

Retired and Making a Fresh Start: Older Russian Immigrants Discuss their Adjustment in Israel¹

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ABSTRACT

Social research on immigrants has usually centred on working age groups or youth, while studies on retired immigrants were typically driven by the social work, geriatric, or nursing agendas, centring on the issues of health, stress, social, and medical services. Trying to explore migration in old age from a broader sociological perspective, this qualitative study addressed different aspects of the socio-cultural adjustment of older Russian immigrants of the 1990s in Israel. Drawing on group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted in two major urban centres, the study covers senior immigrants' attitudes toward the host Israeli society; material privations and coping tools; intergenerational families; patterns of social organization, communication, and cultural consumption; ties with places of origin in the former Soviet Union (FSU); and the perceived sum total of losses and gains from migration. The findings indicate that older immigrants have developed multiple ways for meaningful identification with Israel and generally perceived their resettlement experience as difficult but positive. As their social networks were limited to the Russian immigrant community, most elders did not see their poor knowledge of Hebrew as a major integration obstacle. The main reported difficulties were in the areas of housing, low income, and weakening ties with younger family members.

INTRODUCTION

Social research on migration and migrants has typically centred on working-age immigrants who compete and interact with the host country's majority in the economic marketplace. In recent years some important studies on immigrant youth were published (e.g. Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Yet, one group often overlooked

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by researchers of migration is immigrants of retirement age (60 to 65-plus). This is despite the recent wave of international migration that created a substantial number of elderly groups, ranging from 5 to 10 per cent in the United States, Canada, and Australia (CIS, 2001) to 13 to 15 per cent in Israel and Germany (Dietz et al., 2002; CBS, 2002). In the latter two countries immigration is largely based on the ethnic repatriation principle, whereby Jews and ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (FSU) returning to their historic homelands are not subjected to selection by age or other criteria and are granted full citizenship rights upon arrival. This policy allowed multi-generational families to move together to the host country, simultaneously or in chain migration. In this process, older migrants have experienced more dramatic problems than younger migrants because of age-related difficulties in learning the new language and the physical and psychosocial re-adjustment in the new milieu. Additional sources of stress for older migrants include: (1) feeling homesick for the origin country, and (2) the sense of ultimate loss of home, social networks, and the meaningful past itself, similar to the feeling of bereavement (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989; Litwin, 1995; Zilber and Lerner, 1996).

Since 1989, more than 900,000 former Soviet Jews have moved to Israel, enlarging its Jewish population by 20 per cent. Among the newcomers, about 150,000 are of retirement age, that is, 60-plus for women and 65-plus for men, comprising some 14 per cent of the recent arrivals (vs. around 10% among Israeli Jews) (CBS, 2002). Most of these older migrants have moved along with their adult children and/or grandchildren, but about 25 per cent have immigrated alone or with a spouse (CBS, 2002). Most former Soviets emigrated with little or no financial assets and had to rely on public aid in the host country. All new senior citizens are entitled to subsistence old-age benefit (around \$370 per month in 2003) from Israeli Social Insurance Service, subsidized health care insurance, and often a modest housing allowance. Yet, all these benefits are barely enough for daily living, and many retired immigrants work part-time (usually in private eldercare and childcare for cash) to supplement their income.

Due to the soaring housing costs in the 1990s and a paucity of public housing in Israel, most older immigrants had to rent apartments along with their children and grandchildren. In most cases co-residence of three generations was a necessity rather than choice – combining scant economic resources helped many extended families survive. Family members form a natural social support network, where younger members help their elders get around in the new country and receive in return hands-on help in childcare and domestic chores. Despite the benefits of a give and take relationship in multigenerational families, family members often suffer from a lack of space and privacy (Naon et al., 1993; Litwin, 1995b). Those who arrived alone were especially disadvantaged, both materially and socially, and were often compelled to find new companions (fellow immigrants) for joint

rental of living quarters. During the 1990s and early 2000s the income and housing problems have been most acute for older Russian immigrants, since the public-housing sector has been growing all too slowly. Material privations of older migrants are constantly covered by the Russian immigrant press and are often seen as a sign of failure of social policy at the state and local levels (Zilberg and Leshem, 1996; Vaintraub, 2002).

Reflecting the general trend in migration research, older immigrants in Israel have received less attention from social scientists than younger age groups. As opposed to dozens of studies among youth and working-age immigrants from the FSU, fewer researchers address the experiences of their parents and grandparents. Most studies were driven by social work, psychological, geriatric, and nursing agendas, focusing on physical and mental health, and medical and social services for the elderly immigrants who were viewed mainly as recipients of professional aid. Several studies addressed the issue of co-residence of several generations of Russian immigrants and its effects on family relations from the standpoint of emotional costs, solidarity, and conflict (Naon et al., 1993; Litwin, 1995; Katz and Lowenstein, 1999; Lowenstein, 2002). Ron (2001) and Ritsner and Ponizovsky (2003) have studied psychiatric/psychological outcomes among Russian-speaking elders and found high levels of emotional distress, reflecting material privations, loneliness, cultural gap with Israelis and communicative problems due to poor knowledge of Hebrew, tense family relations in multigenerational households, and a general sense of insecurity. Litwin (1995a) examined social networks of elderly Russian immigrants and showed that many of them suffer from loneliness and low perceived social support, while the effects of co-residence with younger family members were rather variable. Another recent study explored the experiences of family caregivers of Russian immigrant elders – their daughters or daughters-in-law (Remennick, 2001). It was shown that, as a result of resettlement, the elders who used to be self-sufficient in the FSU became helpless and dependent on their children for most daily interactions with the host society due to their deteriorating health, poor Hebrew, and misunderstanding of the new social codes. Remennick and Ottenstein (1998) have found that poor adjustment to the new environment and mental health problems may translate into high utilization of community health services by the immigrant elders, who often approach their general practitioners (especially Russian-speaking ones) as an outlet for both medical and non-medical psychosocial aid. Similar patterns of distress and utilization of health services were reported by Aroian et al. (2001) among older Russian immigrants in the United States.

