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Life and Literature of Jews from the Former Soviet Union: Amplifying New Voices in Canada Conference Report

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Shlomo Gleibman and Olga Stein

Conference Report

Life and Literature of Jews from the Former Soviet Union: Amplifying New Voices in Canada

On November 18 and 19, 2024, the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies at York University, in partnership with the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies, hosted a multidisciplinary conference, “Life and Literature of Jews from the Former Soviet Union: Amplifying New Voices in Canada,” which was followed by a literary workshop on November 20. In their opening remarks, co-organizers Olga Stein, a literary scholar and critic, and David Koffman, the J. Richard Schiff Chair for the Study of Canadian Jewry at York, stated that it was the first time an academic conference of this kind was being held in Canada. Likewise, the non-academic literary workshop that was held on November 20 was a rare instance of institutional space being made available for Jewish writers and translators from the former Soviet Union (FSU) community in Toronto. Along with the conference, the workshop recognized the highly productive and essential work of these creatives.

As originally conceived by Stein and Koffman, the conference was the first part of a three-pronged project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Work presented at the conference will be published in a future volume of the journal *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes*. The third initiative, already underway and formally launched at the conference, is a new collection of the work of Soviet-born Jewish immigrant writers at the Ontario Jewish Archives, in Toronto. The fonds gather literary and autobiographical texts documenting the histories and experiences of Jews who immigrated from the former Soviet Union to Canada.

The conference brought together prominent writers and scholars of Russian Jewish culture and literature from Canada, the United States, Israel, Germany, and Poland. Among the conference’s key themes were the Canadian character of the fiction produced by first- and second-generation writers in the Russian-speaking Jewish immigrant community, the relationship of these works to the older Jewish Canadian canon, as well as the transnational and translingual features of this literature.

The keynote addresses, panels, roundtable discussions, and Q&As drew attention to the role of post-Soviet Jewish Canadian writing in linking immigrants’ Soviet past and their Canadian present, as well as the experiences of migration and resettlement. Some of the panels addressed the ways that immigrant writers, critics, and scholars from this community have dealt with Holocaust memory, Hamas’s October 2023 attack on Israel and its consequences, and the current war in Ukraine. Fittingly, the conference commenced with an address and reading by the award-winning Toronto-based writer David Bezmozgis titled “Our Fiction: Here and Now.” Previewing an important line of inquiry that ran throughout the three-day affair, he asked: Is the Soviet Jewish past relevant for the Jewish present?

In grappling with this question, the conference made room for a wide range of scholarly approaches and literary practices. Panelists employed historical, sociological, religious, and gender and sexuality lenses to discuss the fiction of Jewish immigrants from the FSU. Some participants described new directions in writing and research that endeavor to capture the present and future of post-Soviet Jewish communities in Canada and worldwide. Multiple presenters touched on old and new forms of antisemitism and its impact on Soviet- and post-Soviet-born Jews. Several presenters discussed their efforts to document Russian and Ukrainian Jewish immigrants' lives in Canada. Others highlighted the importance of translating and recovering literature originally written in Yiddish. Many conversations underlined the diversity of identities to which post-Soviet Jewish literature gives voice. The conference and the literary workshop emphasized that this literature is not monolithic and that its writers play a significant, though often overlooked, role in Canadian culture and society.

Memoir Writing and Literary Translation

Memoir and literary translation have played a crucial role in facilitating understanding Soviet Jewish culture as well as the multiple ways Jews constructed their ethnic identities during a protracted period of Soviet state-sanctioned antisemitism after the Second World War.

Katya Bishops, great-granddaughter of the legendary Soviet Yiddish stage actor Solomon Mikhoels, spoke about her work of translating the memoir of her grandmother, Mikhoels's daughter, into English. Literary scholar Marat Grinberg read from the memoirs of his grandfather, a district attorney in Soviet Ukraine. Toronto-based writer Julia Zarankin, whose own work traces the lives of her grandmother and mother, likewise reflected on the importance of portraying family history and the experiences of women in particular. In addition, she asserted that more attention should be paid to female writers in post-Soviet Jewish communities in Canada and elsewhere.

Grinberg's talk on the reading habits of Soviet Jews revealed how Soviet Jews recovered and asserted their Jewish identities through a secret "Soviet Jewish bookshelf," which compensated for state-imposed restrictions on Jewish culture and religion. This "bookshelf" included Russian translations of Yiddish classics, including the work of Sholem Aleichem, and translations of Lion Feuchtwanger's historical fiction. This literature, Grinberg argued, served as a vital source of knowledge about Jewish history and enabled the reconstituting of a collective identity. The "bookshelf," which the majority of Soviet Jews owned or sought to, supplied the tools and language for self-identification, and the preservation of their community.

