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The De-cosmopolitanization of the Russian Diaspora: A View from Brooklyn in the “Far Abroad”¹

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Diaspora communities emphasize different aspects of their complex cultural repertoires—whether by choice or by necessity—as they insert themselves culturally and politically into their host countries. Some highlight their race (blacks from the Caribbean into the United States); others their religion (Muslims from Algeria into France); and still others their language-based ethnicity (English in South Africa). Determining *ex ante* which aspect of their identities will “win” has long perplexed students of ethnicity. But over time, a significant proportion of each diasporic community and their descendants consolidates around a single dimension of difference, conditioning their social and political behavior on their interests as members of a category (say, Catholic) on the highlighted dimension (in this case, religion).²

These identity choices are not inconsequential. As Mary Waters has shown, second-generation Caribbean migrants have suffered a loss in expected life income, in part because they identify themselves (and are identified by outsiders) as “blacks.” A Caribbean identity has higher status to US employers than that of an American black, yet the regional identity has given way to the racial one. This has important implications. The outcomes of identity politics determine, to a considerable extent, who one’s social and political allies are and through what channels one must appeal for favor.

This article describes the process by which Russian-Jewish immigrants (RJIs) into the New York metropolitan area (but mostly to Brighton Beach in Brooklyn) have begun to consolidate around a dominant religious identity.³ The (mostly Jewish) Russophones who left Russia in the last quarter-century had a choice when they reached Vienna: either to emigrate to Israel or to wait longer, but eventually reach (through Italy) the United States. Presumably, those who chose the United States were more secular and less imbued with religious ideals than those who went to Israel. However—to exaggerate the difference for purposes of setting up the implicit comparison—the Russophone Jews in Brighton have principally identified themselves as “Jews,”⁴ while the Russophone Jews in Israel have principally identified themselves as “Russians.”⁵

There is an obvious irony about this outcome. Within the same set of Russian-speaking Jews leaving the Soviet Union in the late 1970s (the so-called third wave) and the late 1980s (the fourth wave, which carried many ethnic Russians along with Russophone Jews), those who dispersed to the religious state (Israel) condition their political behavior on secular identities, while those who dispersed to a state that promotes no religion (the United States) condition their behavior on religious identities.

Viewed from an explanatory point of view and from several theoretical approaches, the outcome is not at all surprising. Simple demographic models of political identification are useful here. To have influence in American and/or New York politics, a Russian identity is of little value. However, conjoined with other American Jews, Russian-speaking Jews can capture part of a powerful minority voice in both arenas. The demographics in Israel are opposite: identifying as Jewish Israelis gives their leaders no special voice, while the identity of Russian-speaking Israelis has become a visible and attractive one, at least to political entrepreneurs seeking support from this demographically significant voting bloc. What this perspective underlines is that diasporas do not necessarily emphasize the most cherished elements in their identity repertoires; rather, after “counting comrades”—potential allies—they choose that aspect of their identities that allows them to maximize electoral influence.⁶

Approaches that take into consideration the political space into which the immigrants arrive also help explain these results. In the United States, as implied by Alexis de Tocqueville (vol. 1, chap. 2) in his classic study of America, there is a deep-seated belief that linguistic diversity is harmful to the public good while religious diversity is healthy. It is no wonder that scholars such as Will Herberg and Helen Ebaugh and Janet Chafetz (chap. 20) have periodically pointed out that American immigrants consolidate into communities of religion, which are honored, and shed their linguistic differences, which are seen as threats by the dominant English-speaking society. Meanwhile, in Israel, although a considerable percentage of migrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) are not (by Ministry of Interior standards) Jews, no group can get government “pork”—or its kosher equivalent—by identifying itself primarily as Jewish. Therefore, immigrants returning to their imagined homeland consolidate around identities associated with the country from which they emigrated.