Fewer researchers were interested in older immigrants as active participants in the new society and their own agency in shaping their post-migration lives. Outside the fields of social work and geriatrics/nursing, with their mainly clinical or service-driven agenda and quantified research tools, few sociologists and anthropologists

have explored the experience of resettlement and changing social milieu in old age as such, including attitudes and perceptions of the new country, ethnic identity, interactions within immigrant networks, and community organizations. The more detailed exploration of the lives of older Russian immigrants was offered by Howard Litwin in his book "Uprooted in Old Age" (1995b), but its field work was conducted in the initial period of Russian immigrants' resettlement in the early 1990s. The current qualitative study tried to re-address some issues raised by Litwin (1995a, 1995b) and other researchers ten to 12 years down the road, with a focus on the socio-cultural adjustment of older Russian immigrants in Israel. Specifically, it explores attitudes toward the hosting Israeli society; material privations and coping tools; relations with younger family members; patterns of social organization, communication, and cultural consumption; the ties with places of origin in the FSU; and perceived sum total of losses and gains from migration. The latter issue was not addressed at all in the earlier research on older immigrants, while being of great subjective importance for many of them given their age-related tendency to reflect on the crucial events of their lives.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD

The target population was defined as immigrants who moved to Israel from all the former Soviet republics during the 1990s after retirement age (60-plus for women and 65-plus for men) and have lived in the country for at least five years. The latter period has been shown as sufficient for the initial adjustment of immigrants in terms of language learning, finding employment, and social orientation (Leshem and Lissak, 1999; Remennick, 2002). The source population included only elderly immigrants living in the community (as opposed to geriatric institutions) and only residents of two major Israeli cities with large immigrant populations (Tel-Aviv and Haifa with suburban areas).

Information was gathered in two ways: discussion (focus) groups and personal semi-structured interviews. Participants for the focus groups were recruited via social clubs and societies established by retired former Soviet immigrants in many Israeli towns. Three focus groups, each consisting of eight to 12 participants, were conducted in the wake of different social events (the Hebrew language class, a birthday party, and a lecture on health promotion) with the author's mediation. Informants for ten in-depth interviews were sought via the author's personal networks (herself being a Russian immigrant) by means of consecutive referral also known as snowballing. The reliance on two different recruitment schemes (organized frameworks and informal referrals) ensured greater diversity of participants in terms of age, lifestyle, family, and health status. All group discussions and interviews were conducted in Russian, audiotaped, and transcribed for thematic analysis. The transcripts were repeatedly scanned for both pre-defined and newly added

topics, which were then integrated into conceptual analytical categories in line with research questions (Berg, 1995). The results presented below are organized by the key themes that have emerged in the focus groups and personal accounts of my informants. Their names in the accompanying quotes have been changed to ensure anonymity. All percentage figures are rounded.

FINDINGS

Socio-demographic profile

All participants have filled out brief personal questionnaire with items on their education, former employment, health status, and family composition. Of 39 participants, 60 per cent were women and 40 per cent men; about 70 per cent were between 60 and 70 years old and 30 per cent were in the age range 71 to 84 (the mean age was 69.2+/- 4.6). The collective portrait of these immigrants contains typical features of older former Soviet Jews as a whole, including high rates (more than 45%) of post-secondary education, past employment as professionals or white-collar workers (70%), and residence in the largest Soviet cities (67%). Like the majority of the immigrant elders, all but three informants were of European (Ashkenazi) origin. Two-thirds have moved to Israel with their children's families and about 50 per cent shared with them housing and family budget at the time of study. Of the remaining one-third who migrated alone or with spouse, all but a few rented apartments in the private sector, often with unrelated companions. Among younger informants, about two-thirds had some additional sources of income in addition to the state old-age benefit. They worked five to 15 hours per week, typically as house helpers, child-minders, and private nurses. Yet, almost everybody (especially those living alone) complained about low income and inability to meet many of their financial needs. Self-rated health status on the ten-point scale (one for the poorest health) had a mean of 4.9; only 16 per cent of respondents defined their health as excellent or very good.

Identity and feelings about Israel

Older generation Soviet Jews, albeit mostly secular and subjected to the assimilative pressures of the Soviet regime for most of their adult lives, nevertheless have a stronger Jewish identity than younger cohorts of immigrants. Many of them are Holocaust survivors who grew up in the Jewish towns of the provincial Ukraine, Biorussia, and other areas of the former Pale of Settlement; went to Jewish schools before their closure in the late 1930s; spoke Yiddish at home; and observed elements of the Jewish tradition. Many of them lived with the hidden Zionist sentiment throughout the years of political hostility and anti-Israeli propaganda in the FSU and dreamed of seeing Israel. When the gates of the FSU finally opened in

the late 1980s, the decision to emigrate to Israel came about rather naturally. For many of them, the push factors (problems in the deteriorating FSU) were balanced by the pull factors (the wish to live in the Jewish state). Among the latter, the expectation of higher living standards and better health care via entitlement for public benefits in the historic homeland were of significant weight. Many older Jews who would not emigrate alone were compelled to join their children and their families, instead of facing old age on their own in the FSU. Hence, for the majority of older migrants the decision to make *Aliyah* (Hebrew for immigration to Israel) was a combination of ideological and pragmatic considerations.