Gennady Estraiikh, an expert on Soviet Yiddish culture, spoke about the construction of a Soviet Jewish literary identity among post-Holocaust Yiddish writers, includ-

ing those who published in the journal *Sovetish Heymland*. He discussed the role of younger members of this group—Estraikh among them—in fostering Yiddish culture in their post-emigration homes in Israel and North America.

Nora Gold, a local scholar and writer, discussed and read from work composed by Jews from the FSU in the literary journal she founded and edits, *Jewish Fiction*. As Gold mentioned, stories by Russian-speaking Jewish émigré writers published in *Jewish Fiction* often probe the experience of immigration, displacement, and antisemitism. Gold was joined on the panel, “Transnational Literature—No Single Destination,” by the German scholar of post-Soviet immigrant fiction Bettina Hoffman and American academic, writer, and poet Maxim D. Shrayer. Hoffman gave a paper on Bezmozgis’s *The Free World* (2011), a novel that captures the vicissitudes and uncertainties of leaving the FSU, and the aspirations that inform families’ decisions to choose one country as their destination over another. Shrayer read from the introduction of his book, *Immigrant Baggage: Morticians, Purloined Diaries, and Other Theatrics of Exile*, touching on the translingualism of his own work (in Russian, Hebrew, and English) and that of many other contemporary authors from the FSU.

Comparisons of Soviet antisemitism with antisemitism in North America today was one of the conference’s recurrent themes. Participants drew parallels between Soviet-era antisemitism, which was often framed as anti-Zionism, and contemporary antisemitism in the West, which sometimes manifests under a similar anti-Zionist guise. Still, some panelists warned against uncritical historical analogies, pointing to different geographical and temporal contexts, the difference between anti-Zionism and valid critique of the Israeli government, and to political, religious, and cultural variations within global Jewry.

Archiving the Past to Safeguard the Future

The connection between the past and the present is evident in efforts to archive the ex- and post-Soviet Jewish experience in Canada and internationally. In his keynote talk at the literary workshop, titled “The Immeasurable Importance of Archives,” scholar and archivist Vassili Schedrin pointed out that the acts of history-writing and archiving can both ensure the survival of immigrant communities. Schedrin presented a short documentary film about his archival work on Solomon Mikhoels, a leading figure of the Soviet Yiddish theatre who was murdered by Stalin in 1948, and shared unknown details about Mikhoels’s life. Schedrin has helped preserve Mikhoels’s memory and legacy through the Solomon Mikhoels Collection at the Blavatnik Archive in New York.

Yuri Daschko of the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre presented its work of collecting oral testimony and archival material about the Ukrainian Canadian experience, including memorializing victims of the Holodomor,

documenting the lives of Ukrainian Canadian women, and stories of Ukrainians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. The Centre, which serves as a model for archiving the experience of immigrants from the Soviet Union in Canada, is also committed to the preservation of the works of Jewish Ukrainian writers in Yiddish and their translations into Ukrainian.

Janice Rosen, director of the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives in Montreal, described its unique collection of cultural output by Soviet Jewish émigrés in that city. Dara Solomon, the executive director of the Toronto Holocaust Museum and the Ontario Jewish Archives, followed with a short presentation encouraging post-Soviet Jewish Canadian writers and poets to deposit their writing—whether memoir, fiction, or poetry—to the new fonds hosted by the OJA, a project called “From the Desk Drawer” (*Iz yashchika stola*).

Immigration and Identity Formation

Historical, literary, and sociological explorations of immigration from the FSU reveal transformations of Soviet Jewish culture and identities through encounters with Canadian and American Jewry. Sociologist Steven Gold analyzed relations between Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants and the American Jewish community, pointing to several factors, including socioeconomic, political, and cultural and religious differences that have historically caused fissures between the two groups. These same differences, it must be pointed out, have kept the Soviet- and post-Soviet Jewish émigré communities in Toronto separate from the city's older Jewish community. Emile Imanov confirmed many of Gold's assertions with data he collected through interviews with ex-Soviet Jews in the United States. His findings demonstrate a spectrum of experiences and identity formations through immigration.

