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**IN SEARCH OF THE SELF:
Reconciling the Past and the Present
in Immigrants' Experience**

ELM Scholarly Press

**Larisa Fialkova
Maria Yelenevskaya**

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in Immigrants' Experience**

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Preface

It has become a universally accepted convention in scientific publishing that acknowledgements are placed after the preface. We would like to violate this rule and begin by expressing our deep gratitude to our Estonian colleagues, and to Mare Kõiva in particular, for initiating this project. Our professional ties with the Estonian Literary Museum began at the ISFNR Congress in Nairobi in 2000. Relatively frequent encounters at various meetings complemented by publication exchange and joint editorial activities paved the way to this project. We were given an opportunity to publish a volume of our articles, written in collaboration and individually but united by one theme. This offer once again revealed that in our professional circle we came to be perceived as an “academic duet”. When we began working on this book we realized that its completion would mark the 15th anniversary of our joint work, so some reflections about collaborative research and writing are in place.

We first met in 1998 at an International Conference of Sociolinguistics held at the University of Haifa, where both of us contributed papers about the use of Russian in Israel. In fact, Larisa’s participation was unexpected even for her, since as a literary scholar and folklorist she was not used to attending linguistic meetings. She accepted an invitation of a colleague who apparently was not acquainted with other scholars, recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), but wanted a discussion about the increasing role of the Russian language in Israel. As a result, Larisa did not expect an incidental conference would have any impact on her future professional life. We listened to

each other's presentations with interest, exchanged some remarks in the intervals, and one of us gave a ride to the other, but no plans for future encounters, let alone joint projects, were mentioned. Several months later we ran into each other in town, and decided to get together for coffee. Only then did Larisa suggest a topic that required joint efforts of a folklorist and a linguist used to analyzing texts in English – a study of ghost stories on the Internet.

Working out a procedure for joint research was not a simple matter. How should we handle preparatory work: literature search, web-site monitoring, text selection and coding, archiving of materials and finally, their analysis? We had to decide how to distribute these tasks and divide time. An additional complication to this project stemmed from our poor computer literacy. Many a time did files disappear, messages wouldn't open and SOS signals were sent to our techno-savvy friends. We proceeded very slowly until the decision was made to reserve one day a week for sitting together discussing or writing. In later stages we would usually meet twice and sometimes even four times a week. Years later when our computer competence improved, and Skype became available we could maintain the usual schedule even in the periods when we were in different countries.

In the beginning, we probed our way forward carefully, learning about each other's work styles and testing the limits of mutual tolerance. At that stage we knew so little about each other that nothing was taken for granted, and every small decision was made together. Four months later a potential conflict started lurking: one of us was ready to submit the text to a journal; the other one was convinced that we were only half way through. The compromise was found, leaving both a bit disappointed, but the article was sent off. It is worth mentioning that although it was devoted to the internet, it was sent to the journal by snail mail – an anachronism difficult to imagine today.

At that time, although each of us had a record of publications in the USSR and the FSU, neither had publications in peer-reviewed Western journals. One had a bitter experience of rejected papers, the other was so scared of the possibility of impolitely formulated rejections that did not even dare submit, and like a Soviet dissident self-censored her own writing and shelved it. To our surprise, our first joint venture was accepted almost immediately, although scheduled for publication in two years (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya 2001). Narrating this story now we see that its plot fits well into the article about lucky coincidences viewed as miracles in immigrants' stories which we wrote in the framework of

our second collaborative project on personal narratives of ex-Soviets in Israel (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya 2001a). Had “the first pancake been a blob”, our first joint project may well have proved to be the last one, but exhilarated by the first victory, we decided to continue and make a foray into immigrants’ personal narratives.