However, the reality of resettlement in the small country with limited resources flooded by the immigrants during the early 1990s proved to be rather harsh. Material privations (mainly the loss of permanent housing and the need to move from one temporary flat to the next during the initial years) were aggravated by the cultural shock of unfamiliar language and the Levantine ethnic and cultural landscape of Israel.

We assumed that we were moving to the outpost of Europe in the Middle East, something like Italy as we saw it in the movies ... that was the image we had in our dreams, knowing as we did next to nothing about real Israel... And in the morning we woke up in the midst of an Asian bazaar, colourful but loud and filthy (Mikhail, 67, former scientist).

The initial reactions strongly depended on where in the country (in terms of geographic location and social structure) the newcomers found themselves. Those who settled in well-to-do urban areas among middle-class Israelis (usually along with their children, after they found qualified employment) had a much better impression of the country than those who found themselves in the so-called development towns in remote areas with cheaper rentals, competing for manual jobs with the local residents, mostly Jews of Middle Eastern origin.

We felt rather welcomed, neighbour's offered us their used furniture, took us around in their car for errands... I was moved to the point of crying (Elena, 72).

I saw the locals as savages, these ... local men in sloppy clothes sitting around in cafes all day long, the women with bleached hair, a cigarette in the mouth, and hoarse voices... I did not want anything to do with them (Vera, 65).

Most older migrants, who had spent all their lives in the FSU, often in the same city, had never been abroad before emigrating to Israel and had no previous exposure to other cultures and lifestyles. They had hard time realizing that Israel is very different from Russia, Ukraine, and other places in the FSU.

Of course I knew that I was going to live abroad, in a country with language and traditions of its own, but I somehow denied this knowledge, hoping in my heart that things will be familiar and workable for me... So it was kind of shocking that most

people I met in Israel won't speak Russian and I couldn't make a thing of what they were saying... I know it sounds naïve, but I guess back in 1991 I was naive to the point of stupidity. The feeling of helplessness was overwhelming (Vladimir, 74).

The landscape, the climate, the calendar, and even the names of weekdays – all were new and puzzling for me. And you know – it's very unpleasant for old folks like us, educated and cultured, to feel like half-wits, not understanding the rules, being unable to express ourselves... I knew some of the Jewish holidays, like Passover, but didn't know many others, so I was often confused about when the shops and buses won't work and couldn't get back home... Russian newspapers and radio were of great help for us to get oriented. In hindsight, my husband and I had a hard time getting settled in Israel (Lydia, 70).

Many informants mentioned that their spurious ideas about Israel and Israelis were partly a reflection of their information sources – the materials disseminated by the Jewish Agency (*Sokhnut*) responsible for the recruitment of potential immigrants to Israel in the Diaspora.

In our last pre-migration year we always went to all the events sponsored by *Sokhnut* in our city. They showed us tourist films about the natural and historic sites of Israel, all those smiling faces of Israeli youth, the wealth of the kibbutzim, perfect school classes... It was all propaganda, as it turned out later. Nobody showed us the dirty streets of south Tel-Aviv during garbage workers' strike, nobody explained how long are the lines, and how nasty the clerks in *Bituakh Leumi* [Social Security Service]... (Vera, 65).

From *Sokhnut* agents we came to believe that all the Jews are brothers and we will be welcome in Israel ... but how can you explain that everybody wanted to make a quick buck on us silly freshmen – real estate agents, landlords, employment agencies... Where was Jewish solidarity? (Yosef, 77).

For me the most difficult in the initial years was to learn how local bureaucracy works – and as a newcomer you need to address various *Misradim* (Hebrew for offices) all the time – for your pension, taxes, and other matters. Israeli clerks have even greater love for all kinds of papers than their Soviet counterparts, but here you can't bribe them to make things work... Now there are Russian-speaking clerks in many offices, but in the early 1990s it was a nightmare – the need to fill in endless forms in Hebrew, not even understanding what you were signing, and getting into trouble because of this... (Peter, 73).

Many things about Israelis make me angry, but especially the youth. School kids behave like savages in public places – yelling, bullying each other, throwing around the junk, turning their crazy music to top volume – and completely discarding adults around them. I tried to call them to order once or twice on the bus, but they talked back so rudely I was shocked; now I know better and shut up. Our young people at least had some respect for the elders (Maria, 65).

The motivation for learning Hebrew and social incorporation depended on the general attitude toward Israel and Israelis – those who felt more positive about their new milieu were more willing to make an effort and get involved with the host society. Those who felt alienated by the locals or found them “primitive, uncultured, and Asian” typically preferred the company of their co-ethnics and

social distance from the mainstream. Most participants have attended the state-sponsored language class (*Ulpan*) for at least a few months, but believed that they had no chance of mastering Hebrew in their lifetime and sufficed with a basic 50 to 100 word lexicon needed for getting around. After five to seven years in Israel, most informants felt socially adjusted amongst other Russian immigrants and did not have much need for learning Hebrew. The initial cultural shock was behind them and they learned to play according to the new rules, to navigate Israeli institutions, and make best of what Israel had to offer.

Israel is far from being heaven, but it is still worth it. This is the only place on Earth where a Jew can feel a normal first-rate citizen, and for this I am ready to take up all the risks and problems (Semion, 76).

Material privations

The standards of living in the new country are always measured against what immigrants left behind. By and large, Soviet Jews were better off than non-Jews due to their high educational attainment and professional achievements (Remennick, 1998). Many had good apartments, country houses (*dachas*), and cars – a luxury by Soviet standards. Yet many others lived as modestly as other members of Soviet intelligentsia. One salient resource Soviet Jews universally shared was participation in the informal social network, giving them access to some cultural assets (e.g. better schools for children, cultural events, etc.) and personal services (e.g. better medical care via Jewish physicians they knew) that other former Soviets could not enjoy to the same extent.

