

# EX- SOVIETS IN ISRAEL

FROM PERSONAL  
NARRATIVES TO A  
GROUP PORTRAIT

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## Introduction

This book is a study of personal-experience stories in which Israelis from the former Soviet Union (FSU) relate their immigration experiences. It was conceived as a culture study that focuses on people and their thoughts, memories, and feelings, rather than on artifacts such as magazines, films, or academic books (Billig 1997, 205), though the latter are used as additional sources. Culture studies are multidisciplinary, and this book draws on literature in the fields of folklore, anthropology, linguistics, social psychology, sociology, political science, and geography. We are concerned with both the general problems of migration and the issues relevant specifically to the Israeli experience.

The closing years of the USSR and the first post-Soviet decade saw an unprecedented rise in emigration. Although different immigrant policies in various countries dictate different integration strategies to newcomers, the Soviet past continues to influence the worldview of individuals and behavioral patterns of immigrant groups, whether ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, or Greeks. Depending on the immigrants' ethnicity, receiving societies divide former Soviets into repatriates and immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Repatriates are expected to integrate rapidly and easily thanks to common ethnic and cultural roots. Various studies, however, prove these expectations wrong. The Israeli sociologists Shuval and Leshem (1998) compared migrations of dispersed Jews and Germans to Israel and Germany. They concluded that while in both countries the immigrants were ethnically identical to the host population, their basic Jewish or German identities were overlaid with other ethnic identities associated with the cultures and countries where they had lived before emigrating (14). More-

over, psychologists, sociologists, and educators find that while FSU immigrants are considerably different from newcomers from other countries, they display the same patterns of adaptation and acculturation and suffer from similar social problems wherever they settle.<sup>2</sup> In Israel the FSU immigration of the 1990s has had a profound impact on society and accounts for an explosion of literature devoted to the former Soviets. Like their colleagues in other countries, Israeli social scientists find the term *immigrants* more fitting than *repatriates* in reference to the Soviet Jews of the last wave.

The previous wave of immigration from the USSR was relatively short: the peak lasted from 1971 to 1973. This was a period when Soviet Jews could choose to immigrate to the United States, Canada, or Israel, and it is widely believed that only the most ideologically motivated and Zionist-oriented opted for Israel. In the 1970s the decision to leave the country was a critical point in the lives of Soviets, one that could jeopardize the whole family, including those who stayed behind. Many applicants were refused exit visas. Moreover, some applicants lost their jobs and were imprisoned if they were reported as participating in political activities. The decision to emigrate was risky and required courage. Israeli sociologists consider the integration of the wave of the 1970s to have been fairly smooth and successful. Even if not all members of this group aspired to political, business, or academic careers, they managed to find their niche as professionals: engineers, teachers, and doctors (Kimmerling 2001, 140–41; Reznitskaia 2004). But some Russian-speaking social scientists and journalists do not agree with this essentially positive assessment. They claim that a large proportion of the immigrants of the 1970s failed to attain the level of Hebrew proficiency necessary to embark on a new career. Many intellectuals left Israel, while others remained on the periphery of Israeli society (Isakova 2004).

The new mass immigration from the FSU in the 1990s became a test for immigrants of the 1970s. Some of them resented the latest newcomers as competitors and criticized them for their continued loyalty to the culture of their country of origin; others were happy to welcome compatriots with a shared past. Moreover, for many the new wave of immigration signified a reunion with family or old friends from whom they had been separated

for more than two decades. The immigrants of the 1990s were themselves divided in their attitudes toward the old-timers: some found new friendships; others were jealous of the benefits the state had given to them in the 1970s. Today, fifteen years after the beginning of the last immigration wave, it is obvious that the two groups are more similar than it might seem. More obscure than their successors, the immigrants of the 1970s established the institutional and cultural infrastructure that was expanded and enriched in the 1990s. Furthermore, children of the immigrants of the 1970s, who had often been ashamed of their links to Russia, suddenly discovered the benefits of speaking Russian and being familiar with the culture of their parents and grandparents. This proved a boon for maintaining personal as well as professional networks (Remennick 2004).

Unlike their predecessors in the 1970s, FSU immigrants of the 1990s can maintain contact with their relatives and friends who stayed behind, and the tourist traffic in both directions is heavy. Electronic technologies give immigrants access to the media in Russia, and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the countries of the FSU has encouraged trade and cultural and scientific exchange. Immigrants develop multiple identities as the interactions of home and host societies become more intense. As a result, FSU immigrants today are considered to be part of the transnational migration flow (Markowitz 1995; Fialkova 2005c; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2005; Yelenevskaya 2005; Remennick 2002c).

