulacrum of the original, it produces "a dialogical counterpart to the original text." Interlation effectively cancels the idea that something can be lost in translation. It creates the effect of stereotextuality, as discrepancies between languages come to the fore, allowing a reader conversant in all of them to savor additional shades of meaning and layers of imagery. Mikhail Epstein, "The unasked question: What would Bakhtin say?" *Common Knowledge* 10:1 (2004), pp. 42–60.

4 Roman Katsman, *Nostalgia for a Foreign Land: Studies in Russian-Language Literature in Israel* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), p. 143.

of Russian prosody and, more broadly, of Russian classical, modernist and even early Soviet literary models. It is generally accepted that this Russian influence endured through the 1950s, when Israeli poetry was re-oriented towards Anglophone, and particularly American, modernism.[5]

Furthermore, the broad Israeli readership has always been fascinated with Russian classical and twentieth-century authors such as Zamiatin, Bulgakov, Gorky, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva etc., whose books are widely available in Hebrew translation. More recently, even such presumably untranslatable literary figures as Sergei Dovlatov, rendered in Hebrew by Sivan Beskin, have enjoyed popularity. One can also find Hebrew translations of many writers popular in Russia today, like Vladimir Sorokin and Ludmila Ulitskaya. But this active exploration of the Russian literary marketplace by the Israeli publishing industry oddly does not extend to other bestselling authors who are published by the leading Russian publishing houses but reside in Israel, such as Dina Rubina, for example. What are the reasons for this strange short-sightedness and lack of curiosity?

Various explanations can be offered for the low visibility of Russian-Israeli literature in its "country of residence." Already the 1970s *aliyah* and certainly the "great *aliyah*" of the 1990s rejected the politics of Hebraization that had been in place since the founding of modern Israel. These newcomers chose to preserve Russian as a language of culture, creativity and as an internal code of communication. Instead of linguistic assimilation in the image of their predecessors, they created their own network of newspapers, radio stations, literary journals, publishing houses, and even the innovative and commercially successful Gesher theater. These media have promoted a markedly different vision of Israeli social, cultural, and political situation compared to the Hebrew mainstream. While carving out a place of cultural autonomy, Russian Israelis also created a divide between themselves and the broader Israeli cultural field, contributing to what some sociologists define as their cultural "separatism" or "ghettoization."[6]

Another reason is linked to the dissatisfaction often expressed by Russian-Israeli writers when they recall the handling of their first Hebrew translations. The Israeli Ministry of Culture financed the publication in Hebrew of a book of any newly-repatriated author. However, for the most part this venture resulted in failure, possibly because of the poor translation quality,[7]

5 Cf. Itamar Even-Zohar, *Papers in Historical Poetics*, ed. B. Hrushovski and I. Even-Zohar, No. 8 (Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics Tel Aviv University, 1978), pp. 57–91.

6 Cf. Chapter 2 "Newcomers in the Promised Land: Integration or Separatism?" in *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, ed. Larisa Remennick (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), pp. 53–168; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, *Ex-Soviets in Israel*, p. 258 (op. cit.).

7 Translators were sometimes drawn from the old cohort of ex-Soviet Jews who had been removed from the natural linguistic environment for decades and were unfamiliar with the current Russian slang and colloquial language.

the lack of proper marketing etc. Subsequently, commercial publishers were reluctant to take on authors whose initial publication had been a flop.

It would be only fair to point out that this lack of interest was mutual. As soon as the USSR collapsed, Russian-Israeli writers began to publish in Russia, orienting themselves to a much more powerful publishing industry and a multi-million audience. This opportunity weakened their resolve to break into the Israeli literary market. Furthermore, Russophone cultural circles have not sufficiently engaged with Israeli culture in Hebrew. As opposed to the previous waves of *aliyah*, many failed to achieve the necessary fluency in literary Hebrew and preferred to disguise their linguistic insecurities as cultural arrogance, constructing themselves as heirs to the European literary tradition and dismissing Israel as an Oriental backwater. Despite the constant flow of translations of Hebrew literature into Russian (by publishing houses like Tekst and Gesharim-Mosty kul'tury), the general knowledge of Hebrew letters among Russophone intellectuals remains relatively limited.

While all of the above reasons are valid, there is still an additional, possibly more relevant factor. Because of its peculiar "in-between" situation, Russophone writing in Israel constitutes a zone of artistic expression relatively free from the pressures of respective national traditions, literary canons and dominant political discourses of both countries. Without much concern for self-censorship, Russian-Israeli writers discuss diverse contested and ideologically-packed agendas, often centered around the Middle-Eastern geo-political conflict. For readers in the Russian Federation, the sensitive topics broached in their texts are dislocated from their original context and naturally lose their political urgency and emotional charge. When such works make their way "back" to Israel and the Israeli public, in occasional partial translations from a Russian edition, they clash with the social and cultural codes endorsed by the Israeli intellectual and academic mainstream. Authors who appear to maintain views markedly different from the accepted narratives are often stereotyped and dismissed, barring the way to institutionalization in their "historic homeland." The clash usually results from different approaches in the respective communities to what I designate in the title of this article as political correctness.

Russian culture in general has been distinguished by its cavalier disregard for political correctness, and Russian-Israeli writers preserve this penchant for provocative explosiveness and violation of taboos. The hugely popular author of subversive comic verse Igor Guberman once said playfully on Moscow radio in response to a question about Islamophobia in Israel: «Исламофобия существует ... и мне она присуща» (Islamophobia exists … and I embrace it.)[8] Needless to say, such "jokes" would be unthinkable within the mainstream Israeli media.

The common grievance voiced by many Russians in Israel is directed against

8 "Difiramb," The Echo of Moscow, September 25, 2016.

the left-leaning Israeli intellectual, media and academic circles, which allegedly censor dissenting opinions. Possibly the most extreme example of a confrontation with the accepted code of political correctness can be found in Maya Kaganskaya's falling out with Hebrew media outlets. A writer, journalist, and literary scholar, Kaganskaya (1938-2011) was one of the most vocal personalities of the 1970s *aliyah*. She worked for Russian and Hebrew-language journals, gave lectures to university students, and wrote books on Russian literature. In 1992, she published an article in the Russian-language newspaper *Vesti* entitled «За что я не люблю левых?» (Why do I dislike leftists?), which provoked an attack by the translator Nilly Mirsky, whose piece in *Haaretz* essentially called for a boycott. Incidentally, Mirsky knew Kaganskaya very well: they met in the 1970s at gatherings of Russian intellectuals at Natalia Rubinstein's house outside Tel-Aviv. Later Kaganskaya collaborated with Mirsky, in particular supplying an introduction to Mirsky's translation of Mikhail Bulgakov's *White Guard* into Hebrew. As a result of this campaign against her, Kaganskaya was blacklisted and lost all of her regular newspaper columns and lecture engagements for a Hebrew audience. Writer Nina Voronel reportedly compared Kaganskaya's treatment at the hands of the Israeli "liberal" elites with the Soviet practice of discrediting dissident intellectuals. Mirsky even made sure that subsequent editions of *White Guard* were published without Kaganskaya's introduction. When in 2008 Mirsky was awarded a prestigious state prize for her translations, the interviewer from the newspaper *Yediot Akharonot* asked her whether she had close ties with Russian speakers from the former USSR, whose culture had played such an important part in her life. Mirsky gave a surprisingly dismissive and untrue answer: "I don't have and don't want to have any contact with them, either with those who arrived in the 1990s or those who arrived in the 1970s. … both groups are very alien to me. Most of them are extremely right-wing."[9]