We did not realize how privileged we had been as members of the intellectual elite. Our children had good education despite tacit anti-Semitism at schools and universities, we could read great books, see terrific works of art and theatre, consult good doctors when ill – all via our informal ‘Jewish net’. This is precisely what we cannot get here in Israel, being new and knowing nobody (Maya, 64).

The most significant loss is permanent housing, perceived by most former Soviets as great privation. Residential mobility in the FSU was low, many people had lived for decades in the same city, neighbourhood, and even house, and the need to leave it was highly traumatic. Most former Soviets now in their 60s and 70s had suffered from meagre housing conditions during their youth and initial years of family formation, living in small crowded apartments, often shared with strangers (so-called “communal flats”). It took them many years to get decent flats of their own, either from the state or via workplace coops. Being relatively settled and comfortable in their homes by the late 1980s, most had great pain living them behind and venturing for the unknown place under sun.

If only we had hope to live in a home that we will own one day, to shed this dependency from the caprices of the owner [author note – there is no rent control or long-term lease

contracts in Israel]. But we know full well that we'll have to move from one shabby flat to the next till the end of our days. With our income, who can dream of buying a place in Israel? (Yosef, 77).

I feel like a displaced person, always living on the suitcases and carton boxes. In my nine years in Israel, I have changed six flats, first sharing them with my daughter and then renting with strange roommates. It is so sad to always use other people's old beds and closets... I don't have even a chair that is my own (Vladimir, 74).

Another recurrent topic in the interviews was the need to manage with a very low income in a country with high costs of living.

Our salaries in Russia had always been low, but then we also had free housing, paid next to nothing for electricity, water, telephone, public transport, etc. ... and food was cheap, albeit hard to get. In principle we are used to living modestly and counting every *ruble* (or *shekel*), but it's hard to get used to the fact that what was cheap (and taken for granted) in Russia is expensive in Israel. The state benefit is totally unrealistic, as if the authorities don't know what costs are like out there. If my wife and me didn't make some extra money by grabbing whatever small job comes our way, we won't be able to rent a flat by ourselves (Alexander, 69).

Many educated immigrants were bitter about their inability to afford some "vital extras" as one woman put it, mainly cultural products such as books, musical records, and tickets to the theatre and other cultural events. Yet, several informants pointed out that they were ready to cut down on food, telephone, and other basic expenses in order to save money for a concert or a show.

Relations with younger family members

For those whose adult children had lived separately in the FSU, the need to live together again came as a mixed blessing, breeding both support and conflict.

I wish I could manage on my own, but I cannot. I don't know a word of Hebrew and cannot even pay the bills myself, let alone go to a doctor. My daughter is taking me around for all the errands. I am trying to help her with cooking and cleaning, but they don't always like what I cook, or how I clean... Younger people have different tastes (Dina, 81).

We live in a two bedroom apartment, so that my son and his wife have a bedroom, their daughter has a room of her own, and I sleep in the living room. The only privacy I have is when I am cooking or washing dishes in the kitchen. On the other hand, I hate feeling that I am encroaching on my children's space – they cannot even have guests till late since I need to go to bed in the living room. So far we are renting, but if we dare to take a mortgage and buy a flat, I doubt that it will be much bigger... (Tania, 66).

I have lived for two years with my son, but his wife dislikes me so much, and I can't stand her either. Our home was hell – everybody trying to hide in his corner and avoid

rubbing elbows with others... My son was always cross at me saying I am interfering in their life... Sometimes your own kin is worse than strangers, you know. So finally I stepped out and now I live with a roommate. We don't talk too much, but get along well (Rosa, 71).

Older immigrants who are part of multigenerational households often complained about gradually losing contact with their children and especially grandchildren, due to their immersion into Israeli life, new interests, and new friends.

I often feel left out of their life. My daughter and her husband work very hard and I hardly ever see them. When we sit together at supper, they discuss matters I do not understand, using many Hebrew words. I don't dare asking to explain since I see how tired and irritated they often are... (Faina, 76).

I have two grandsons, aged 12 and 16, but what's the point in living with them under the same roof if I hardly ever talk with them? They are interested in this crazy rock music, wear strange clothes, don't read books... Most important of all, they can hardly speak Russian, after ten years in Israel. When I ask them a question about school or some party they've been to they are fishing for Russian words to answer, it's much easier for them to tell it in Hebrew, which I don't understand. Since communication is so tedious, I feel they are avoiding me and my questions (Gregory, 72).

It is inevitable that young people have different tastes and lifestyles from our own; the generation gap is always there. But if we had all stayed in Russia we would at least have common language that we are losing now (Igor, 68).

LIFE IN THE "RUSSIAN STREET"

For younger immigrants, the principal venue of social integration is employment: to achieve occupational mobility they have to improve their Hebrew proficiency and adopt some of the local cultural practices (Remennick, 2003). Older immigrants have a slim chance of finding a skilled job; therefore, they seldom advance in their Hebrew skills beyond survival level and have few contacts with native Israelis. Being socially isolated from the mainstream Israel, they concentrate all their activities and social networks within the boundaries of the so-called Russian Street. During the 1990s, the multifaceted subculture created by Russian immigrants evolved to the extent that its members are able to meet most of their cultural, informational, and practical needs not using a word of Hebrew. Being the largest cultural and linguistic minority in contemporary Israel, Russian Jews have created social networks crosscutting every economic sector: they run small businesses, publish multiple newspapers, produce radio and TV channels, and work in education, social services, and health care.