These presentations compel us to ask: What is the nature of ex-Soviet Jewish identity? The keynote address by Soviet-born Israeli political scientist Ze'ev Khanin, “Future of the Major Post-Soviet Jewish Communities in the Context of Migration and Wars in Ukraine and the Middle East,” explored this question through a raft of statistics that suggest the emergence of a coherent Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora transnationalism along with new localized identities, as Jews from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and other post-Soviet countries join and augment older immigrant communities in Israel, Germany, and North America.

War, Displacement, Documentation

Several panelists took stock of how Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing war between the two countries has impacted the post-Soviet Jewish diaspora and its cultural output. Participants noted how shared suffering among Jews and Ukrainians—

past and present—has shaped a new kind of collective memory between the two peoples, often expressed through war writing and the translation of war-related memoir, poetry, and essays. Meanwhile, for post-Soviet Jews, whose lives and literary output are largely rendered in Russian, the war has engendered a crisis of linguistic identity, as Russian-language literature and the language itself have been discredited by the war.

Anna Shternshis, a scholar of Soviet Jewish studies at the University of Toronto, introduced recent narratives produced by Ukrainian Jewish refugees. These accounts document the experience of flight and displacement and offer insight into the ways that refugees narrativize these traumatic experiences and their new circumstances in the countries where they find safe harbour.

Vita Shtivelman, a Toronto-based writer born in Soviet Ukraine, shared her project, “Three Questions Regarding the War in Ukraine,” which includes interviews with contemporary diasporic Russian-speaking writers and artists and her own meditations on Russia’s literary and poetic canon, which often supports or references implicitly Russian imperialism.

Literary scholar and translator Maria Bloshcheyn introduced the *Kopilka* project, which focuses on collecting, translating, and publishing anti-war poetry on social media and in printed form by authors from Russia and Ukraine, as well as from other countries, including Canada.

Maxim D. Shrayder read poems from his recent collection of Russian and English poetry, *Kinship*, which meditates on the war in Ukraine, his grandparents’ Ukrainian homeland, and the complex intersections of his Ukrainian, Soviet, and American identities. Shrayder asks: Does Ukraine only represent a collective past, a place where one’s Jewish ancestors are buried? Out of solidarity with its people amid the country’s ongoing war with Russia and an empathic sense of kinship with those currently experiencing violence, Shrayder has come to view Ukraine as a kind of homeland.

Shrayder’s reading resonated with the talk “Revisiting Identity in Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry” by Amelia Glaser, a scholar of Slavic studies, who zoomed in from the University of California, San Diego, to discuss representations of tragedy in contemporary Ukrainian poetry as a means of reimagining Ukrainian identity. As Glaser argues, while these works often frame the Holodomor and Holocaust as competing traumas, they also demonstrate that the recent violence has led to a transformation of Ukraine’s national identity from the strictly ethnonational to a more inclusive sense of identity grounded in citizenship. Glaser emphasized the importance of linking the destruction of both Ukrainian and Jewish communities—that is, of seeing these catastrophes as two sides of the same coin, and of building understanding and empathy across these communities in the present.

Transnationalism and Canadian Jewish Identities

Can literature written by post-Soviet Jewish authors in Canada be categorized neatly as Canadian and/or Jewish, or does it reflect something new and different? This was one of the conference's main concerns. Soviet-born writers now reside in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Germany, among other countries, and cater to diverse national and international audiences. Recent fiction by post-Soviet Jewish authors indicates a move away from writing about a country that no longer exists to writing about migration, places of resettlement, and family scattered across a global Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora. These immigrants and their translingual and transnational affiliations contribute to multiple kinds of individual and collective identities. How, we need to ask, does the transnational nature of this literature align with or meet the expectations of Canadian cultural specificity?

This question was addressed largely through the work of David Bezmozgis, who was born in Soviet Latvia before immigrating to Toronto as a child. Some panelists compared Bezmozgis's works with those by other Soviet-born Jewish Canadian writers. Literary scholar David Rego, for instance, discussed Julia Zarankin's *Field Notes from an Unintentional Birder*. Ruth Panofsky, an expert on Canadian Jewish literature, juxtaposed Bezmozgis's representations of Toronto's Russian-speaking Jewish community with Mordecai Richler's novelistic portrayals of Montreal's Jewish enclaves. Panofsky thus underscored the traditional function of specific cultural spaces in Jewish Canadian literature, arguing that Bezmozgis's Goldfinch Court (and the larger Bathurst and Finch intersection in Toronto's north) should be seen alongside Richler's "The Main" (the area surrounding St. Urbain Street and Saint Laurent Boulevard) as a neighbourhood where the lives of Canadian Jewish immigrants unfold. Shlomo Gleibman's paper applied queer theoretical approaches to Bezmozgis's short story "Minyan," which is partly set in a small synagogue serving Soviet-born immigrants at Bathurst and Finch. Reflecting the transnational nature of post-Soviet Jewish culture, other scholars put Bezmozgis's work in conversation with Jewish communities elsewhere in the world, Russian-speaking and not: New York (Jonathan Boyarin), Poland (Karolina Krasuska), and Germany (Bettina Hofmann).