This kind of ideological profiling of Russian-Israelis resonated with the pronouncements of much more powerful players on the Middle Eastern geopolitical stage. Recall, for instance, Bill Clinton's words about the Russophone community's alleged right-leaning political preferences:[10]

9 Nelli Gutina, *Izrail'tiane: Sdelano v SSSR* (Tel-Aviv: Merkhur, 2011), https://giglo-fava.livejournal.com/659770.html. Hereafter all the websites were accessed in August 2022. Nelly Gutina defines Mirsky's statements as an extreme expression of "ideological xenophobia" facilitated by the Israeli "perverted code of political correctness," which allows liberal elites to stigmatize entire segments of the population and to exclude any dissenters from open public debate.

10 In fact, the russophone community in Israel has not always placed itself on the right of the political spectrum. In the 1990s, Russians usually voted against the ruling party, helping to bring Binyamin Netanyahu to power in 1996 and boosting Ehud Barak in 1999. There are many explanations for their subsequent shift to the secular right, including profound disappointment with the Oslo accords and the failure of the peace process, the Intifada that began in 2000 and produced a wave of suicide bombings, and constant security threats in the West Bank territories where many Russians live.

> The former Soviet immigrants to Israel have emerged as the central obstacle to achieving peace in the Middle East. An increasing number of the young people in the IDF are the children of Russians and settlers, the hardest-core people against a division of the land. This presents a staggering problem. It's a different Israel. 16% of Israelis speak Russian.[11]

The spilling over of political disagreements into the cultural and academic discourse is a rising global tendency. Today it is particularly visible in the phenomenon of "cancel culture." But in Israel this tendency has arguably manifested itself for quite some time, affecting, in particular, the Russophone community.

The most controversial subjects, governed by written and unwritten taboos in mainstream Israeli culture are inevitably those touching upon tensions between Jews and Arabs, Islam, terrorism, and life in the settlements. Before the appearance of the internationally renowned TV series "Fauda" (2015), mainstream culture treated these issues in a prescribed way outlined by such iconic figures as David Grossman or Amos Oz, relentless in their critique of Israeli policies. The existential Jewish-Arab confrontation has been explored in multiple ways by Russian-Israeli writers, Yulya Viner (*Снег в Гефсиманском саду*), Eli Luxemburg ("Переселенцы"), Dina Rubina (*Во вратах твоих* and *Вот идет Мессия*), Yulia Vudka (*Свеча памяти*), Mikhail Gendelev, and many others. Although Russophone literature and journalism project a markedly different view of the situation compared to the Israeli cultural establishment, this remains largely an intramural cultural and geo-political conversation within the Russophone community. One notable exception occurred in 2009, with the appearance of Sofia Ron-Moria's Hebrew novel *Ha-khatan ha-miukhad* (The Tenth Groom). Ron-Moria, a native of Leningrad, made a name for herself as a Russian- and Hebrew-language journalist and politician who promotes Orthodox-Zionist views and supports the settler movement. Her book, which unexpectedly found its way into the bestseller list, tells the story of Dina, an ambitious Russian-Israeli divorcee who lives in a settlement, pursues her career, braving daily threats of terrorist attack on her commute to work, and tries to realize her dreams and ideals. Ron-Moria's novel offered the broader Israeli public unique insight into the mode of living, thoughts and humor of the religious Zionist community from the ex-USSR, who reside quite far from the security and creature comforts of the coastal zone. While the book received a warm welcome from diverse readers in Israel, it also predictably provoked critical comments from the left-wing press. In her piece in *Haaretz*, Lily Galili, for instance, was at pains to suggest a (non-existing) parallel between the fictional

11 Clinton made this declaration on September 21, 2010 (quoted in Maria Saleh, "Former Soviet Union Immigrants: The Impact on Israel, Israeli Politics, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," http://ucollege.wustl.edu/files/ucollege/imce/iap_saleh.pdf).

protagonist of *The Tenth Groom* and Larisa Trembovler, the Russian-born wife of Igal Amir, who married him when he was already serving his prison sentence for the assassination of Itzhak Rabin.

Ex-Soviet writers take a certain pride in the unlimited freedom of expression that they see themselves to enjoy. Their conformist Israeli peers, by contrast, are believed to circumscribe their thematic subject matter within implied ideological requirements. In an interview, poet Gennady Bezzubov assesses the respective literary strands in the following terms:

Я отнюдь не считаю себя знатоком израильской литературы на иврите, но мне кажется, что для многих ее авторов характерно известное мазохистское искажение взгляда, из-за которого доминирующим мотивом становится мифическая «правота» арабов, а у многих других просто превалируют конъюнктурные соображения (без как минимум всаженной в сюжет любви между арабом и еврейкой ни премии не получишь, ни сценарий не экранизируешь). В израильской литературе на русском языке ситуация другая. Здесь врага могут назвать врагом, не боясь обструкции и ее последствий. Хотя и здесь есть свои штампы, с непременным, погибшим в теракте героем (героиней). Но воплощение названной темы вполне способно впечатлять всерьез…[12]	I don't consider myself a connoisseur of Israeli literature in Hebrew but it seems to me that many of its authors share a notorious masochistic distortion of perspective, because of which the Arabs' mythic "rightness" becomes a dominant motif, and many others are guided mainly by conformist considerations (it is impossible to get a prize or to shoot a film without a love story between an Arab and a Jewish woman inserted into the plot). In Russophone Israeli literature the situation is different. Here, one can call an enemy an enemy without the fear of obstruction and its consequences. Although there are clichés here too, with a hero (heroine) inevitably perishing in a terrorist attack. But the realization of this theme can certainly make a serious impression….