When I walk on Hertzal Street in Ramat-Gan [author note – a street featuring a variety of Russian shops and businesses], it seems to me that I never left home. I do my hair at a

Russian hairdresser, buy groceries imported from Russia or produced by Russian recipes, check new books and records in a Russian bookstore – all in one-stop shopping. You may say that this place is special, but I know streets like that in most Israeli towns. My family physician is from my own hometown, my lawyer speaks Russian... Of course it helps a lot, since my Hebrew is almost nil. But why would I need it if I can pass using my native tongue? (Frida, 69).

Russian Jews in New York have Brighton Beach, but here the whole country is like Brighton Beach, for better or for worse. That's why we never learned Hebrew (Victor, 68).

The last remark by Victor taps into a real problem: on one hand, life in the Russian Street greatly helps the personal losses older immigrants feel by providing them with new sources of social support and allowing them to easily accomplish daily requirements. Yet on the other hand, the immersion into a co-ethnic social life is a strong disincentive to reaching out to the Hebrew-speaking majority, to understand its mindset and lifestyle. Thus, high ethnic density of Russian-speakers in Israeli society helps sustain social distance between older immigrants and the rest of Israelis. An important role in narrowing this social gap is played by Russian-language Israeli media (especially the new TV channel "Israel+"), which introduces new Israelis to the national agenda and current events and serves as a cultural mediator between Hebrew- and Russian-speaking Israelis.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

After the initial years of re-adjustment, from the mid-1990s on Russian Jews have manifested signs of community formation – their multiple voluntary organizations based on common origins and interests spread out in most Israeli towns. Retired immigrants were especially active in this process, having enough spare time, energy, and intellectual resources. As in other immigration countries, most immigrant non-governmental organization (NGOs) provide self-help and promote certain community causes.

The largest and most popular NGO for senior Russian Jews is the National Network of the Veterans of the Great Patriotic War (i.e. World War II on the Soviet territory) that has departments in every city and large neighbourhood. Through its media campaigns and street marches on Victory Day, this organization endorsed public recognition of the role of the Red Army (and its Jewish soldiers) in the victory over fascism.

It's important that the younger generation of Israelis know that Jews during the times of the Holocaust were not only helpless victims but also warriors and heroes. Jewish soldiers made a great contribution in the victory over the Nazis and we want to make this common knowledge (Yosef, 77).

Recently 9 May (Victory Day in the Soviet calendar) has been recognized as a national Israeli holiday, to the great satisfaction of Russian Jewish veterans. In addition to their main goal, veteran clubs serve as meeting places where older men can read, play board games, discuss politics, and attend cultural events. Sometimes they also sponsor legal aid for their members.

Our veteran's society is my second home, I spend most afternoons there. I was involved with all the process of its organization and growth, negotiated with local authority about our premises, applied for governmental aid... This gives me the sense of purpose in life, the sense of belonging to an important community. We were all so happy when V-Day was recognized at last as a special date! (Gregory, 72).

Other organizations of older Russian immigrants include classes for the study of Judaism and/or Hebrew, chess and card clubs, groups for nature lovers, and more. During election campaigns this picture is complemented by various support groups, lobbying for both "Russian" and national parties and politicians. Retired immigrants probably comprise the most politically active sector on the Russian Street. Their voting rates and engagement with political campaigns are very high.

Because Israeli society is so small every activist with brains and energy can really make a difference. It's exciting to see the results of your effort! As a Jew living in my own country I know I can change things for the better, and I never had this feeling in Russia (Alexander, 69).

The issue of political attitude is beyond the scope of this paper; I will only note that older Russian immigrants belong almost exclusively to the right and secular end of the Israeli political spectrum, ranging from *Likud* to *Israel Beiteinu-Ehud Leumi* parties. They are usually supporters of the hard line in the Arab-Israeli conflict and against territorial concessions.

Apart from community organizations, older immigrants are involved in multiple informal social networks of their own that spread around residences and neighbourhood gardens (where they often walk with their grandchildren). The involvement with various formal and informal groups fills the communication void that senior immigrants find themselves in due to the almost complete detachment from the host society, as well as the growing estrangement from their own children and grandchildren. Therefore, these informal networks serve as an important (and, for some, the only) source of social support, in both instrumental and emotional terms. Faina (76) told a typical story:

I live with my son and his wife, but I hardly ever see them at home. I am rather healthy for my age and in the beginning I greatly suffered from the lack of activity, having full empty days on my hands. I tried to find some small job but failed, no one wanted to hire a 76 year old. I help my children with cooking and cleaning, but this is not such a big task, given they only eat supper at home. I was usually done by noon and didn't know what to do with myself. Before emigration, I always kept busy, doing domestic chores

and in summer working in our vegetable garden in the suburb ... I had lots of friends, with whom we went out together, or just chatted on the phone ... here I knew no one. I felt that I started losing my mind at home, watching Russian TV for days on end. In a month or so after we moved into this neighbourhood, I was lucky to meet G., who had lived here for a few years and knew lots of other Russian immigrants our age. She introduced me to the local seniors club and since then I am busy in the afternoons attending their meetings, learning Hebrew, taking weekend bus trips... my life has changed dramatically. G. also got me involved in the last election campaign, delivering flyers in Russian to immigrants' homes, working for the local Likud voters club. I feel almost like a real Israeli now.