Academic collaboration in humanities still remains a controversy discussed in scholarly publications (see, e.g., Harris 2000; Page & Smith 2010; Stone & Thompson 2006). Clearly, some of the problems and concerns of “academic relationships” are apparently common to all. First comes a question of hierarchies. Since we work at different universities, our partnership was never affected by institutional structure. Neither was it marked by status differences: both came to Israel as “Candidates of Sciences”, the degree that was transformed into the internationally accepted Ph.D. We are almost equals in terms of age and length of professional experience. Furthermore, we immigrated and entered Israeli academia at the same time, so our exposure to the new professional conventions was also similar. Last but not least, we entered the field of internet research and later immigration studies in which both were complete novices. In terms of taxonomy proposed by Dustin Griffin for literary partnerships we started as equals, although we were neither friends,¹ nor bound by contract (Griffin 1987: 2–3).

Personality traits are also an important factor for successful collaboration. As educators we are used to being leaders and over the years may have developed dominant personalities often ridiculed in school folklore. It required a lot of self-restraint not to assume the dominant role because we quickly realized that neither of us would agree to be “closeted” as Stone and Thompson vividly describe invisibility of a partner in unequal collaborations (2006: 6).

For institutions, personal problems and family circumstances are to a large extent irrelevant. By contrast, joint research and collaborative writing are shaped by partners’ readiness to take them into account. Making schedules and keeping to them, choosing the home in which to write, making adjustments when family members need care, or disasters like house remodeling befalls one of the partners are all essential elements of joint work. We also feel that comparable speed of thinking and reacting, humor appreciation and tolerance of critical remarks are essential for a long-term partnership. Numerous hours we spent together travelling to conduct fieldwork, discussing and analyzing material, writing and preparing conference presentations,

as well as cooking meals to relax during long work sessions² elevated “just work” to important social interaction and friendship.

Since most of our joint writing is in the realm of immigration studies, we couldn’t refrain from expressing our ideological position, be it our attitudes to the Arab-Israeli conflict, ethnic policies, immigrants’ use of their cultural capital or relations between religion and the state. If our opinions in these matters were not compatible, collaboration would be impossible.

While our colleagues often envy our creative companionship that helps avoid inevitable loneliness of single-author research, our institutions are ambivalent as to how to evaluate our long-term co-authorship. At the initial stage of our joint work on immigration we received a small grant promoting collaboration between our institutions. Yet in Maria’s case there were obstacles to getting this grant as administration did not appreciate her spending time on investigating topics that had no direct impact on her teaching Technical English courses. As the number of joint publications grew, administration and colleagues in Larisa’s university became perplexed and doubtful as to how to assess her joint publications when she was up for promotion. The most radical opponents of collaborative research in humanities suggested dividing the number of joint articles by two; others counted essays in which her name came first. These attitudes taught us to alternate the order of names. Moreover, while working on articles in legal anthropology we borrowed a formula used by jurists: irrespective of the name order we always add a footnote stating that the contribution of both authors to the reported study is equal.

In several cases we were offered collaboration by some other colleagues. It may have been fruitful to join efforts with jurists and sociologists while investigating issues in legal anthropology or professional re-integration of immigrant scientists, but the prospect of losing a name and becoming “et al.”, let alone dividing the number of publications into three stopped us. Clearly, this consideration is on the mind of many researchers participating in joint projects. Scholars’ concern about evaluation of their contribution is manifested in word juggling to invent terms which would reveal the hierarchy of contributors. Thus, in an article devoted to gender differences in publication rate and impact we came across the terms “senior author”, “first author” and “last author” (Duch et al. 2012), and in the essay reporting the results of a similar study the term “first co-author” is introduced (Fellman 2012).

We find it ironic that we have to “play according to the rules of the game” because if we were asked to identify which idea is whose in our writing, we would be unable to answer. Like other research collaborators, we experience what Hughes and Lund aptly called “blurred boundaries of authorship” (1994: 50). We also know that when each of us writes separately the themes of studies diverge and the style changes. This is one of the reasons why selecting material for this book we had to be very careful to choose individually written chapters that would not disrupt thematic integrity of the whole. We hope we managed to achieve cohesion, and the five chapters of the book form a coherent whole, but at the same time are self-sufficient and can be read separately.