This article is not primarily about explaining *why* Russophone Jews in the New York area condition their political and social lives around their religious identities. Rather, its purpose is to describe, at the level of the family, *how* this result emerged. To do this, I will first provide a “modal life history” of the last two waves of Russian-speaking migrants from the FSU. These life histories, I contend,

demonstrate the cosmopolitan network into which Russophone Jews were embedded and do not foreshadow the outcome reached after settlement in New York.⁷ I will then discuss how the Russian-speaking diaspora in the “near abroad” (i.e., those countries that were formerly republics of the USSR) adopted a “Russian-speaking” identity.⁸ In contrast, this language-based identity did not become the focal or primary way of developing identity in the New York area. Third, I will discuss the everyday emergence of a religiously oriented Jewish-American identity among these once secular cosmopolitan Jews. The concluding section traces the cultural transmission of a religious identity from children to their parents.

For this analysis of one community of the diaspora living in the “far abroad,” I conducted field research in spring 2004 among Russian-speaking (and mostly Jewish) migrants from the late 1970s and beyond, most of them living in Brighton Beach. These interviews elicited twenty-five distinct family histories, in which I inquired about three generations. First was the generation that made the decision to migrate; second were their parents; and third, their children. Of course, these testimonies are a mix of factual recounting and rhetorical strategies employed by the interviewees to give meaning to their tumultuous lives. My interpretation of these interviews must therefore go somewhat beneath the facts.⁹ To supplement these histories, and to help get a broader vision than is possible from ethnography alone, I have also relied on some secondary sources, newspaper archives, and large-scale survey data.

I. A Modal Intergenerational History of the Third and Fourth Waves of the Soviet Diaspora in the United States

The outlines of the great majority of the intergenerational histories are similar. The elder generation was born in the Pale of Settlement on the western borders of the Russian Empire—a narrow zone, extending from the Black to the Baltic Sea, where the Czars permitted (useful tax-paying) Jews to settle but not to own land. Local nationalities rooted in the Pale generally despised these “protected” Jews and would terrorize them when central power was weak. Under Soviet rule, things changed fast. Jews began to adopt cosmopolitan identities in which their religion had little significance.¹⁰ The elder generation in my interviews, experiencing this early Soviet period, report becoming part of broad social and professional networks. And in response to the German invasion in 1941, many Jews were evacuated from the Pale and transported to Central Asia for safety, thus surviving the Holocaust. After the war, no longer restricted to the Pale, Soviet Jews advanced professionally at rates at least as fast as those of other Soviet nationalities. However, during the period of economic stagnation in the 1970s,

their children began to sense discrimination holding back their opportunities. It was this generation that sought to emigrate, and one route toward emigration was to emphasize their Jewish identity. When they applied for papers that would allow them to emigrate to Israel, the Soviet state turned on them. Those who took the risk and were granted visas dragged their secular cosmopolitan parents abroad. Given the immense social support for these Jewish émigrés (from their accompanying parents, from private agencies, and from refugee law in the United States), their equally high levels of human capital, and the opportunities available to them in the US economy, the middle generation rapidly advanced economically. Their children, on average, excelled academically and integrated socially into American culture. It is this modal story that sets the stage for the question of which aspect of their cultural repertoire (in this case, Russian-speaking or Jewish) would become their dominant political identity in the American context.

Let us begin, as did many of my respondents who were asked about their migration history, with the trauma of the German occupation in 1941 and the move from the Pale to the Urals and Kazakhstan. Here is but one such story:

In 1941, I finished ten years of school, in which the medium of instruction was Ukrainian, graduating the day of the occupation. The Germans bombed the bridge on the Dnieper, and we built a temporary bridge, and we were evacuated, and waited at an open railroad platform, with the sick and elderly, and for protection, they put us in carriages.

There were four in our family while everyone was evacuated to Kazakhstan, my mother, my brother and my sister (my father was on the front).