Besides the geopolitical situation, Russophone writers and journalists occasionally express dissenting views on other controversial topics regulated by the regime of political correctness. In his recent book, *Хартия сексуальной свободы* (The Charter of Sexual Freedom, 2021), the journalist Arie Baratz critiques the leftist ideological stance on a range of current phenomena, including Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and "critical race theory." But his main focus is the destruction of the traditional institution of marriage through legitimization of various kinds of "sexual perversions." Baratz studied medicine and philosophy in Russia and completed a course at a *yeshiva* upon

12 Gennadii Bezzubov, "Edinstvennaia tema poeta — eto ego sobstvennaia zhizn'!" Interview on December 27, 2013, http://www.runyweb.com/articles/culture/literature/gennady-bezzubov-interview.html

his relocation to Israel. He has contributed to a range of Russian-language periodicals, including the newspaper *Vesti*, and most of his columns and articles address various aspects of Jewish life from a Zionist religious and philosophical perspective. In *The Charter of Sexual Freedom*, Baratz presents a thesis that links the ongoing "sexual revolution" with Herbert Markuze's neomarxist plan to liquidate democracy. He discusses the silencing of scientific and medical experts who contradict the PC views on homosexuality, and concludes: "Идея вседозволенности сексуальных отправлений легла в основу идеологии современного левачества. Сексуальная свобода — это единственная свобода, которую они оставили человечеству!"[13] (The idea of indulgence of all kinds of sexual behaviour is foundational for the ideology of contemporary Left. Sexual freedom is the only freedom that they have left for mankind!).

Baratz's chief concern is Israel's liberal policies with regard to the LGBT rights. For a number of years, Tel-Aviv has been a site of an annual gay pride parade. Since 2008, gay couples have been allowed to adopt children, and in early 2022 the Minister of Health announced new legislation facilitating the use of surrogate services by same-sex couples, as well as single adults. In this respect, Israel, in contrast to other countries in the Middle East and Asia, is closely aligned with the European Union. While the complex debate in Israel on issues of gender, marriage and sexuality is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that voices like that of Baratz can be heard on both sides of the Russian-Hebrew divide. Israel remains a peculiar combination of a secular and religious state, with the Rabbinate overseeing all affairs related to marriage, birth and burial rituals. Religious law governs the Rabbinate's decisions in these areas, in which liberal legislation adopted by the State has no effect. This situation reflects deep and possibly widening divisions in Israel between the secular and religious sectors, which cut across different linguistic and cultural communities, creating multiple and often unexpected alliances and combinations.

The Frustrated Dream of a "Western Eden": Geopolitics vs. Geopoetics

One of the broader dichotomies that informs much of Russophone writing about Israel and that has given rise to particularly passionate contestation and misreading among occasional Hebrew audiences, is "East vs. West." Within the Middle Eastern context, the East/West binary, one of the universals that define the Russian cultural canon, has been reterritorialized into a debate about the Western and Eastern elements that constitute Israel's character. Russian Jews who upon relocation strove unsuccessfully to shed the collective sobriquet *rusim* ["Russians"][14] subsequently redefined their Russianness as a

13 Ar'e Barats, *Khartiia seksual'noi svobody* (2021): http://www.abaratz.com/Chartiya.pdf.

14 The irony of this designation is that in the USSR Jews were considered a "nationality"

genetic connection to European culture. From this perspective, in a number of texts Israel emerges as an Eastern provincial locale.

In a poem by Elena Akselrod, the frustrated expectations of the *oleh chadash*[15] become a source of self-irony:

> Но круг не замкнулся, и я проскочила—куда?
> Европа не рядом, а рядом шатер бедуина.[16]
>
> (But I didn't come full circle. And I ended up—where?
> Europe is not nearby, but nearby is a Bedouin tent.)

In a rare interview published in the newspaper *Haaretz*, writer Alexander Goldstein refers to the naïve expectations he harbored before coming to Israel:

> When I arrived in the country, I was disappointed by Israel's Eastern appearance. I thought that the Jewishness that I would find in Israel would be like the Jewish civilization I had known since childhood. Jewish life that I knew was founded on the works of Kafka and Bruno Schulz. I imagined Israel as a country in literary foment. I thought it was a Western country, a Western Eden.[17]

Many pages of Goldstein's book *Аспекты духовного брака* (Aspects of Spiritual Union) are dedicated to a contemplation of Oriental elements in Israel, even addressing peculiar scents exuded by Arab men or the residents of Jewish ultra-Orthodox districts.[18] The transition from the ex-Soviet Union to the historic homeland is pictured by the author as an unrelenting march away from the "light" of European culture:

... говоря о еврействе, разумею, естественно, ашкеназов. В далеких	…when I talk about Jews, I'm referring to the Ashkenazim, of course.

distinct from "Russians" and this status was recorded in their passports, giving rise to various forms of institutionalized and grassroots Antisemitism. Many Jews tried to change their formal "nationality" from "Jewish" to "Russian" in their documents in order to obtain equal access to prestigious educational establishments and careers, and to avoid discrimination at the workplace. In Israel, the informal label of "Russians" was conferred upon them simply on account of their native language, bringing up unpleasant memories of their Soviet past that they would have been happy to forget.

15 The status of new repatriant, or *oleh khadash*, brings with it state-sponsored support (monthly payments, free Hebrew courses, beneficial loans for the purchase of a first home, etc.). After several years, *oleh khadash* status is replaced by the designation of *vatik* (an immigrant of long standing). Jewish Israelis who were born in Israel or mandate-era Palestine are referred to as *tsabar*, an indigenous species of cactus, symbolically reflecting their tenacious roots in the arid land.

16 *Orientatsiia na mestnosti: russko-izrail'skaia literatura 90-kh godov*, ed. Margarita Shklovskii (Jerusalem: Biblioteka-aliia, 2001), p. 15.

17 Zot tarbut zot? // Haaretz, February 27, 2002, http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.775461.

18 "Iaffo, zhilishche i fotografiia," in Aleksandr Gol'dshtein, *Aspekty dukhovnogo braka* (Moscow: NLO, 2001).

истоках восточный, впоследствии же две тысячи лет как устойчиво западный, европейский характер (до европейцев еще европейский), он вернулся в Израиле в ханаанское лоно и был подорван галдящим базаром, левантийской ленью, жарой.[19]	In their distant past they had an Eastern character, later for two thousand years a solid Western, European character (European before the Europeans), and as they returned in Israel to Canaan's bosom they were knocked senseless by the market's bustle, the Levantine torpor, and the heat.

This inexorable descent into darkness is only accelerated by the influx into Israel of Asian *Gastarbeiter*:

Восток пеленает нас, точно саван. Тают последние европейские огоньки ашкеназской души. Так неужели должны мы ускорить кончину и, приняв филиппинцев, малайцев, тайцев, китайцев, раньше срока упасть в азиатскую ночь?[20]	The Orient wraps us like a shroud. The last sparks of Europe in the Ashkenazi soul are fading. So should we precipitate our demise and, absorbing the Filipinos, Malaysians, Thai and Chinese, prematurely fall into the Asian night?

