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М. Еленевская, Л. Фиалкова. Русская улица в еврейской стране: Исследование фольклора эмигрантов 1990-х в Израиле. Москва: Институт этнологии и антропологии РАН, 2005. Ч. 1. 353 с.; Ч. 2. 243 с., илл. Приложения, Библиография. ISBN: 5-201-00887-9.

Mariya Yelenevskaya and Larisa Fialkova have studied the folklore of recent Russian immigrants in Israel. Their book, however, is much more than a traditional folklore study – it is rather an intersection of oral history and postfolklore studies (Sergei Nekludov's term for a hybrid mix of modern urban folklore and mass culture).¹ Yelenevskaya and Fialkova present an analysis of life story interviews with 143 immigrants, focusing on their Jewish identity, attitudes to "others," perceptions of time and space, religious beliefs, folklore, and language. What emerges is a collective portrait of the new immigrant community of nearly one million people. This community constitutes both a sizable part of the Russian diaspora and a significant addition to the Israeli society – today every sixth Israeli is of Russian origin.

Yelenevskaya and Fialkova draw from and contribute to several areas

of study, including the study of immigration, the study of the Russian diaspora, and the study of contemporary Israeli culture. But perhaps their most important contribution is to the study of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry. In that sense, the appearance of this book is timely and welcome. For years, research on Russian Jews was limited to antiquated Sovietology ("Jews of Silence" discourse), or a black-and-white study of anti-Semitism ("Oy, we suffered" discourse). More often than not such research was produced from an "outsider perspective" – by researchers trained in the West, who were predominantly non-native speakers of Russian.

Unlike such "outsiders," Yelenevskaya and Fialkova are themselves immigrants to Israel (from St. Petersburg and Kiev respectively) who know their subject first hand. They speak in the first person, giving the readers a rare insight into the world of local meanings and expressions of the immigrants (taking what anthropologists call the "emic" approach). In that, they join a cohort of new research on Russian Jews, produced by "cultural insiders," based on interviews, ethnography, and cultural history. Among them, are monographs by Yuri Slezkine, Elena Nosenko, Larissa Remennick,

¹ S. Iu. Nekludov. *Posle fol'klora // Zhivaia starina*. 1995. No. 1. Pp. 2-4.

and my own.² What is particularly valuable in Yelenevskaya's and Fialkova's book is that the authors do not focus on elites and intelligentsia, but rather capture the everyday mundane life of rank and file Russian immigrants (or simply "the Russians," as they are dubbed in Israel). Even though the authors did not aim for a representative sample, the profile of their interviewees does resemble that of the larger immigrant community. Most of the immigrants came from Russia and the Ukraine, mainly from large urban centers. Most of them are college educated professionals for whom immigration meant a loss of professional status. Most of them are ethnic Jews, but some of them have partial Jewish heritage or just Jewish spouses (the Israeli immigration law *jus sanguinis* grants citizenship to both Jews and their non-Jewish family members). Importantly, most interviews were conducted in areas with a high concentration of immigrants – Haifa, Nazaret-Elit, Ashkelon, and Beer-Sheba – which form a periphery that is rarely seen and heard.

One of the book's many strengths are the interviews themselves. Yelenevskaya and Fialkova let their

interviewees speak freely from the pages of the book, carefully preserving their juicy metaphors, stuttering repetitions, idiosyncratic syntax, and linguistic shifts. Taken together, these interview narratives capture a novel form (or dialect) of Russian – a Russian with an influx of Hebrew vocabulary, Russified with suffixes and endings (e.g., *olimka* – "a female new immigrant" from the Hebrew *ola*). The language of immigrants is the subject of an entire chapter, which also includes an analysis of hysterical double entendres resulting from mixing languages, as well as accounts of misunderstandings resulting from genuine mistakes.

The authors' choice to quote generously (sometimes entire pages) from the interviews strikes me as particularly important given the non-elite status of the interviewees, who are doubly and triply marginalized: as immigrants, as provincials, sometimes as elderly, and often as women (about two-thirds of the interviewees are women). This choice is empowering. Moreover, like any good story, the interview narratives are fun to read, and are often humorous and poignant – the examples are just too numerous to quote.

² Y. Slezkine. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton, 2004; E. Nosenko. *Byt' ili chuvstvovat'?* Osnovnye aspekty formirovaniia evreiskoi samoidentifikatsii u potomkov smeshannykh brakov v sovremennoi Rossii. Moscow, 2004; L. Remennick. *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*. New Brunswick, 2006; O. Gershenson. *Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel: A Study of Cultural Colonization*. New York, 2005.

However, the focus on interviews also has some drawbacks. The authors' narrative reads like an extended commentary to the interviews. Even though the commentary is usually perceptive and insightful, the analysis is descriptive and not always theoretically driven. Additionally, it is not clear why certain theoretical approaches are applied rather than others. For instance, I was surprised that the authors do not approach their rich data with the analytical tools of the ethnography of communication (best represented by Gerry Philipsen, Donal Carbaugh, and in Israel by Tamar Katriel). This approach considers communication as the very fabric a culture is made of, and through the analysis of communicative practices (style, genres, and contexts of speech) gives insight into cultural meanings and assumptions. Clearly, Yelenevskaya's and Fialkova's analysis would be enriched by application of such approach.