In the Urals, I worked for the Ministry of Ferrous Metallurgy, dismantling the factories from the west, and reconstructing them in the Urals, and storing engines and such for re-use after the war. All the equipment was listed, and I made these lists, and sent them to Moscow. In this way, they could send spare parts to factories operating all over Russia during the war. We lived in tents doing that work, twenty people to a tent.

My boss went to Moscow, and then the workers began applying to return to their home areas, but needed permission. My boss was head of the Komsomol [the Communist Youth Organization], and said it was too dangerous to return, and everything was destroyed. I applied twice and was denied permission, as they were afraid that there would be no one to do the work

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there. [I asked if it were because she was Jewish. She laughed and said,] No one cared about those things then. We were 80% Ukrainian there and 20% Jewish, but no one there knew who was who and we all spoke Ukrainian. It was after the war that religion mattered.

I then joined the Communist party. My boss then advised me to “just go” and not to worry about permission or paperwork. I returned to Ukraine in October 1943, a month in journey.

With my mother and little sister, we went to our old apartment that was watched over by a friend who stayed in Ukraine. My brother died in the Urals. My father went from Poland to the Japanese front and then returned to Ukraine. My boyfriend died in Stalingrad. (Interview 9)¹¹

As with the camps, so with the army. As one interviewee explained,

There was no anti-Semitic discrimination in the army; that came later. Everyone was treated equally in the army; no one had time then to find out what nationality you were. (Interview 13)

A sense of openness for Jews after the war is supported by the following recollection

I did not leave Kiev for financial reasons. I was doing well there. In Kiev, I was living across from Central Stadium, at the Central Square. During perestroika, many mass meetings took place there. I heard a lot of threats that the Jewish people would be killed (and many anti-Russian speeches as well). I became afraid, as many friends compared Ukraine then to Germany in 1932, and we heard the same messages coming from Kremenchug, from Kharkiv and elsewhere in Ukraine. My friends started leaving, and I decided to follow, in large part out of curiosity, like jumping out of a parachute [*sic*]. (I was wrong about the future, but those were still scary times, with the waning of Soviet power. But in independent Ukraine, with the collapse of the USSR, there is no longer a cultural life, due to lack of money.) The Soviet Union was good to me. I was from a poor family, yet I got educated and went to a technical institute. (Interview 8)

As the previous report suggests, anti-Semitism was a shocking new experience for Soviet Jews in the 1970s and 1980s. The Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants whom I interviewed are

emphatic that anti-Semitism was openly expressed during the stagnation of the 1970s and that it grew during the period of perestroika in the 1980s. In one survey of RJIs living in New York, 85% of respondents pointed to this stage of anti-Semitism in the FSU as serious (RINA, *Russian Jewish* 32–3).

My interviewees reported the feeling of anti-Semitism as part and parcel of everyday life during the stagnation, a time when latent prejudices became manifest. “In Russia, very little children hate Jews, I don’t know why,” Interviewee 2 recounted.

I told my children that they must study in school, better than everybody, because your grade will be lowered. When I tried to pass examination to Leningrad University, it was difficult, because the special tribunal put two hours more questions to me than was required, only for me personally, and the head of the tribunal said, “unfortunately, I haven’t found the question that you don’t know the answer to” and they had to give me a 5 [the highest grade]... Even with high grades, due to the special situation for Jews, it was hard to get jobs.

In *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*,¹² Odessa-born Yakov Smirnoff, who came to the United States in 1977, at age twenty-six, tells the following joke summarizing the feeling Jews had in Soviet times: There is a long line in a grocery store for sausage. Because of shortages in supply, the manager tells all Jews to leave. Three hours later he tells all non-Communists to go home. Three hours later he says all is gone, and everyone else must return home. One of the remaining Communists complains, “The Jews have all the luck again” (Iarmolynets, “Vozvrashchenie”). Today Smirnoff’s Odessa-style humor, simple and intellectual at the same time, is appreciated in New York.