Maya Kaganskaya articulates similar sensibilities with striking directness in a book she published in Hebrew, *Dimdumei elim* (God's Twilight, 2004):

> I hate the East. Everyone has a conception of his own death, his hell. […] So for me, […] my hell and death, turned against me, is the East, the Muslim world. […] The Mizrahim are a very archaic people, and in all archaic tribes, the central events are birth, marriages, and deaths […] Culture starts beyond nature—literature, metaphysics, philosophy, music. […] When Israel becomes more and more part of the East, it is the end of the world for me, the end of our dream. Israeli culture is starting to be pulled in that direction […] I do not believe in a culture without hierarchies. I will never accept that Mizrahi music and Mozart are one and the same thing.[21]

This entire passage can be interpreted as part of the die-hard Russian intelligentsia's plea for maintaining cultural hierarchies: the notions of high and low/popular culture were espoused by many in the late Soviet era, when a similar argument could be heard about Mozart versus, for instance, the pop star Alla Pugacheva. The notions of "high" and "low" culture, perhaps obsolete in today's Western academic discourse, are still very much part of the Russian traditional cultural vacabulary (and certainly were about 20 years ago, when

19 "Nashestvie," in Gol'dshtein, *Aspekty dukhovnogo braka*, p. 25.

20 Ibid., p. 26.

21 Translation in Adia Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel: Literary Perspectives* (West Lafayett: Purdue University Press, 2014), p. 174.

Kaganskaya was writing her book). Here again, we see the displacement of a conventional argument of a particular culture into a new context. When it reaches the Hebrew audience it acquires a politicized reading (or rather a judgment in politically correct terms). Voices like those of Kaganskaya and Goldstein are condemned from a postcolonialist perspective in Adia Mendelson-Maoz's book *Multiculturalism in Israel. Literary Perspectives*. Mendelson-Maoz admits that she does not know Russian and relied for her chapter about Russophone literature on translated samples, but nonetheless allows herself the following generalization: "Once in Israel, members of the [Russophone] intelligentsia were amazed to discern the Mizrahi and Arab foundations of Israeli culture, and developed a patronizing, colonialist approach to them."[22] Rafi Tsirkin-Sadan likewise identifies Orientalist stereotypes in the ex-Soviets' narratives and explains them as the residue of Soviet imperial consciousness, with its pejorative attitudes to people from non-European Soviet republics.[23]

Meanwhile this dissatisfaction with the Oriental look of Israel could plausibly be reframed as just one part of a more general deconstruction of the modern version of the exodus myth in Russian-Israeli culture. Mikhail Vaiskopf observes that in the pre-repatriation narratives, the Promised Land usually figured as Paradise and true Home. The USSR was identified with Egypt, a place of captivity, and the ultimate arrival of Soviet Jews in Israel was conceptualized as redemption. The shock of encounter with the real, rather than imagined, Holy Land, produced, according to Vaiskopf, a reversal of values: many texts register profound alienation from modern Israel, sometimes informed by nostalgia for Russia, while picturing Israel as simply another stage in the Jews' eternal wandering.[24] Klavdia Smola puts this "common plot" in Russian-Jewish writing into further perspective by exploring the causes of the pessimism that in her view permeates the discursive expressions of *aliah*. What happens, she asks, if there is no sense of spiritual unity with Israel, which could give some inner meaning to repatriation? Surveying the works of Efraim Sevela, Grigory Kanovich, Mikhail Baranovsky, and Yakov Zigelman, she detects the complex of a displaced person who questions his relationship to Jews and Jewish spirituality, curses his "unfortunate 'inherited' Judaism as coincidental and meaningless," feels skeptical about the entire agenda of modern Israel and

22 Ibid., p. 165.

23 Rafi Tsirkin-Sadan, "Between Marginal and Transnational: Post-Soviet Immigration in Hebrew literature," *East European Jewish Affairs* 44:2–3 (2014), pp. 253–268. Russian-Israelis' "orientalist attitudes" are subjected to scrutiny in a range of other research works, e.g. Dimitry Shumsky, "Post-Zionist Orientalism? Orientalist Discourse and Islamophobia among the Russian-Speaking Intelligentsia in Israel," *Social Identities* 10:1 (2004), pp. 83–99; Edna Lomsky-Feder, Tamar Rapoport, and Julia Lerner, "Orientalizm be'mivhan ha-hagira: studentim rusim korim mizrahiiut," *Teoriia ve-bikoret* 26 (2005), pp. 119–147; Remennick, op. cit.

24 Mikhail Vaiskopf, "'My byli kak vo sne': tema iskhoda v literature russkogo Izrailia," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 47 (2001), pp. 241–252.

condemns Jewish culture as provincial.[25]

While this critical assessment of Israel may appear very conspicuous in more radically conceived narratives, Russian-Israeli literature has also generated a more positive way of dealing with the unexpectedly Middle-Eastern character of the new country. The poet Aleksandr Barash and writer Aleksandr Goldstein proposed to embrace their Levantine location with its palimpsest of cultures as a way of forging a new literary identity. They articulated the concept of the Mediterranean Note, conceived as a community of writers living in the Eastern Mediterranean. From this perspective, Mediterranean writing is informed by contact with the region, its energies, cultures, history and aesthetics, with a Greek poet from Alexandria, Konstantinos Kavafis, elevated as the archetypal role model. In 2002, Barash published a book of poetry under the same title (*Средиземноморская нота*). The name Mediterranean Note echoes the Paris Note, an informal association of Russian-Parisian poets of the 1930s, who also felt that their place between the Russian tradition and their immediate location in France required a new cultural vocabulary and transnational poetics.[26] For Barash the specific flavor of Mediterranean literature is distinguished by a combination of hedonism and apocalyptic vision that recalls late Antiquity. His own poetic identity is generally defined in terms of specific places (Jerusalem, Israel, the Middle East, the Mediterranean region, Moscow). But equally important are cultural itineraries and dialogues between such geographical loci. This is expressed in the title of one of his books, *Итинерарий*, which means itinerary in English but sounds deliberately estranged in Russian.[27] A variation of this geography-based model of self-identification is the construction of Russian Israel as a Levantine province of Russian culture articulated by Goldstein in his essay "Тетис, или средиземная почта" (Tethys or Mediterranean Mail).[28]

This rather aestheticist literary project also encountered a negative reception among Israeli scholars, who often frame their critique in postcolonial terms. Edward Weisband writes: "self-proclaimed Russian-Israeli Levantines did not pass [their] main test on postorientalist multiculturalism; rather, they made use of the Levantine field of reference to consolidate their elitist Russian or Eurocentric cultural identity, while using the Israeli context to uphold Russian

25 Klavdia Smola, "Israel and the Concept of Homeland in Russian Jewish Literature after 1970," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 4:1 (2011), pp. 171–190. Smola elaborates on the exodus theme in her monograph: idem, *Izobretaia traditsiiu: Sovremennaia russko-evreiskaia literatura* (Moscow: NLO, 2021), pp. 134-210, 241-255.