Mass migration processes of the 1990s have also sparked the interest of the Russian scientific community in their former compatriots. This is not surprising: in the last decade alone, some 8 or 9 million migrants from the FSU settled in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Israel (Khrustaleva 2001b, 27). While even in the recent past emigrants from the FSU were regarded as separate ethnic groups, today there is a tendency to study them first of all as Rossiiskaia diaspora<sup>3</sup> (Iontsev et al. 2001; Lebedeva 1997; Levin 2001a, 2001b; Makhovskaia et al. 2001; Savoskul 2001; Tishkov 2001a, 2003). Since members of immigrant communities dispersed throughout the world remain psychologically and culturally Russian, the government and the public came to realize that they should not be dismissed as valuable human resources for Russia.

Many immigrant scientists integrated by the host countries' academia also focus on the FSU immigrants of the last decade. They study immigrant communities from within and function as a mediating link between the receiving society and newcomers (see e.g., papers by Russian-speaking Israelis Dymerskaya-Tsigelman, Epstein, Feldman, Kheimets, Naiditch, Remennick, Rotenberg, Zilberg, etc.). Their studies usually go beyond investigations of the in-group because they inevitably touch upon the peculiarities of the society and culture of the old and new countries. Despite common interests, Western social scientists seldom have access to burgeoning Russian literature on immigration; likewise, their Russian colleagues are only now beginning to discover Western immigration studies. Although the Cold War is over, there is still little interaction between the two communities, and immigrant researchers, including the authors of this book, try to bridge this gap.

Receiving new immigrants has been part and parcel of Israeli life since the foundation of the state. Though the country has accumulated valuable experience in dealing with immigrants from every corner of the world, adjustment and adaptation of individuals and immigrant groups remains the focus of the Israeli scientific community and the general public. In the spring of 2000 the Israeli mass media covered the arrival of the one millionth immigrant from the FSU. While the Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption cites a more modest number—835,410 FSU immigrants between 1989 and 1999—this remains the biggest immigration wave from a single country in Israel's history. Integration of Soviet Jews triggered the Israeli scientific community's interest and became the subject of studies in sociology, psychology, anthropology, education, and linguistics.

To a large extent, an immigrant group's success in integration depends on the attitude of the receiving society. Mass immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel had been long expected and desired not only for ideological and sentimental reasons but for instrumental reasons. Politicians hoped that the new wave would serve to preserve the Jewish majority over the fast-growing Arab population, thus helping to maintain power in the settlements and strengthen security. Kimmerling (2001) quotes the slogan invented to persuade Israeli taxpayers to make sacrifices for the sake of the newcomers: "From immigrant to immigrant, our

strength is rising" (139–40).<sup>4</sup> Sure enough, in the late 1980s and the very early 1990s veteran Israelis gave a warm welcome and a helping hand to the newcomers (see Yelenevskaya and Fialkova 2005, 156–58). But the enthusiasm dissipated fairly quickly when it became clear that 1990s immigrants were highly competitive on the job market (see the demographic profile of the subjects in chapter 1) and aspired to occupy a socioeconomic position at least as high as it had been in their country of origin. The intellectual elite of Israeli society, however, refused to accept Russian-speaking intellectuals as equals, which some researchers believe contributed to the formation of an almost autonomous cultural enclave (see, e.g., Al-Haj 2004, 109–10). The abundance of non-Jews among émigrés of the 1990s is a never-ending topic, and negative stereotypes of "the Russians," emphasizing their otherness, are widely used in informal and formal discourse. Among the pejorative labels given to the immigrants are pork-eaters, sausage aliya, AIDS-carriers, alcoholics, Mafiosi, prostitutes, parasites, and even Bolsheviks (Prilutskii 2003). A wide repertoire of "anti-Russian" jokes reinforces these stereotypes (see Golden 2003, 161–62). Particularly humiliating for the immigrant group is the claim that prostitution is one of the most widespread professions among "Russian" women (see Fialkova 2005a; Golden 2003; Lemish 2000).

Materials found in the mass media intensify distrust of "Russians" among the general public. Media stereotyping of immigrants is so pervasive that it was put on the agenda of the Knesset Committee for Aliya and Absorption. The committee was presented with a report on the coverage of the life of Russian-speaking Israelis on the two most popular TV channels. During the nineteen weeks of monitoring, only 60 out of 3,000 news items dealt with "Russians," including news replays. Most of those items dwelled on politicians of "Russian" origin, criminals, and couples unable to marry in Israel because of Halachic (Jewish law) problems. On the other hand, the report testified to an abundance of "Russian" images in comedy and satirical programs (Kogan 2004; Yelenevskaya and Fialkova 2005, 142).

Stereotypes are often internalized by laypeople, and also by politicians, whose decisions influence immigrants in various aspects of life. In the mid-1990s the then minister of labor and social security, Ora Namir, publicly complained about the high per-