Survey research by Samuel Kliger captures a genuine irony concerning this firm consensus about anti-Semitism: “Those Jews who now live in Moscow (including ‘half-Jews’) comprise a significant part of the new Russian elite ... their weight in Russian politics and business is much more significant than in any other Christian country ... ” (150). Thus, according to Kliger, it was perceived discrimination, not the actual fact of being worse off than others in the Soviet Union, that induced Jewish restlessness.

Restlessness, along with a new political opportunity to emigrate for those who made claims that they suffered from anti-Semitism, influenced how Jews in the Soviet Union perceived their socioeconomic situation. A series of informal agreements between the Soviet and US administrations allowed for a new flow of emigrants to Israel. These applications, however, were in the early years taken as a sign of disloyalty to the Soviet state and had grave consequences

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for those whose applications were refused (and who thus lived as *refuseniks* or *refuseniki*). For example,

Upon application for a visa, I immediately lost my position in the Russian Academy of Sciences. I survived by writing dissertations for Central Asian graduate students who paid me because there is no way their abilities in writing Russian would allow them to get advanced degrees. (Interview 25)

Refuseniks created new lifestyles in the Soviet Union. They joined “Jewish” circles, whereas beforehand many of them were largely uninterested in their ethnic traditions. They began to be more ethnically conscious and to practice Jewish traditions (not necessarily out of religious conviction, but because that was the custom of their people). Only a small number became religious; the others observed Jewish holidays as ethnic traditions:

As *refuseniki*, we tried to celebrate Jewish holidays, but it was pretty dangerous. We tried to learn Hebrew and the Jewish religion, because the Russian government oppressed it. Each time we changed place for our group studying Hebrew, for fear that the police would suppress us. (Interview 2)

But their reconnection with ethnic traditions was hardly their highest goal. Many of them used their savings to learn English. As one *refusenik* reported,

We studied English for many years before coming. The instruction of course was very mediocre. While we were waiting for an invitation, we started taking private lessons, contracting a very successful English teacher from Leningrad, who had tutored generations of immigrants. I had connections with teachers in the US who would send me teaching materials. We studied for a year with her. We didn’t study any Hebrew. We knew all along that we were going to New York.

Yet to get to the United States, they first had to receive an invitation from Israel. To be invited to Israel, potential migrants had to procure documentation from an Israeli saying that they were relatives seeking to join their families. In 90% of cases (this figure is a judgment from Interviewee 22), such connections were false, but Soviet authorities paid no attention, as all knew these were fraudulent documents.

We received such an invitation from “cousins,” and we brought it to the Special Department of the KGB, and filled out detailed

forms, and we had to specify the family connections with our invitees. We were then known as potential immigrants, but our jobs were in jeopardy immediately upon receiving the invitation ... My husband was a research physicist, and he was fired. First, he was denied permission to consult secret data archives. Then a British scientist came to his lab to consult with him; we invited him to our house, with members of the lab. This was forbidden without KGB approval, and this was used as the pretext for firing him ... I was then teaching Latin, French, and History at a vocational school for nurses, and I too was fired .. After my husband was fired, we filed our documents. There were dramatic consequences of this application. My husband's father had access to highly secret strategic military documents, and was a long-term member of the communist party, going back to his youth. Being an honest man, after we applied, he went to the head of his department to inform him, even though he had no intention of emigrating, and did not share our views on the future, but as a grandfather he "understood." The next day he was sent into retirement, even though he was the leader of a major project. (Interview 22)

In the late 1980s, the fourth and final Soviet wave of Russian-Jewish emigration began. Under deals between President Ronald Reagan and Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, the gates were opened to Jews wanting to go to Israel to rejoin families; those who created such fictions got visas, and Gorbachev got American wheat! In 1989, the US Congress designated Soviet Jews as a category eligible for admission to the United States as refugees, provided that they could demonstrate a credible fear of persecution if they remained in the USSR (Kliger 149).