We wish to thank our interviewees for their willingness to share their stories and reflections about the influence of immigration on their life. We are grateful to Kadi Pajupuu for the design of the cover which reflects the spirit of the book, and we are grateful to Diana Kahre for her meticulous work on the layout.

We would like to thank our families for their constant support and encouragement. We appreciate their interest in the topics we investigate and their tolerance as listeners of our endless stories.

A Note on Transliteration

Throughout the book we have used the U.S. Library of Congress transliteration system for Russian proper and geographic names.

Introduction

This book is a follow-up to our project devoted to personal narratives of ex-Soviets in Israel. Our original plan was to collect previously published articles dealing with immigration issues but differing from the main themes of our book *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait* (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya 2007). The themes of immigrants in the city, attitude to law, immigrants' literature and humor were touched upon but not developed in depth in that volume. They were researched in a number of papers written later (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya 2006, 2006a, 2011, 2012, Yelenevskaya & Fialkova 2006, 2008) and discussed in our presentations at 11 scholarly conferences. However, when we re-read the articles we realized that the situation in the Russian-speaking community was so dynamic that studies conducted three-five years ago should be seriously revised and updated. The result is that the three co-authored chapters were rewritten and expanded to such an extent that they can be regarded as new texts. The two chapters authored individually have never been published before.

In *Ex-Soviets in Israel* we were concerned with reasons for immigration, first impressions of the new country and encounters with members of the host society. Although the subjects quoted in this book were interviewed for different projects, all of them had substantial experience of life in Israel, and their perspective was markedly different from what we encountered in the interviews recorded in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Life before immigration moved to the background and comparisons with the country of origin were less pronounced, although the influence of the pre-immigration experience was still noticeable.

In this book we do not limit our material to oral stories about immigration to Israel, but include investigation of Internet discussion forums, analyses of writing about immigration by Russian-speaking authors in Germany, and Russian émigré humor devoted to the Arab-Israeli conflict in traditional and electronic media. The core theme uniting such different topics as attitudes to law, perception of urban life, relations with host societies, and others is identity and its evolution in the new environment. In the last decade, complexities and dialectics of FSU immigrants' identity have drawn attention of researchers in the countries where ex- and post-Soviets formed enclaves. Despite inevitable acculturation processes, more than 20 years after the beginning of the fourth wave of Russian emigration symbolic boundaries between FSU immigrants and host societies have not disappeared. Russian speech is still audible in public space, and various services ranging from clinics run by Russian-speaking doctors through afternoon schools to tourist agencies are offered to immigrants by their co-ethnics. While the circulation of conventional immigrant press is on decline, numerous Internet portals and specialized sites have sprung up and are visited by Russian-speaking users residing in different corners of the world. The repertoire of leisure activities offered to immigrants in their mother tongue in Israel, Germany, the U.S.A. and other countries can satisfy any age and taste and includes shows and concerts, literary contests, bard festivals, national and international shows of student cabaret *KVN*, and so on. All of these phenomena of immigrants' life have been observed and documented in numerous studies devoted to émigrés of the fourth wave. Most of these investigations dwell on the hybridization of identity. Thus, Ilatova³ and Shamai postulate that ethno-cultural self-identification of immigrants to Israel should be regarded in the framework of a bi-dimensional rather than a mono-dimensional model. The mono-dimensional model presupposes that as immigrants acquire and accept the culture of the host society, their original culture retreats. By contrast, the bi-dimensional approach demonstrates that the combination of the two cultures in immigrants' identity can vary without creating cognitive dissonance (2007: 123–125). The bi-dimensional model of acculturation, and as a result hybridization of identity, was confirmed in the study of immigrant youth in Israel by Niznik who shows that cultural integration of young people is not linear. They are bi-cultural or globalized rather than assimilated into the dominant Hebrew culture. Her findings are “in line with the segmented assimi-

lation theory and also exemplify a ‘limited’ or ‘selective’ acculturation scenario” (Niznik 2011: 104).