26 I explored these aspects of the Paris Note in the following article. Maria Rubins, "The Diasporic Canon of Russian Poetry: The Case of the Paris Note," in *Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon*, ed. Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton, and Alexandra Smith (Cambridge: Open Book, 2017), pp. 289–328.

27 Aleksandr Barash, *Itinerarii: Stikhotvoreniia* (Moscow: NLO, 2009).

28 This essay became the final chapter of Goldstein, *Rasstavanie v Nartsissom: Opyty pominal'noi ritoriki* (Moscow: NLO, 1997).

colonialist views."[29] Passing a "test on postorientalist multiculturalism" was certainly not the primary motivation behind the Russian Israeli authors' use of the Levantine geocultural myth. Rather they drew on it to distinguish themselves from the Russian metropolitan paradigm and to establish a niche for themselves within contemporary global Russian writing. This was clearly stated in the introduction to the collection of contemporary Jewish writing, *Символ «Мы»: Еврейская хрестоматия новой русской литературы* (Symbol "We": Jewish Anthology of New Russian Literature), which contains samples from various authors living beyond metropolitan borders. They set themselves the goal of cultivating "foreignness" based on the geopoetic potential of their specific location: "Добивайтесь максимального удаления от метрополии своей речи, развивайте свое иноземство"[30] (Strive to distance your speech maximally from the metropolis, cultivate your foreignness).

"FAREWELL, EUROPE!": THE EUROPEAN LEGACY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SHOAH

Over the last decades, the Russophone intellectuals have demonstrated complex patterns of cultural identity. Their initial affinity for Europe as the spiritual home of Ashkenazi Jews has also undergone a significant revision. The Holocaust has emerged as a context particularly conducive to this interrogation of the European cultural legacy.

As ex-Soviet Jews integrate into Israeli society they become more aware of the clash between the two official narratives of the Holocaust. In Israel, the memory of the Holocaust is incorporated into school education and state commemoration rituals and, to a large extent, informs the Jewish-Israeli collective identity. As fewer Holocaust survivors remain, the *shoah* experience moves from the recollection of personal trauma to postmemory.[31] In either case, Jews are consistently seen as passive victims of the Third Reich.

In contrast, in the USSR, this specifically Jewish tragedy was a *de facto* taboo, with the dominant Soviet discourse focused on the losses and sacrifices of the entire Soviet nation in its fight against Nazi Germany. Compared to their fellow Israelis, ex-Soviet Jews view the Jewish role in the Holocaust differently, partly because many had internalized the Soviet narrative, and partly because up to half a million of Soviet Jews actively fought the Nazis during the war in the ranks of the Soviet army. This cognitive dissonance was revealed time and again during the intercultural discussions that involved Russian-Israeli

29 Edward Waysband, "Alexander Goldstein's 'Tethys or Mediterranean Mail': A Russian-Israeli Levantine Literary Idea Reconsidered," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2018), pp. 253–280, here 257.

30 *Simvol "My": Evreiskaia khrestomatiia novoi russkoi literatury* (Moscow: NLO, 2003), p. 7.

31 I draw on Marianne Hirsch's definition of postmemory in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

teachers, whose anonymous opinions were later published as "Беседы о Катастрофе" (Discussions about the Holocaust):

… В России мы говорили о Катастрофе ... как об уничтожении людей, сопротивлявшихся нацистской идеологии. Слова «Катастрофа» в нашем доме вовсе не существовало, хотя мы и знали об уничтожении евреев. Я выросла на героических военных историях, и еврейская составляющая была, главным образом, историей героизма еврейских солдат в Красной армии. Я очень удивилась, узнав, что здесь у израильтян ... было такое отношение к этому, словно евреи шли на смерть, «как овцы на убой».[32]	… In Russia, we spoke of the Holocaust … as the liquidation of people who resisted the Nazi ideology. The word "Holocaust" did not exist at all in our household, although we knew about the killings of Jews. I grew up on heroic war stories, and the Jewish component was mainly the history of heroism of Jewish soldiers in the Red Army. I was very surprised to find out that for the Israelis … it was as if Jews were going to their death like "sheep to the slaughter."
... Сейчас, когда есть очень много детей, говорящих по-русски, связанных с «русской» средой тут, в Израиле, еврейские проблемы далеки от них. ... И ... такой ученик должен усвоить историю Катастрофы в том виде, в котором она изучается в Израиле,--ведь здесь, чтобы стать частью этого общества, он должен отделить еврейские жертвы войны от русских жертв, которые тоже относятся к его семье.	… Now, there are a great many Russophone children here, in Israel, connected to the "Russian" environment, and they are not much concerned with Jewish problems… And… such a pupil needs to assimilate the story of the Holocaust in the form it is studied in Israel—after all here, in order to become part of this society, he needs to separate the Jewish victims of the war from Russian victims that also were in his family.

According to another participant, incomplete knowledge about the Babi Yar massacre[34] was largely inconsequential for Soviet Jews' identity:

… Мы не знали, было ли это намеренным умалчиванием со стороны советского режима. Только	… We did not know whether this was a deliberate silence from the Soviet regime. Only those who lived nearby

32 "Besedy o Katastrofe," in *Disput rasteriannykh*, ed. D. Marom and M. Miller, trans. N. Zinger (Moscow, 2011), pp. 77–97, 81.

33 Ibid., 79.

34 Babi Yar – location outside of Kiev and the site of one of the largest mass killings of Jews by the Nazis during World War II. On September 29–30, 1941, SS and German police units aided by Ukrainian militia murdered 33,771 Jews there. During the months that followed, thousands more were killed at Babi Yar, bringing the total number of victims to 100,000 (90,000 of them Jews).

те, кто жил поблизости и слышал рассказы, знали, что речь-то идет о евреях, но и у тех «еврейские события» не становились элементом самоидентификации, отличавшейся от русского целого.[35]	and heard some stories knew that it involved Jews, but even for these people the "Jewish events" did not coalesce into an element of self-identification distinct from the general Russian whole.