From Moscow, those who received visas went to Vienna to be processed to go to Israel. In Vienna, those wanting to emigrate to the United States got support from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), to travel to Rome (where HIAS was headquartered) and apply for refugee status in the United States. As one interviewee explained,

We went first to Austria, paid for by HIAS. We had already made plans that we were going to New York, because two years earlier our best friends emigrated, and we decided to join them in New York ... We went from Vienna to Rome. Everything was well organized. We stayed for two weeks in the vicinity of Rome (in a lovely town named Monticello), in August. Once you received your package of money from HIAS, you had to find and rent an apartment. My son was knowledgeable about

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Roman history, and he knew everything by heart, and loved touring Rome ... Everyone was seeking to extend their Italian vacation compliments of HIAS. (Interview 22)

The migrants traveled in three-generation modules, although in most cases the grandparents tagged along reluctantly:

I came to the US because of this daughter. I didn't want to go, because I had this work in the Ukraine, and I was a member of the Union of Lawyers in the USSR, which gave me status. But here I can't work as a lawyer, not until my language is good. This language thing is a very big problem for me. (Interview 4)

Another case is similar

I was a military officer, a colonel, and served for twenty-nine years, a veteran of World War II. I finished my military service in Tashkent. There was big anti-Semitism there. My children did not want to live there, and came here. So what should I do, I came with them. (Interview 10)

Or again: “I had a ‘mother’s heart’ to be near my younger son. The older son [who also did not want to emigrate] came with us to keep the family united” [Interview 19].

These integrated family units made rapid economic and linguistic progress in the United States. In 1990 the average income of the Russian-speaking households in the United States was \$32,500, about average for the country. “The adaptation process is quick and relatively painless for most of them—two thirds find work during the first year in this country” (Supian 2004).¹³

This is no surprise. Self-supporting family units came together, providing child care and other support for those in the workforce. More important is the level of human capital. The level of education and skills of this diaspora ranked amongst the highest ever to enter the United States. In one survey, 60% of the interviewed RJIs had five or more years of higher education, in contrast to 35% of American Jews (RINA, *Russian Jewish* 12). In another survey, children of RJIs arriving after 1965 reported on their parents' education: 84% had at least one parent with a college degree, and 61% had two parents with college degrees (Kasinitz, Zeltzer-Zubida, and Simakhodskaya 13). In yet another study, sponsored by the National Foundation of American Policy, children of recent immigrants from all countries were shown to excel. They had the best results in math and science, and children of parents with H-1B visas (granted to those with PhDs)—100,000 from all over the world arrive annually in the United States—accounted for eighteen of forty

finalists in Intel's 1994 national contest of "scientific talents." According to this study, summarized in New York's Russian-language press, second place went to Boris Alexeev, whose father arrived from Russia with an H-1B visa. At the International Physics Olympiad held in South Korea in 2004, the American team consisted of two recent immigrants; the one female participant was Elena Udovina, whose father also had an H-1B visa (Anderson).¹⁴

Indeed, the Russian-speaking local press inundates its readers with stories of Russophone economic success. A story entitled "The Teacher with Golden Hands" (Iarmolinet, "Zolotykh") reports on Vladimir Deming, who emigrated twenty-seven years ago from St. Petersburg, where he worked in jewelry design. His passion was restoration, and, once in the United States, he educated himself in it. He now teaches these skills in New York's Fashion Institute of Technology and takes American students to Russia to observe restoration projects. In *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* there appears an interview by Alexander Grant with Semen Zakharovich Kislin. Kislin was born in 1935 in Odessa and left the USSR in 1972. In the USSR, he was the director of a supermarket; he now heads a company, Transcommodity, with a \$1.1 billion annual revenue stream. When he came to New York, Kislin spoke no English; he polished cars and cleaned vegetables. His company is now the largest supplier of cast iron in the world (Grant).