Identity issues often arise in the discussions of Russian-language immigrants’ media which sprang up in various countries. Elias believes that the Russian-language media in Israel had a central role in their integration and in acquiring knowledge about the culture and history of the Jewish people and the state of Israel. She also claims that the flourishing of the Russian media did not stimulate immigrants to read the Hebrew-language press; rather it became a mediator between the immigrants and the host culture. She contrasts pressure for assimilation put on “Russian” Germans in Germany with Israeli tolerance and openness to the newcomers’ cultural habits (Elias 2008: 143–145). One other reason for continued use of the Russian media can be explained by linguistic attitudes observed by the Russian linguist Zemskaja in various enclaves: Russian-speaking émigrés display reluctance to acquire those local languages that do not enjoy the international status (2001: 42). In this respect, proficiency in German may be regarded as a more important asset than fluency in Hebrew. We agree with Elias’ conclusions about the socializing function of the Russian-language media but like some other researchers, we cannot support the claim of Israeli openness to the immigrants’ culture. Although Israeli mass media are multilingual: radio broadcasts in seven languages and TV in four (Epstein 2006: 226), the host society’s attitude to the maintenance of immigrants’ languages and culture (with the notable exception of English) still remains negative. Kenigshtein, for example, suggests that proliferation of the Russian-language media in Israel can be partially attributed to the obstacles put by the Hebrew-language press for Russian-speaking journalists.⁴ In the absence of “Russian” voices the prevailing image of immigrants in the Hebrew media is negative. Content analysis he conducted revealed that as immigrants started to compete with the veterans in the political and socio-economic spheres they came to be presented as “aliens” in our home” (2006: 107–110). In the last couple of years debates about FSU immigrants’ loyalty and their identification with traditional Israeli values has intensified with members of the “old” elites, journalists and academics expressing suspicions about the wish of Russian-speaking Israelis to integrate. Moreover, there is an unprecedented discussion about the alleged massive emigration of the “Russians” from Israel, shaping the perception of the lay public (Khanin and Epstein 2010: 101–103). Notably, revulsion

against Jews leaving Israel is reminiscent of the treatment of émigrés in the Soviet Union as traitors.

In this context the Russian-language media were instrumental in community building, not only by shaping the positive image of co-ethnics who succeeded professionally, created numerous NGOs and made contributions to Israeli science and culture, but also by publishing materials about the contribution of Russian Jews in laying the foundation of Israel, fighting in Israel's wars and against the Nazis (Zilberg 2008; Yelenevskaya 2009a). Boosting the positive collective self-image helps shape positive identity of the in-group and dispel negative hetero-stereotypes pervading in the Hebrew-language mass media.

Most of the studies devoted to socio-cultural practices of FSU immigrants are also related to identity as an ongoing process of negotiating Russianness with the values, habits and patterns of behavior of the host societies. Even presentation and perception of the immigrant's body is part of this process. Thus Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder investigate how self-presentation of the body among Russian-Israeli students may reflect either a desire to be indistinguishable from their Hebrew-speaking peers and thus "invisible", or an intention to fit one's own image irrespective of its ethnic belonging (2010). Reflecting on the identity of Russian speakers in Germany, Darieva observes that the presentation of the "immigrant body" in Germany is defiant in the demonstration of wealth and sexuality – the image compatible with the ill-famed "New Russians". It is this image which has become part of the negative stereotype in the host society (2007: 38–39).

In the last decade there has been a noticeable shift from quantitative to qualitative methods in the study of immigrants and their changing identity, because sociologists noticed that "hard" methods may yield misleading results. Ilatova and Shamai, for example, noted a statistically valid discrepancy in the ethnic self-identification of immigrants when they were choosing an in-group on a scale and in free verbal communication in semi-structured interviews (2007: 131–32).