Gradually, however, the Holocaust began to occupy a more essential place in Russian Israelis' self-definition; it became a focus of intense polemics and a special *topos* of Russian-Israeli literature (e.g., Dina Rubina "Адам и Мириям," Alex Tarn *Пепел (Бог не играет в кости)*). As the round-table talks organized by the Tel-Aviv journal *Zerkalo* made clear, any reflection on the Holocaust today cannot be separated from the contemporary geopolitical situation, relations with the Arab world, the rise of antisemitism and anti-Israeli propaganda in the West—all these phenomena are seen as growing from the same root. As Mikhail Deza put it in his conversation with the editor of *Zerkalo* Irina Vrubel'-Golubkina,

Есть стабильная, глубокая корневая ненависть к Израилю со стороны арабского мира, и в каком-то глухом, перемешанном виде—со стороны европейского мира. ... громадность антисемитизма идет не от конкретных сегодняшних дней ... есть какие-то постоянные структуры человеческого поведения, и вот в структурах поведения европейского или … христианского, исламского и православного, еврейство—вечная жертва.[36]	There is stable, deep, primordial hatred for Israel on the part of the Arab world and in some muted, mixed-up form—on the part of the European world. … the enormity of Antisemitism does not come from today's concrete reality … there are some permanent structures of human behaviour, and in the structures of European or … Christian, Islamic and Orthodox [Orthodox Christian – *M.R.*] behaviour, the Jew is the eternal victim.

In cultural terms, this realization translates into a more sceptical attitude of Russian-Israeli intellectuals to the European humanist values they held so dear during their Soviet past. Deza concludes his interview with a direct indictment of the European culture that led to the Holocaust and the present-day attacks on Jews and Israel:

Европа очень страшно поет. Почему страшно? Многие думают, что Европа—защита. Так думают все левые, среди остальных так думают	Europe's cry is very frightening. Why frightening? Many think that Europe means protection. This is what the left wing thinks, and also those who love

35 "Besedy o Katastrofe," p. 83.

36 "Eto evropeiskaia kul'tura prizyvaet nas umeret'," in *Razgovory v Zerkale*, ed. Irina Vrubel'-Golubkina (Moscow: NLO, 2016), pp. 515–530, 519.

те, кто любит культуру. Но этот крик потому и страшный, что идет из глубин европейской культуры Это европейская культура призывает вас умереть. Это от имени Микеланджело вам кричат хулиганы, это вам церковь кричит … это вам кричит чистота Европы...[37]	culture. But this cry is so frightening precisely because it comes from the bosom of European culture. It is European culture calling on us to perish. Hooligans are shouting at you on behalf of Michelangelo, it is the Church shouting at you, … it is the purity of Europe shouting …

Deza expresses here a thought that resonates with a much broader intellectual debate within the Russian-Israeli circles. He deconstructs the dominant narrative that decouples Nazi atrocities from the achievements of high German/European culture. This narrative has rarely been questioned by lovers of European art and spirituality, including the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia, who continued to worship Europe. Indeed, can Kant, Goethe, and Bach be held accountable for the war atrocities, gas chambers and racial laws? However, upon their relocation to the Middle East, Russian Jews acquired a different perspective on a range of historical, geopolitical, and cultural matters, which prompted them to challenge this seemingly axiomatic reasoning.

Gennady Bezzubov's poem "Прощай, Европа! Мы не европейцы" (Farewell, Europe! We are not Europeans") sums up in a strikingly straightforward manner the main points of the anti-European pathos that came to distinguish some of Russian-Israeli writing. This poem tells the story of a cultural, rather than purely geographical, exodus: European art saturated with Christian spirituality that proved so inconsequential during the greatest trials of humanity, is an inadequate legacy for Jews returning to their national home.

Глаза в твоих музеях проглядели Мы до того, что в пустоте зрачка Нет слез пока. …….. Прощай, Европа! Плакать неохота, Не прихватив ни Дюрера, ни Джотто – В краю, где камни растворяет свет, Им места нет. Прощай, Европа! От тебя подальше, От многослойности налипшей фальши, От равенства, ненужного до слез, От всех речей и поз.	Farewell, Europe! Indeed it seems That we so strained our eyes in your museums That no tear yet wells up in the pupil Of our empty eye. Farewell, Europe! We don't feel like crying, We've taken neither Dürer nor Giotto— There's no place for them in a country Where the light melts stones. Farewell, Europe! As far as possible from you, From the layering of cloying falsehood,

37 Ibid., p. 530.

	From equality that no one needs, From all of your speeches and poses.
Прощай, Европа! Видно, в самом деле Прощай, Европа! Твердо, насмерть стоя	Farewell, Europe! Standing firm, to death,
Ты пропадаешь в сумерках, как Троя, Верней, ее руины там, вдали, Откуда мы ушли.	You disappear in the twilight, like Troy, Or rather its ruins, there, far away, From whence we walked away.

Bezzubov's poem develops the motif of indicting European culture for tacit complicity in the greatest tragedy that befell the Jews, a motif articulated in twentieth-century Hebrew poetry long ago. In 1942, Natan Alterman wrote a passionate and desperate poem, "Ve-ata bakhar vanu" (And You Chose Us), which became one of the earliest responses from Jewish Palestine to news of the Final Solution. In this text, Alterman sarcastically points to the Pope who cares far more about saving the art treasures of the Vatican than Jewish children sent off to concentration camps:

Ve-okhel ha-garzen ba-yamim u-ve-leil, Ve-ha-av ha-notsri ha-kadosh be-ir Rom Lo yatsa me-heikhal im tsalmey ha-goel La'amod yom ekhad ba-pogrom.	And the gallows are eating day and night, And the Holy Christian Father in the city of Rome Did not come out of the hall with the images of the Redeemer To stand for one day amidst the pogrom.
La'amod yom ekhad, yom ekhad viyakhidi, Ba-makom she-omed bo shanim kmo gedi Yeled kat, Almoni, Yehudi.	To stand for one day, just one day On the spot where stands for years like a baby goat A small child, Anonymous, Jewish.
Ve-raba daaga litmunot upsalim Ve-otsrot-emanut pen yuftsau. Akh otsrot-emanut shel roshey-olalim El kirot ukvishim yerutsatsu.	But great care is shown for paintings and sculptures And for art treasures so they are not blown up. So art treasures of the powerful Will be rushed beyond the walls and to the roads.

The title and refrain of Alterman's poem reproduces the words from a key prayer of the Jewish liturgy (*ve-ata bakhar vanu mi-kol ha-amim*), which encapsulates the Jews' gratitude to the Almighty for having chosen them above all other nations. But the poet reverses its meaning in a sinister, iconoclastic way: the Jewish children earmarked for extermination are thanking God for having chosen them, and not the Swedes, Czechs or British, to be sacrificed in the Shoah. As the "chosen ones," they have a deep-seated knowledge that

there will be no rescue. In the last lines of Alterman's poem the lyric voice says to God that He may collect their innocent blood and smell it like flowers, but blood must also be claimed from the murderers and from those who remained silent and uninvolved, allowing these atrocities to take place. In stark terms, and possibly for the first time in Hebrew verse, Alterman blames not only the Nazis but the European spiritual authorities who turned a blind eye to the Holocaust. The hypocritical Pope personifies here the European cultural and (pseudo)humanist values that proved false and devoid of empathy. This poem, along with other poetic responses to the Shoah by Alterman and other Israeli poets, inaugurated a trend in modern Hebrew verse, which subjected European cultural legacy to a profound revision. Decades later, this theme was recontextualized and, as we have seen, continued to reverberate in Russophone discourses and poetry – a rare instance of ex-Soviet authors writing themselves into the Israeli literary tradition.