Immigrant ambition "o'erleaps itself." For example, in my Interview 13, a parent reported proudly that her child had passed the entrance exam for Stuyvesant High School, a prestigious Manhattan public school open only by examination. The parents knew they were moving out of the city, and therefore their son would not be eligible to enroll. But they nonetheless had him take the exam, as a proof of his academic prowess.

Not only does the Russophone Jewish diaspora have impressive human capital, but its members also have Soviet "training" in breaking bureaucratic barriers, quite a useful skill for immigrants seeking to make it in a new country. As reported above, one of my interviewees reported that after Vienna, "Everyone was seeking to extend their Italian vacation compliments of HIAS":

We were called to the US consul on the day when I had plans to lead an excursion [for which she would receive a wage, mostly to lead trips for Russian-speaking tourists, many of them on HIAS stipends]. We called the consulate and said I was sick. We didn't come. Next week, we found that our HIAS subsidy was withdrawn because we did not come for the appointment. We went to HIAS to straighten things out and our reception there was horrible. They knew we had two children and an aged parent. How can they do it without

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warning? They refused to reinstate it. My husband and I sat in their offices and said we were not going anywhere until our financial aid was restored. It paid off, and it was restored. We got what we wanted, and very soon after we left. (Interview 22)

Or, as reported in the press,

As one of the Russian comedians once said, if somebody learned to steal from and deceive his own country, it would be easy to succeed in doing it elsewhere. This seems to be the case with the Russian mafia—even Italians are amazed at their schemes and fearlessness. (Pakhomov)

Old-fashioned corruption is hardly absent from the Russian-speaking Jewish repertoire. American analyses of the Russian presidential election in March 2004, including that of US Secretary of State Colin Powell, saw it as a sham. Yet some Russian citizens living in New York went to vote, both at the Russian consulate in Manhattan and at the Millennium Theater in Brighton Beach. Passports were required. One young man submitted two of them, and a consulate employee entreated him to use just “the live one” (Kozlovskii).

Even though their success was derived from a combination of human capital, ambition, and cunning, my interviewees expressed unequivocal thankfulness for the country that offered them refuge and were nearly unanimous in feeling total loyalty to the United States: “All the Russians who appear here older than twenty-five have an accent, but they achieve a lot; they are doctors, lawyers, have huge businesses, a great country and God Bless America” (Interview 4). One interviewee complained about the conditions under which he was receiving “social security.” He and his group of veterans wanted it to be called “veteran pensions,” as this would give them the feeling that they had a right to it, that they had “earned it.” Yet, amid this statement of indignity, he blurted out, “I am grateful to the US. I have received medicine without payment, gotten social security, and many other benefits. God bless America” (Interview 15). Another immigrant nostalgically recalled the Crimea and the Black Sea (from which she had moved away, but to which she returned regularly for vacations) as more beautiful (“more natural”) than what we were then looking out upon, the beach at Brighton. Yet her loyalty is unquestioned:

Upon arrival to the US, we rented a room in a private house in Brooklyn. But we joined a lottery, where we were on a line for eleven years before we got this apartment in the Center for the Aged, and when we got it, my husband was dead. This was

from Program 8, and we also got SSI and food stamps.¹⁵ For that we didn't have to work. God bless America" (Interview 19)

A typical expression in the interviews was this one: "So we are very thankful to... the American people. We gave nothing to America, but America gave us social security" (Interview 10).

In a newspaper story, the reporter asked how "Russian-speaking" (*russkoiazychnye*) immigrants celebrated July 4. One respondent answered the interview question this way:

I spent Independence Day with my husband. We went to Brighton Beach. I am a doctor, so I could not switch off my cell phone. But fortunately all of our patients felt well that day. In the evening we met up with friends and went to Battery Park to watch the fireworks.

The author writes, "The celebration is over. I am sure that all Russian immigrants felt a surge of patriotism and an enhanced feeling of belonging during Independence Day" (Chernomorsky).