Another drawback is the low production value of the book (certainly not the authors' fault). Thus the book is unnecessarily published in two volumes: the first volume includes a theoretical introduction, a methodological overview, and chapters analyzing Russian-Jewish identity (chapter 2), relationships with "others" (chapter 3), and perceptions of time and space among immigrants (chapter 4). The second volume in-

cludes chapters on religious and superstitious beliefs (chapter 5), on immigrant folklore (chapter 6), on language use (chapter 7), conclusions, and appendices. This division is hardly conceptual, but rather is due to limitations of binding. But even "slimmed down," the two paperbacks fall apart at first reading. The quality of the images, which the authors so generously included, is so poor that some photographs are nearly inscrutable. The lack of index is also a hindrance. Hopefully this can be improved in the future editions – as this book truly deserves.

Yet, Yelenevskaya and Fialkova arrive at meaningful and provocative conclusions. As I mentioned before, their major contribution is to the contemporary multidisciplinary research on Russian Jewry. From the outset, Yelenevskaya and Fialkova approach Russian Jewish identity as fragmented, contradictory and multivocal, resulting in the polar "Jewish self-stereotypes" that either "idealize Jews or humiliate them" (P. 80). Refuting a tired argument about Jewish identity in the USSR (or rather lack thereof), Yelenevskaya and Fialkova show how even in the Soviet era Jewish identity was kept alive: "Collective memory was transmitted through folklore: in Yiddish songs, parables, jokes, and even more so in the personal stories about Nazi crimes, about 'rootless cosmopolitans,' about arranged failures in

college admission tests, about difficulties in finding jobs and advancing one's career, about friends and relatives who emigrated [from the USSR]" (P. 86).³ Yelenevskaya and Fialkova conclude: "It is precisely these stories that gave Jews a sense of a common fate" (P. 110). This is a great example of how this self-defined folklore study contributes to a broader debate among sociologists, historians, and anthropologists.

Perhaps the most revealing chapter deals with the perceptions of "others" whom "the Russians" (themselves a diverse group) encounter in Israel. There are multiple others – on the one hand, there are Jewish Israelis from countries like Morocco or Ethiopia, who from the immigrants' vantage point don't look or act remotely "Jewish." On the other hand, there are ultra-religious Jews, who are perhaps "too Jewish." And finally, there are Palestinians – a paradigmatic enemy. Perceptions of these multiple others and the hierarchical relationships between them are overlaid with homegrown ethnic and racial stereotypes, so that "the mythological systems, absorbed before emigration, are mobilized as a means of interpreting Israeli reality in familiar terms" (P. 121). The preexisting stereotypes and an experience of im-

migration often combine into what Svetlana Boym called "the inferiority-superiority' complex of immigrants."⁴ In that sense, the Russian immigrants' hostility towards various others can be explained by their own marginalized status: "Belief in the superiority of one's own group often functions as a compensation for low self-esteem, caused by a loss of social status and a conflict between the official values [supporting immigration] and the real [negative] attitudes [towards immigrants]" (P. 136).

The defensive superiority felt by immigrants is especially salient in their attitudes towards Palestinians. In Israel, immigrants often feel exploited and marginalized, and divide their social world into "us" – "the Russians" and "them" – "the Israelis." But when Palestinians are concerned, the alignments shifts, and now "us" includes "us, the Israelis," versus "them" – "the Arabs." To elevate their status as immigrants and to distance themselves from an undesirable minority, some "Russians" mobilize their historic memory as "saviors of Europe" (from the Nazis, from Napoleon, and from the Tatar-Mongols' armies). They choose to see themselves as "defenders of Israel from Muslim threat and terrorism" (P. 196). This discussion should

be relevant not only to the scholars of the Russian immigrant community in Israel, but also to researchers thinking about the larger post-Soviet context, including the rise of nationalism and anti-Muslim Orientalist attitudes.

Of course, a monograph on immigration, especially on Russian immigration, is unimaginable without a discussion of nostalgia. What Yelenevskaya and Fialkova find is that their interviewees are nostalgic not so much for their lived Soviet past, but rather for their dream of the "imaginary West" (Alexei Yurchak's term).⁵ Once again, the pre-immigration perceptions define the way immigrants see Israel – welcoming its "Western" features and disparaging its Middle Eastern or "Levantine" character.

The most enjoyable part of the book focuses on postfolklore – on the Russian-Israeli use of stock characters of Soviet jokes (e.g., Chapaev or Baba Yaga). These and other characters of Soviet mythology pop up in idioms, stock phrases, and of course anecdotes, circulating not only in face-to-face interaction, but also on the Internet, TV, and newspapers. Inclusion of these mediated contexts is another strength of the book, broadening its scope to media representations, which today are ubiquitous and are as important (if

not more so) than traditional folklore channels.

In conclusion, the authors summarize their discussion of life histories as a genre of folklore, and the folklore of immigrants as a reflection of their past and present. They also refer to contemporary debates about the positioning of Russian Jews: are they a Russian diaspora in Israel, or are they homecomers from the Jewish diaspora? But instead of giving an answer, the authors end with the question of the future of the Russian immigrants in Israel.

All in all, this is a pioneering work that makes an enormous contribution to our understanding of a community in formation. This contribution spans several disciplines and areas of study, and will be of great value to scholars seriously thinking about immigration and diaspora. English-speaking readers will be happy to know that an updated and revised version of the book will be published in 2007 by Wayne University Press, under the title *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait*.



³ All quotes are in my translation.

⁴ S. Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York, 2001. P. xv.

⁵ A. Yurchak. *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, 2006.