"Is this Culture?": A Failed Attempt at a Russian – Israeli Interface

While on the whole Russian-Israeli literature remains poorly assimilated within contemporary Israel, some writers and literary groups have sought to launch a more structured dialogue with the host culture, in particular via bilingual journals and editions. What strategies do Russian-Israeli authors use to preempt misunderstanding and to explain their aesthetic and cultural positions? How do they contextualize themselves for their potential Israeli readers? And how are they received by their new audiences?

In 2001, *Zerkalo* published a special Hebrew volume containing poetry and prose excerpts written by the writers who collaborated with the journal. Soon an article about this edition was featured in the newspaper *Haaretz*. It was written by Uria Shavit, then a doctoral student and a regular contributor to major Israeli periodicals, and now a professor of Arab and Islamic studies at Tel-Aviv University and a writer. Even the title of the article, "Zot tarbut zot?" (And is this culture?) conveys irony towards the described material.[38] In part the article incorporates an interview with Alexander Goldstein: the journalist mentions, somewhat skeptically, Goldstein's prominent status in Russian literary circles and the fact that his previous book (*Прощание с Нарциссом* (Farewell to Narcissus)) received the Russian Booker prize.[39] But for the most part he focuses on the aspects of Goldstein's life and writing that are certain to raise eyebrows among Israeli readers: we learn that after 12 years in the country Goldstein not only speaks no Hebrew but barely understands it, that he has no respect for the most prominent Israeli authors (Haim Nahman Bialik, Amos Oz, David Grossman, A.-B. Jehoshua, Meir Shalev) although he has sampled them only episodically in English or Russian translations. To illustrate

38 Zot tarbut zot? *//Haaretz*, 26 Feb, 2002, https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.775461.

39 In fact, the first edition of this book was distinguished by two literary prizes: Small (*Maly*) Booker and Anti-Booker.

Goldstein's own style, Shavit selects a few decontextualized quotations from his second book *Аспекты духовного брака*, grotesque and provocative passages about the overwhelming influx into Israel of *Gastarbeiter* from Africa and Asia:

С неграми дело не ладно, так много их быть не должно … Какой вывод из вышеизложенного? Вывод понятен: всем оставаться на своих местах. Румынам – в Румынии, филиппинцам – на Филиппинах, тайцам – в Тайланде, малайцам – в Малайзии, китайцам – в Китае. Пусть едут куда им заблагорассудится … лишь бы избавили нас от себя. Их присутствие – род злокачественной опухоли. Смешение рас, кое-как допустимое в больших государствах, несет Израилю гибель в дополнение к той, что традиционно и неотменимо грозит ему с берегов Иордана, из аравийских пустынь, из каждого дюйма начертанной нам географии.[40]	The situation with Blacks is not good, there should not be so many of them. … What conclusion can be drawn from this? The conclusion is clear: everyone should stay in his own place. Romanians in Romania, Filipinos in the Philippines, Thai in Thailand, Malaysians in Malaysia, Chinese in China. Let them go where they wish, … as long as they free us from their presence. They are a sort of malignant tumor. Mixing of races, more or less acceptable in big countries, inflicts harm on Israel in addition to that which traditionally and relentlessly threatens it from the banks of the Jordan, from Arabian deserts, from every inch of the geography that was carved out for us.

These citations were clearly selected not to whet the reader's appetite for Goldstein's books but rather to use his persona to actualize existing stereotypes about Russian Israelis as xenophobic, racist, Orientalist bigots. Goldstein's exquisite style, his original erudite prose, self-irony, the use of narrative masks, internal dialogism, as well as his sober, common-sense assessment of the immediate reality – in other words all the qualities appreciated by literary aesthetes in Russia and which earned him the most prestigious literary prizes (the Russian Booker, the Anti-Booker, the Andrei Bely prize) – appear to have escaped his interlocutor's attention.

Further in the interview, Goldstein is given a chance to explain his literary credo: anticipating a certain reaction to his prose, he tries to justify his position. Literature, he says, must not be subjected to the requirements of political correctness. Literature is a provocation, a radical gesture, it is based on irony, grotesque, it must cause discomfort, overcome inertia of thought and interpretation. Ultimately, literature is "private words capable of shaking the world." This definition recalls the formula of the so-called "unnoticed generation" of Russian émigré writers of the 1930s – "literature as a private affair" (*literatura kak chastnoe delo*). These writers also existed in a socio-cultural vacuum in the midst of the French host culture, and could afford absolute liberty of expression.[41]

40 Gol'dshtein, "Nashestvie," pp. 18, 25.

41 On this younger Russian émigré generation of the interwar period and its poetics, see

Elective Affinities: Cross-Cultural Dialogues Across Ideological Divides

In addition to the direct explication of one's position, another strategy used by Russian-Israeli authors to pre-empt a skewed and politicized reception of their works by Israeli readers consists in suggesting analogies between themselves and particular Israeli writers, typically outside the mainstream. Thus, the poet David Avidan emerged as a nexus between Israeli literature in Hebrew and Russian. Goldstein mentions Avidan among the Israeli poets who impressed him the most (along with Yoel Hoffman, Yona Vallach and Dan Pagis). Avidan's poems were rendered in Russian by Savely Grinberg, a prominent translator and poet.[42] Avidan figures as a main reference point for Mikhail Grobman, avant-garde artist and poet (Grobman and Avidan were close friends). Grobman released several collections of his poems in Hebrew translation. His 2013 volume, entitled Ha-kheirut magi'a aruma (Freedom comes naked), was accompanied by an afterword by poet, writer and literary scholar Gilad Me'iri, entitled "Ke-she-gever hu be-tselem Grobman" (When a man is in the image of Grobman). In this afterword, Me'iri focuses on such aspects of Grobman's poetry as its provocative and performative nature, avant-garde poetics, grotesque, narcissism, elitism, self-irony, and hybridity, illustrating his points with some representative lines, for instance:

> Hu ha-gibor ha-naarits ha-planetari.
> Aktivi, kreativi, populari.
> (He is a revered planetary hero,
> Active, creative and popular)
>
> Ani ha-klasikon
> Ha-olami ha-yedua
> (I am a classic Global and famous)

Grobman's verse, writes Me'iri, contains a political message and feeds into a "universal agenda of counter-culture."[43] Significantly, Me'iri, who had written a doctoral dissertation on Avidan, draws parallels between his verse and that of Grobman, tracing their respective styles to their roots in Futurism and the Beatniks.[44]

Why was Avidan positioned as a kindred spirit to Russian-Israeli

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Maria Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris* (London: Palgrave, 2015).