I believe the immigrants were coached to utter "God Bless America" for their citizenship interview, because they nearly all recited it as if it were part of a catechism. Nevertheless, there is no question that they felt an unbounded gratitude to America. Indeed, they were becoming super-loyal Americans. But most Americans have a hyphen before American; what would it be for this wave of immigrants mostly settling in Brooklyn? I address this question in the next two sections.

II. Not Becoming "Russian Speakers" (as in the *Near Abroad*)

The Russophone Jews could have designated themselves as, and conditioned their social and political behavior on being, members of the "Russian-speaking population" of the United States. Had they done so, they would have become part of a supra-ethnic community that includes Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Georgians, and Moldovans who also immigrated to the United States. Indeed, this self-designation was a choice made by many Jews in the republics of the "near abroad" after the Soviet Union collapsed. And for a variety of reasons, adaptation to America as "Russian-speaking Americans" could have been attractive.

First of all, in the New York area especially, there was full support for the Russian language and its community of speakers. Indeed, by the early 1990s the area had a critical mass of speakers. In 1990, there were about 300,000 Russophone Jews in New York City and about 400,000 in the metropolitan area. According to

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official New York City sources, new arrivals from the FSU were the largest source of immigrants in the later 1990s (RINA, *Russian Jewish* 1–2). Given the size and geographic concentration of the Russian-speaking diaspora, facility in Russian was passed on to the next generation naturally. A report in 1991 showed that although 53% of second-generation migrants reported preferring to use English at home, 85% claimed to speak Russian “well” and 93% reported understanding spoken Russian (Kasinitz et al. 10).

One of my interviewees explained,

Maintenance of Russian cultural life in Brooklyn is very good, because of the large numbers who came in the fourth wave. I consider myself an immigrant in the fourth wave, in 1989–92; the third wave was in 1978–79. The third wave people didn’t have knowledge, didn’t have information; they suffered more than our wave of immigration. In 1989, the influx of immigrants was huge. We arrived here through the old route, Israel visa, Vienna, Rome (for two months), and then to the United States. When we arrived here there was such an influx of immigrants that we couldn’t rent an apartment. Now they are lawyers, doctors, programmers, engineers, and artists. The third wave didn’t have theater, there was no Millennium here in Brighton. These people have been able to preserve the Russian language, support newspapers, theaters, two radio stations (which we did not have ten years ago). (Interview 3)¹⁶

Institutional support to sustain this community of Russian speakers was strong. As one interviewee reported,

When I came here, at the Brooklyn Public Library, there was one shelf of books in Russian. Right now there is a whole huge section for Russian literature. Half the readers in the library here are Russian, as Russians are avid readers; everybody goes to the library and they read a lot; the libraries here in Brighton, in Sheepshead, and in Gerritson, all have Russian-speaking staff. There was only one Russian bookstore when I came, and now there are several, with many children’s books. It made me cry, because in Russia, you had to know someone in the bookstore to get children’s books; and now (here) you can buy anything you like for Russian children, and I’m going to buy these books for my grandson. The libraries have all current fiction from Russia; and classics; and you can order what you want online. (Interview 1)

Because of the excellent Russian-language library collections and widespread access to credit cards with which to order books online, Russian-speaking Americans scarcely need these bookstores.

Other media are also available. Russian-language newspapers are plentiful. TV programming in Russian is varied and easy to get. “On TV I have four Russian language stations. The last Russian movie we saw was *Brigada*” [a soap opera, currently popular in Russia, about mobsters in St. Petersburg, available for rent in all local video stores as well as on TV] (Interview 2). There is ubiquitous availability of Russian radio programming in the New York metropolitan area, from talk shows to music to news. Theater, too, is plentiful, often with shows that have just recently played in Moscow and St. Petersburg: “As for Russian shows, we go sometimes, because it is convenient, walking distance from my home. The Millennium Theater plays before a full house always” (Interview 1).