Among other issues, the differences between the Russian-speaking Jewish immigrant experience in Canada and the United States remained salient throughout the two-day conference. As Panofsky noted, a higher sense of alienation in Bezmozgis's fiction reflects the fact that Canada's Jewish community is smaller and more isolated compared to that of the United States. The conference's closing event, "Writing Soviet Jewry Between Fiction and History: A Conversation between David Bezmozgis and Anna Shternshis," moderated by *Canadian Jewish Studies* managing editor Joshua Tapper, emphasized the importance of writing and scholarship on the post-Soviet Jewish experience, especially in terms of facilitating understanding of the Rus-

sian-speaking Jewish immigrant community and its culture by mainstream Jewry and the wider Canadian society.

Literary Workshop

The literary workshop served to bring together voices from both Canada and the United States. Prose writers included Lea Zeltserman, Mikhail Iossel, Julia Zarankin, and Shlomo Gleibman. Poets included Vita Shtivelman, Nina Kossman, and Olga Stein. Poetry translators (from English into Ukrainian or Russian) included Ilia Lipès, Alexander Shik, Simon Safro, Margarita Koschenko, Radda Teplitsky, Vita Shtivelman, Dmitry Broymtan, Yana Kane, and Masha Bloshteyn. Excerpts from memoirs were read by Lily Kovan, Elena Clark, and Anatolii Kotchanov.

The paucity of publishing opportunities for Russian-speaking Jewish writers in Canada was identified as a pressing issue at the literary workshop. The discussion, “Publishing Your Work: Why It’s So Darn Hard,” reflected these challenges. Stein argued that the Canadian publishing industry shows bias against writers of Russian and Jewish backgrounds; not only that, there remains the simple fact that Canada has relatively few publishers compared to the United States and thus far fewer opportunities for publication and building literary careers more generally. Nora Gold identified several additional reasons for the above-mentioned challenges writers face. For one, the boycott of Israeli writing by some literary magazines over the past two years now extends to non-Israeli Jewish writers, making it ever-more necessary for writers to have a home for their Jewish stories.

The literary workshop also featured several practical suggestions for its participants. Poet and translator Alexander Shik discussed venues for publishing in Russian outside the post-Soviet world, including the Canadian literary magazine *Novy Svet*. The author and publisher Anna Porter highlighted Canadian book publishers and literary magazines, in English and French, that might be receptive to the writing of Jews with Soviet roots. Edward Trapunski, co-chair of the Canadian Jewish Literary Awards, encouraged participants to submit books for prize consideration and shared practical tips for approaching publishers. He insisted that there is a real public need for this kind of literary production.

The final discussion at the literary workshop, “Where Do We Go From Here?,” moved toward the organization of an association of post-Soviet Jewish writers in Canada as an institutional space for the study and publication of existing and new works by this community of writers and translators. The association would also provide opportunities for network-building, mentoring, and connecting with publishers. Another potential project is an online journal showcasing post-Soviet Jewish writing from across Canada. Ultimately, future efforts should be directed at forming a cohesive

literary community and creating new publishing opportunities that will raise the profile of (post)-Soviet-born Jewish writers in Canada.

Shlomo Gleibman moved to Canada from Ukraine over twenty years ago and received his PhD from York University's Humanities program and the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies. Shlomo teaches at York and other Canadian universities and has authored dozens of publications for academic and general audiences. He serves on the board of Canadian Comparative Literature Association and as a guest editor at the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*.

Olga Stein was born in Moscow. She lived in Israel before moving with her parents to Canada. Her PhD, from York University's English department, focused on contemporary Canadian fiction and cultural institutions. She is an editor, literary critic, poet, and sometime university instructor. Her public-facing essays, book reviews, author interviews, and scholarly pieces have appeared in numerous Canadian publications.