ELDERS WITHOUT BORDERS

The earlier survey research (Remennick, 2002) has shown that Russian Jews living in Israel form an integral part of the post-Soviet diaspora and manifest multiple signs of the emerging transnational lifestyle. It is expressed in their permanent social and cultural ties with the former places of origin in the FSU and with other branches of the Russian Jewish Diaspora in North America and Europe. Older age groups of Russian Israelis, endowed by spare time and financial help of their children, have been found to be the most active in actual physical movement across borders. More than half of the retired immigrants keep their Russian or Ukrainian citizenship and some also keep apartments there (especially former residents of Moscow and St Petersburg). More than one-third travel to their home cities annually or bi-annually and many avoid hot Israeli summers by spending it in their Russian homes or country cottages. Besides, about 30 per cent have close relatives and/or friends in the United States, Canada, or Germany and visit them once every few years. Russian TV, transmitted via cable and satellites to every country with significant Russian immigrant population, plays the major role in cementing the transnational community of Russian speakers (Jews and non-Jews). In this study I tried to explore further these trends among the retired immigrants.

Most informants told me that they were nostalgic about their past, cities and homes they left behind. Most had some relatives and many friends still living in the FSU; all had graves of their parents and other close ones often left unattended.

No day goes by without me thinking about my old street, my cosy flat, the neighbourhood park... I feel an urge to go there every now and then, although I know that this place is no longer mine, strange people live in my flat... Still I returned there three times since I came to Israel, to clean and plant flowers on my parents' grave, if not for anything else (Elena, 72).

How can you forget the place where you spent most of your life, where you children were born and grew up? You know what, there is no need to forget, because you can go back there any time. It is so important that the borders are open today and we can travel back and forth like free people! Twenty years ago we couldn't even imagine this freedom! (Peter, 73).

Although Russia has changed dramatically, it is still our native country and our roots are in the Russian soil. It is important for me to stay connected with Russian culture, to meet my old friends and colleagues ... yes, whenever I can save the money for the trip I happily go there for a month or two (Gregory, 72).

In terms of feeling homesick and wishing to visit former homes, there was a clear difference between former residents of the largest cities (Moscow, Petersburg, and Kiev) and elders coming from smaller provincial towns. The immigrants coming from the capital cities are usually more educated and many of them have kept social and professional ties with their former colleagues. One older scientist was even working part-time in his research institute through correspondence and annual visits. Additional attractions offered by the largest urban centres of Russia and Ukraine include a rich cultural life and inexpensive local tourism. Several informants who spend summer months in their former homes said that they try to cover most of the theatre season to catch up with all the premiers, or visit Moscow film festival, or go on a cruise boat on the Volga River.

When I go to Moscow in summer, I go to the theatre at least once a week, if I can get cheaper tickets. I also rummage every large bookstore in the city; the choice of new books is amazing there. I wish I had more money to spend – my appetites are incompatible with my small pension (Vera, 65).

Although most informants admitted that they enjoyed their ability to travel back to the FSU, no one was ready to return there for good. When asked why, the informants gave rather similar answers such as “My new home is already here in Israel, where my grandchildren are”, and “Although I like visiting Russia, I prefer to live among the Jews.” Most informants were also sceptical about their ability to re-emigrate to the West, although all those who had travelled there admitted that the living standards of Russian immigrants (at least their successful part) were much higher than in Israel.

My sister lives in Germany, and she is much better off than I am. The state pays her rent for a very good apartment, her pension is large enough to afford vacations in Turkey or Greece every year, and she doesn't have to rush from one part-time cleaning job to the next as I do... Her children live in a large house and have good jobs. But you know what – I still would be unable to live in Germany, even if I was offered all these benefits. I cannot forget what Germans did to Russia and to the Jews during the war. Our lives may be harder in Israel, but as a Jew I feel in the right place (Ada, 63).

SUM TOTAL OF MIGRATION: GAINS AND LOSSES

In the concluding part of our discussions I asked the participants to cast a general glance over their lives in Israel and to think about the balance between the gains and losses experienced. Many informants found general speculations of that sort

difficult and uttered things like “It’s hard to define the bottom line; in some ways my life has improved, in others it got worse.” Hence, I suggested that they think about several specific aspects of their lives, such as financial and personal security, living conditions, the quality of leisure and cultural life, friendships and social support, affiliation with the country and feeling at home. These topics were discussed both in groups and in personal interviews, and many informants said that trying to compile a balance of their experience as immigrants was a new and interesting mental exercise for them. The picture that emerged from these accounts is understandably complex and equivocal, but many informants said that to their own surprise they arrived to a largely positive conclusion, i.e. realized that, despite all the difficulties, they have largely gained from moving to Israel.

One area that most participants perceived as a loss was permanent housing – the elders living with their children in rented or owned homes had more residential security but suffered from the lack of privacy and incompatibility between their own lifestyle and that of their children and especially grandchildren. Those renting apartments by themselves were speaking about the sense of temporary shelter, difficulty of moving and getting along with new roommates, and unpredictable raise of the rentals. Opinions about financial well-being ranged – all informants asserted that their income was much lower than their needs, but many still believed that they were doing much better in Israel than they would have in Russia.

Our pension and rental allowance are low, but you can somehow make ends meet. In most places in the FSU pensioners cannot live on their pension alone, they all have to engage in small trade, or to grow their own produce in order to survive. And many just perish, most Russian elders do not reach their 80s and 90s the way Israelis do (Boris, 76).

In both Russia and Israel it is uncommon for younger retirees to live on their pension alone, most try to make some more money by various part-time jobs. So maybe the difference is not so great, after all – in both cases elders work and still have financial problems (Maya, 64).

It depends to whom you compare yourself. To my mind, we feel worse in Israel being poor since in Russia every pensioner is the same (i.e. pensions are similarly tiny) while here we feel like second-rate elders, comparing ourselves with our Israeli counterparts. Those who worked here for all their lives have very good pensions and live their own homes, while we have neither... (Lydia, 70).