42 David Avidan, *Sbornik stikhotvorenii*, trans. S. Grinberg (Moscow: Mosty kul'tury; Jerusalem: Gesharim, 2003).

43 Ke-she-gever hu be-tselem Grobman. Mikhael Grobman. Ha-kheirut magi'a aruma, 2013, http://lenazaidel.co.il/translate-heb.asp?id=8

44 Ibid.

writers? Nekod Singer, who wrote an introduction to a volume of Avidan's verse translated by Savely Grinberg, later reflected on the poet's legacy. Singer writes about Avidan's eccentricity, his extreme individualism, calling him the most radical of Israeli avant-garde poets.[45] His most appealing quality for this circle of Russian-Israeli writers was his nonconformism, his provocation against the nominally liberal, but in fact very restrictive, establishment. Singer refers to one of Avidan's poems, written during the Persian Gulf War ("The Last Gulf"), which caused a scandal. In the atmosphere of "political correctness that became the ideology of the middle layer of Israeli culture," writes Singer, Avidan was in every respect unacceptable. Hence the paradox: while recognized as a leading poet of his generation, along with Yehuda Amihai and Natan Zach, he was completely sidelined in social terms. Avidan's applications for financial support for his literary and cinematographic projects were consistently rejected. The poet lived in abject poverty and, after several prior attempts, committed suicide in 1995.

This romantic image of Avidan as a marginal genius, ostracized for his nonconformist views, offered a role model for Russian-Israeli avant-garde writers. The translingual and transcultural constellation that formed around Avidan included Grobman, Singer, Grinberg and Goldstein. Their self-identification with Avidan served as a vehicle for introducing their own controversial views and texts to Israeli readers.

In the history of Russian-Israeli literature there have certainly been other instances of shared cultural agendas crossing linguistic barriers. Mikhail Gendelev and Haim Guri formed a conspicuous pair, which was also a case of elective affinities and cultural strategies. Arguably Gendelev's best poems are those written in the wake of his participation in the 1982 Lebanon war. Guri's reputation is also largely based on his war lyrics dating to the War of Independence. The image of a poet-warrior whose existential experiences inform his philosophical insights was at the core of their shared identity. The two poets knew each other, and Guri endorsed Gendelev's verse (which he could sample only in a very limited way). For Gendelev, an association with Guri served a twofold goal. It was a form of self-validation on the Israeli literary scene. It was also a way to distance himself from Russian literature and to highlight his identity as an Israeli poet. As Gendelev wrote in the postscriptum to his collected works published in Moscow:

> Я не считаю себя русским поэтом ни по крови, ни по вере,
> ни по военной, ни по гражданской биографии, ни по опыту,
> ни по эстетическим переживаниям… Я поэт израильский,
> русскоязычный.[46]

45 Nekod Zinger, "'Avidanium' Grinberga," *Dvoetochie* 04.06.2014, https://dvoetochie.wordpress.com/2014/06/04/singer-avidan/

46 Mikhail Gendelev, *Nepolnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Vremia, 2003).

> (I don't consider myself a Russian poet in terms of blood, faith, my military or civil biography, experience, or aesthetic sensibilities. … I am a Russophone Israeli poet).

These representative examples show that Russian-Israeli writers can break out of their isolation and enter the broader Israeli cultural field, not by accommodating its master narratives and internalizing politically correct language, but through more subtle mechanisms, including elective affinities with specific Israeli literary figures and establishing personal contacts leading to mutual discovery and collaboration. Building transnational constellations across languages, cultures, and national traditions has been discussed in criticism as a path to making World Literature.[47] It is also a productive way of articulating common cultural codes in a hybrid and fragmented society like Israel.[48]

Conclusion

Russian-Israeli cultural and literary production is very much a living and evolving phenomenon that resists any final definition. What this article has attempted to do is to reflect on some conspicuous tendencies that characterize this heterogeneous corpus and its precarious status within the broader Israeli cultural field. Shaped by metropolitan Russian culture, Russian-Israeli authors naturally continue to draw on inherited conceptual lexicons even when they turn their attention to local reality and try to define their position in the new, Middle-Eastern environment. This process often entails dislocation of some Russian universals into a new context, whereby a canonical *topos*, stereotype or historical metaphor may be filled with different meaning, highlighting the hybrid nature of the narrative and its openness to alternative interpretations. At the same time, the new geocultural locus and new existential experience often lead to a gradual revision of metropolitan discourses and patterns of cultural self-identification.

Multiculturism is in vogue in Israeli academia, as elsewhere in the West, but so far most research under this heading focuses on Mizrahi and Arab voices, eliding the Russophone community. By in large, the Russian-Israeli corpus

47 Cf. Mads Rosendahl Thompsen. *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

48 It may be still more profitable to trace *unintended* affinities and *unconscious* resonances between Russian-Israeli literary production and other texts in Hebrew or Arabic. In my research I have identified a range of contexts where narratives from all three strands of contemporary Israeli literature enter into an unlikely dialogue or polemic. As I show in my comparative analysis of Mikhail Gendelev's and Mahmoud Darwish's poetic responses to the Lebanon war, the Middle Eastern existential, political and historical reality may suggest a common poetic language to poets who are not only ignorant of each other's work but occupy irreconcilable ideological positions. See Mariia Rubins, "'V sadakh Allakha': Livanskaia voina Mikhaila Gendeleva i Makhmuda Darvisha," *Zvezda* 4 (April 2020), https://zvezdaspb.ru/daspb.ru/index.php?page=8&nput=3766

remains unassimilated in Israel. Most texts reach Israeli readers and critics in abridged versions, one-off anthology or occasional citations. Decontextualized reading of controversial fragments, conflation of the narrative voice with the author, and simplistic application of standard ideological interpretive frames inevitably produce a clash between different cultural, mental and discursive codes and reinforce existing clichés about the "Russians." As many examples from this article demonstrate, Russian-Israelis tend to attribute this alienating reception to the dictates of political correctness in the Israeli cultural mainstream, which, in their view, stifles free expression, irony, and experimentation.

Yet, despite the lack of institutional support, we see the emergence of multiple linkages and collaborations across linguistic, ethnic and cultural divides. Russian Israelis form alliances with distinct Israeli personalities, often associated with non-conformist, counter-cultural tendencies. These (real or imagined) aesthetic or ideological affinities serve as a mechanism of plugging into Israeli culture and reaching a broader public. In this way they have the potential to gradually reshape the Israeli cultural map and contribute to its further diversification.