Sociologists Remennick and Al-Haj, who have made important contributions to the study of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel using surveys, now also show greater leaning to qualitative methods and elaborate on the usefulness of soft data. While Remennick sees ethnography rather than statistics to be fitting for the understanding of the "thin fabric" of Russian Jewish culture and the social boundaries between Jews and other former Soviet citizens" (2007: 6), Al-Haj emphasizes the benefits of focus group discussions for dealing with

“puzzling data” of the surveys (2004: 10). Equally reflective about advantages and disadvantages of qualitative methods in sociolinguistic research is Shulamit Kopeliovich, who observes that the ethnographic method and in-depth interviews give researchers insights into the social norms of the community under study and help explain individuals’ linguistic behavior (2009: 37–44).

Yet prejudice against qualitative methods and unstructured conversational interviews still lingers on in social sciences. We observe that when authors indicate the type of data collection and methods used to analyze the material they don’t defend their use of quantitative techniques, but when “soft” methods are applied, they sometimes find it necessary to justify their choice, as if apologizing for what is still considered semi-reliable. Studying literature, we also came across cases when the method of data collection was identified as structured interviews, although the quoted lengthy excerpts from unedited interviews suggested that they were in fact semi-structured (see Kenigshtein 2008: 209). We can hardly suspect that this experienced ethnographer does not know the difference between structured and semi-structured interviews; rather it is the desire to present his research as objective and more trustworthy that caused this mismatch. The interviewer gave his subjects maximum freedom to express themselves, not typical of structured interviews, feeling that the delicate issue of changing ethnic and cultural identity would yield more subtle and reflective observations in this format.

In immigration studies a special issue is the language of data collection. Most researchers give their subjects a choice whether to be interviewed in their native language or the language of the host society. Only one research team we know, Edna Lomsky-Feder and Tamar Rapoport and their research assistants excluded the subjects’ mother tongue. Although the two principal investigators do not speak Russian, their assistants, first generation immigrants who did their university studies already in Israel, speak Russian well enough to conduct interviews, transcribe and translate them into Hebrew. The “language policy” of Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport’s projects was not only thoroughly thought out but also theorized in one of their articles. The cornerstone of their arguments is that as “home-comers” immigrants should shed the language and culture of the Diaspora and fully assimilate. In their view interviews in Russian would marginalize their subjects creating a gap between them and veteran Israelis. Thus they presuppose that for an immigrant to speak the language of

the “old country” and to identify with its culture and values perpetuates an inferior status. These researchers looked for confirmation of their position in the attitude of the interviewees. While some were disappointed, because their Hebrew was insufficient for rendering the richness of their cultural associations, others found the experience of telling a familiar story in a foreign language challenging and even empowering (Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport 2001; 2003). In their later article these researchers remained loyal to the same principle (Rapoport & Lomsky-Feder 2010). We believe that offering subjects a choice of language is a better strategy. The interviewees’ decision may depend on diverse factors, such as the age at immigration, the length of time spent in the host country, and aptitude for languages – all the factors that affect the command of the newly acquired language. But no less important are cultural values and attachment of the subjects to the culture of the “old country”.

We discovered that some authors refrain from quoting their immigrant informants altogether. For example, in the articles by sociologists Sabina Lissitsa and Yohanan Perez (Lissitsa 2007, and Lissitsa & Perez 2008) the authors state that they conducted “personal interviews on the problems of integration” with immigrants and veteran Israelis, as well as interviews with experts. Each interview was about 90 minutes long, yet there is not a single quotation from what the subjects said to the researchers. All the collected data are presented in charts which compare attitudes of the immigrants and old-timers to such sensitive issues as pride in one’s country, desire to live in it and perception of Israel as home. The reader can conclude that free expression of ideas and emotions, and sharing experiences is transformed into numerical data, more fitting statistical analysis than interview-based research. By no means do we want to downgrade the importance of researchers’ interpretation of the data collected, yet people who agree to share their experiences, attitudes and emotions have the right to be heard. Without giving them the floor, the authors risk to turn subjects into objects and perpetuate hierarchical relations between the researchers and the researched.