The sense of physical security was another topic of dissent between the informants. While some of them stressed the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians with the ensuing terrorist attacks on the Israeli citizens in virtually every place, others countered that despite these outbreaks the general level of street safety in Israeli cities is still much higher than either in Russia or in the United States.

During the last three years I've been feeling very tense. I try to avoid riding buses and going to the crowded places if I can help it. My neighbour's son was wounded in a bus explosion. Since then I feel much worse than I used to (Mikhail, 67).

My grandchildren are hanging out in the streets of Tel-Aviv all night long and nothing happens to them. You can't imagine letting your kids out at night alone in New York or in St. Petersburg (Maria, 69).

In the Jewish neighbourhoods, old people feel safe at any time of the day. Of course there are cases of robbery or burglary of single elders, but it is much more rare than in the FSU (Rosa, 71).

The principal concern for most informants was safety of their children and grandchildren rather than their own.

My grandson is in the army, and I listen to the news every hour to know if there were some military accidents, God forbid... My daughter takes three buses to her work every day during rush hour and I always call her to make sure she's arrived safely (Ada, 63).

All but few informants said that, despite their poor Hebrew, they felt a strong affinity to the country, were interested both in the Jewish past and in current events, and generally felt that Israel became their new home. More than 40 per cent of the informants have attended classes of Hebrew and/or Jewish history and traditions currently or in the past. Besides, most pensioners often take advantage of various subsidized tours and cultural events offered to them by senior citizens' centres and other local organizations. The selection of TV and radio programmes in Russian is very rich. On balance, most elders believed that their leisure and cultural lives have not suffered any damage as a result of resettlement.

In Israel one can see all the pivotal shows, concerts, and other cultural events that occur in the FSU – the touring artists arrive in every small town these days. If you can't afford the tickets to live shows you can always catch up with them on Russian TV (Olga, 78).

If I try hard, I can even save some money to go on a tour of Turkey or Greece with a Russian group when it's not so hot. I couldn't imagine seeing foreign countries while living in Belorussia... As Israeli citizens we have acquired many new opportunities to expand our horizons (Elena, 72).

Well more than half of the informants also expressed satisfaction with their personal networks and social support. Since retired immigrants have multiple venues to meet each other and have many common problems to share, friendships grow easily around public gardens, seniors' clubs, Russian groceries, hairdressers, and doctors' offices.

In Donetsk [an industrial city in the Ukraine] it was uncommon to meet another Jewish woman in your neighbourhood, and Russians or Ukrainians were not always friendly...

Here we are all Jews and have much in common, so you always have other women to talk to, to take a walk in the park ... this feels good (Nadia, 81).

Quite often, fellow immigrants were perceived as a greater source of social support than children or grandchildren:

When I need to see my cardiologist (who speaks only Hebrew) I always ask Olga to go with me because she knows Hebrew much better than I do. Why not my daughter? Forget it, she's always busy; she can't make spare time during the day. I try not to nag her with my problems, I have friends of my own age to help (Dina, 81).

Hence, my overall impression from conversations with elderly immigrants was that they have largely reconciled with their past and found many new possibilities and social outlets in their life in Israel. Although the material problems still haunted most of them (as well as health related to aging left outside this research), most informants believed that spending their senior years in Israel had many advantages.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study tried to shed more light on the social adjustment of senior Russian immigrants in Israel during the early 2000s beyond the traditionally studied issues of health, medical, and social services for older migrants. In order to hear the unmediated voices of the immigrants telling their stories, the study draws on the qualitative approach – discussion groups and semi-structured personal interviews. As is often the case in qualitative research, our sampling technique was based on convenience and cooperation of participants, rather than formal representation of various demographic strata. Yet, the key socio-demographic features of the older Russian immigrants (higher share of women, origin in the largest cities, high level of education, residence in the major urban centres of Israel) were reflected in this group of informants, so their narratives tap rather well into the typical experiences in this immigrant community. One caveat has to be made, though. My findings depict a more positive general picture of older immigrants' lives in Israel than did some earlier studies by psychologists, geriatrists, and social workers (Litwin, 1995a, 1995b; Zilberg and Lerner, 1996; Ron, 2001; Ritsner and Ponizovsky, 2003) that reported on the high levels of distress, loneliness, and lack of social support. This discrepancy may reflect my sampling scheme based on community centres and hence involving a more active (and maybe also younger and healthier) sector of the retired immigrants with broader opportunities and social networks. Also, my methods of eliciting information were more open and holistic (i.e. trying to capture the total subjective experience rather than measuring specific psychological indicators by means of structured scales and inventories).

My principal finding is that older Russian Jews, who had suffered from anti-Semitism for most of their lives in the FSU, have a strong affinity to Israel as a Jewish state and largely do not regret their decision to make *Aliyah*. At the same time, real Israel, with its Middle Eastern landscape, climate, and lifestyle, was rather shocking for those expecting to find here a Jewish version of Europe. After the initial years of cultural shock and social orientation, most older immigrants concluded that they had no chance for incorporation in the Israeli mainstream because of their inability to master Hebrew and the perceived cultural gap; instead, they built their social lives within the co-ethnic community. Over time, the informal social networks were complemented by a variety of community organizations, through which senior immigrants became more involved in the social and political life of Israel. At the same time, many older immigrants use the advantages of globalization, open borders, and double citizenship to keep in touch with their places of origin in the FSU as well as to travel to the West as tourists or guests. In this way senior Russian Jewish immigrants heralded the advent of transnational lifestyle in the post-Soviet global diaspora (see Remennick, 2002).