What happens when the text of interviews makes it to the reported research? Here there are different approaches. The authors of the book about the town of Katzrin, Israel, for example, did not indicate how the interviews had been conducted: whether the settings were formal or informal, whether the interviews were recorded or only notes were made, etc. Moreover, while the names of the experts are given in the

bibliography, the lay people who participated in the project are not listed at all. They remain anonymous, with just the first name indicated, and we do not know whether anonymity was the decision of the researchers or whether it was the wish of the subjects. This strategy could be prompted by the desire to protect informants, but it creates a hierarchy within the group that is investigated. Another distinction intensifying hierarchical relations is the use of direct quotations and reported speech: the experts are quoted and their words are graphically marked, while the lay people's stories are primarily reproduced. Direct quotations from these interviews are scarce and are not marked graphically (Horowitz, Shamai & Ilatov 2003: 54–68; 122–126). Some authors, e.g., Al-Haj and Remennick, introduce their informants to the readers, but supply direct quotations with minimal information, for instance: “a participant in the student focus group said...”, “one student from the Russian Federation had to say...” (Al Haj 2004: 174, 165), “one of my Bostonian informants, hard-working single mother (ethnic Russian...)”, “Nina, forty seven, a music teacher...” (Remennick 2007: 198, 261). Different research topics dictate how much information about the subjects should be disclosed. For example, when we worked on the material on legal anthropology (see chapter 2) we decided to give less information than usually, for fear that recognition could harm our interviewees. While most of our informants relax when they are told about anonymity, some still feel threatened. More than once our potential interviewees changed their mind and refused to tell their stories or asked to withdraw their narratives already recorded and transcribed. Naturally, respecting the subjects we never insisted or violated their wishes. There are also informants who wish their names to be mentioned. The reason may be a confusion of an analytical research publication with a report in the media. Mistakenly, some interviewees expect either publicity or assistance in solving their personal problems. Although we saw that anonymity disappointed these individuals, we preferred not to expose them since all the issues related to identity are sensitive.

As in all our other studies, collecting material for this book we applied qualitative methods. In the interview-based chapters we include excerpts of various length, as well as quotations from internet discussion forums. In the last two chapters devoted to literature and humor the reader will hear voices of the immigrants, be it fictional characters, protagonists of jokes or writers reflecting on immigration experience and identity in published interviews. As the focus in these

two chapters is not on poetics or linguistic mechanisms of humor but on anthropology of immigration, the quoted excerpts and humorous texts present an extension of immigrants' discourse.

Although the book is addressed primarily to researchers specializing in immigration studies, it may appeal also to urban and legal anthropologists, folklorists and members of the wide public interested in how individuals cope with the changing of the *self* in the environment of their new country.

Notes

- ¹ Stone and Thompson observe that studies grouped under the label "literary collaboration" focused on couple male, canonical heterosexual writers while detailed studies of textual relations and joint writing practices of other types of couples such as cross-gender partners, siblings, parent-child collaborations were much less common (2006: 7). Both of us had prior experience of such partnerships. Larisa compiled a book of medical proverbs together with her father (see her reflections about it in Fialkova 2010: 11–12). Maria, on her part wrote a number of course books for students of Technical English with her senior male and female colleagues.
- ² Friends often make fun of our workaholic tendencies, while in our families it has become a standard joke that "she said she was going to work on her new article with her research partner but made a big bowl of salad before leaving the house."
- ³ Note that the same author appears as "Ilatov" in English and Hebrew publications and as "Ilatova" in Russian. In English and Hebrew there are no gender differences between male and female family names. Many immigrants did not protest against Hebraization of their first and family names (e.g. Misha becomes a Moshe, Svetlana turns into a Liora, and so on). Others, including the authors of this book, put up a fight with the Ministry of the Interior to preserve their names unchanged, viewing the name as a substantial element of their identity (see Yelenevskaya and Fialkova 2005: 168-176). There are also others who continue using both versions, the original and the new one, depending on the situation.
- ⁴ See similar observation in Epstein 2006: 249.