The major problems faced by older immigrants are found in two realms: material privations (low income and the lack of quality permanent housing) and weakening emotional ties with younger generations in extended families. The financial constraints are partly overcome by finding supplementary income from various menial jobs available to many younger pensioners. The generation gap is much harder to narrow, since it inevitably ensues from a varying pace of social integration between various age groups of immigrants. Adult children, and especially grandchildren of the elders, typically learn Hebrew rather soon and often switch language codes at home, de facto excluding older family members from the communication circle. The range of interests, contacts, and hobbies (e.g. TV programmes watched, music played at home, ways of spending weekends and vacations, etc.) grow very much apart between the younger and the older relatives living under one roof or close by.

As a result, the cultural common denominator, which sustained emotional ties and mutual interests between parents and children in the past, often tends to shrink to a bare minimum of mutual responsibility. Adult children and grandchildren continue to provide instrumental aid to their elderly parents (e.g. take them to the doctor, help with banking transactions, etc.), but since elders have few favours to offer in return, this is increasingly perceived by caregivers as an unfair burden (see Remennick, 2001). Reflecting these trends in family relations, many senior immigrants try to minimize the claim on their children's time and attention and seek alternative outlets of help and guidance from other seniors, who often become their equal or even primary sources of social support. The central role of co-ethnic peer social networks for older immigrants has also been shown in the

earlier Israeli studies by Litwin (1995a, 1995b) and Prager (1985), and among senior Russian immigrants in the United States (Aroian et al., 2001) and Germany (Nauck, 2001).

In sum, this study has shown that many senior Russian immigrants lead active lives in their new country and are endowed by multiple personal resources underused by the receiving society. Given their high educational level, social energy, and flexibility with time, senior Russian immigrants could contribute a lot to the local communities, for example as paid workers (with symbolic wages) or volunteers in day care and youth centres, hospitals, and rehabilitation units for the mentally ill. Given that former Soviet immigrants are found among all these populations receiving social services, the Russian language skills of the volunteers would be an asset rather than a problem. Volunteering is rather common among old-time Israeli seniors, but recent immigrants are usually excluded from these venues of self-actualization, being seen largely as passive and helpless receivers of social services. This attitude of the Israeli social institutions needs to be changed, for the benefit of all parties involved.

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A LA RETRAITE ET PRETS POUR UN NOUVEAU DEPART:
LES IMMIGRANTS RUSSES AGES PARLENT
DE LEUR ADAPTION EN ISRAEL

Tandis que la recherche sociale sur les immigrants est traditionnellement centrée sur les groupes en âge de travailler ou sur les jeunes, les études consacrées aux immigrants retraités sont traditionnellement axées sur le travail social, la gériatrie et les soins infirmiers, et mettent l'accent sur les questions de santé et de stress et sur les services sociaux et médicaux. En s'efforçant d'explorer la démarche migratoire à un âge avancé d'un point de vue plus largement sociologique, cette étude qualitative examine différents aspects de l'adaptation socioculturelle des immigrants russes âgés arrivés en Israël dans les années 90. En s'appuyant sur des discussions en groupes et sur des entretiens approfondis menés dans deux grands centres urbains, l'étude s'attarde sur les attitudes des immigrants âgés face à la société israélienne qui les a accueillis, sur les privations matérielles et les méthodes utilisées pour y remédier, les familles s'étendant sur plusieurs générations, les schémas d'organisation sociale, la communication et la consommation culturelle, les liens avec les lieux d'origine dans l'ex-Union soviétique et la perception totale du tableau des pertes et des gains découlant de la migration. Les résultats montrent que les immigrants âgés ont mis au point de multiples méthodes pour aboutir à une identification positive avec Israël et qu'ils perçoivent de manière générale leur expérience de réinstallation comme difficile mais positive. Comme leurs réseaux sociaux sont limités à la communauté russe immigrée, la plupart des personnes âgées n'ont pas perçu leur mauvaise connaissance de l'hébreu comme un obstacle majeur à l'intégration. Les principales difficultés signalées concernaient le logement, le faible niveau de revenus, et l'affaiblissement des liens avec les membres plus jeunes de la famille.

JUBILADOS QUE EMPIEZAN DE CERO: LOS INMIGRANTES RUSOS
ANCIANOS DEBATEN SU AJUSTE EN ISRAEL

Por lo general, la investigación social sobre los inmigrantes se ha centrado en grupos de personas en edad de trabajar o en jóvenes, mientras que los estudios sobre inmigrantes jubilados concernían principalmente a trabajadores sociales, especialistas en geriatría o ámbitos de cuidados de estas personas, y se centraban en la salud, el estrés, y los servicios médicos y sociales. Al tratar de explorar la migración de los ancianos desde una perspectiva sociológica más amplia, este estudio cualitativo encara distintos aspectos del ajuste sociocultural de los inmigrantes rusos ancianos en los años noventa hacia Israel. Tras deliberaciones del grupo y encuestas exhaustivas realizadas en dos de los principales centros urbanos, este estudio abarca las aptitudes de los inmigrantes de mayor edad de

cara a la sociedad de acogida israelí; las privaciones materiales y los instrumentos para hacerles frente; las familias intergeneracionales; los patrones de organización social, la comunicación, y el consumo cultural; los vínculos con el lugar de origen en la ex Unión Soviética; y la suma total de las ventajas y desventajas percibidas de la migración. Los resultados indican que los inmigrantes ancianos han desarrollado diversas maneras de identificación positiva con Israel y, generalmente, consideran su experiencia de reasentamiento como difícil pero positiva. Habida cuenta que sus redes sociales se limitan a la comunidad de inmigrantes rusos, la mayor parte de los ancianos no considera su falta de conocimientos de hebreo como un obstáculo a la integración. Las principales dificultades de que se habló concernían a la vivienda, los bajos ingresos, y la desvinculación de los familiares más jóvenes.