Telephone connections to the Russian-speaking world are as cheap as calling New Jersey: “In 1989 we paid \$2 per minute, it is now cheap; right now we pay three cents maximum, but St. Petersburg is now 1.9 cents per minute” (Interview 1). All this is important evidence that the critical mass for a self-sustaining language community, one whose members see themselves as having a common identity as Russian speakers, exists in New York. These media opportunities support the formation of a “Russian-speaking” identity community. “We use the increasingly popular term ‘Russian Speaking’ Jews to include people from throughout the former Soviet Union as well as the emerging ‘Russian speaking’ Jewish communities in Western Europe and Israel,” reports one sociological study. It continues, “The second generation makes far fewer distinctions about which Soviet republic they or their friends come from than did the original immigrants themselves” (Kasinitz et al. 10–1). There is evidence in this report (and several nicely illustrative biographical statements) of children of Russian-speaking parents abjuring the language, but then as young adults studying it and regaining competence in it, in hopes of teaching it to their own children (10–1).

There was also a strong emotional attachment to the language on the part of several of my interviewees:

We speak Russian at home, I insist. In 1998 when I took my son to St. Petersburg, and my son Julian was impressed by the city and noted with glee that “everyone speaks Russian here. Thank you for making me speak Russian. Now I can understand what is going on around me.” My children spent three summers in Lithuania with their former nanny, so they brushed up on their Russian, and my daughter just spent the summer with her former nanny in Kiev, Ukraine, and then to the Black Sea. She came back not speaking a word of English, and her Russian was so good, but it all ended about a week later. She did not mix the two languages, but every word she

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had to say in Russian was very funny. My son downloads contemporary Russian music from the Internet, and they listen to CDs in Russian. (Interview 11)

Russian-speaking communities live in distinct neighborhoods such as Brighton and Kew Gardens in Queens. The more successful Russophone Jews from Brighton Beach move to larger houses and more opulent neighborhoods in Manhattan Beach (Berger). Still, they cluster together. Ester Schwartz, a schoolteacher, reports that, “Most Russians stick to each other because they prefer speaking their native language” (Berger). To give symbolic significance to the emergence of this historical language community in the United States, the newspaper *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* gave publicity to someone attempting to create a monument to the Russian-speaking immigrant community: “There is no decent monument to the Russian-speaking immigrants,” wrote Leonid Oloviannikov, who portrays this immigration as having world-historic significance. “The three generations of immigrants who brought to the USA their talents, their knowledge and experience,” he has pleaded, “deserve for their names to be remembered forever.”

Despite all this, Russian-speakingness has not become the dominant political identity, at least among Russophone Jews. Several interrelated reasons for this suggest themselves. First, there is a class divide between the (largely Jewish) third and the (mixed Jewish and ethnic Russian) fourth waves of immigrants, preventing a common cultural front. Many of my respondents deny this divide, but it is a real one. Again and again my middle-generation interviewees (from the third wave) insisted that they had close non-Jewish friends in their circles (upholding their cosmopolitan self-images), but, when asked to provide names and phone numbers (to allow me to increase my “snowball” sample), they directed me elsewhere, admitting they had no such references in their cell-phone directories. One interviewee who did admit to the divide rationalized it by stipulating that the Russians who came to Brighton Beach after 1991 were different. These mostly non-Jewish Russophones were poor and came to the United States for financial reasons, she explained, while the earlier wave, mostly Jewish Russophones, was well to do and came for political reasons. The more recent immigrants, therefore, were having more problems assimilating, while the earlier ones had assimilated easily (Interview 8). Another third-wave interviewee made the same argument. She did not “blame” the members of the fourth wave for their failure to connect with third-wave immigrants, but she found little in common with them (Interview 22). While there is a self-glorying aspect to third-wave perceptions, it is true that the *refusenik* generation of migrants was more highly educated and politically motivated.

A second reason for the non-emergence of a consolidated Russian-speaking dominant identity in New York is the undeniable intergenerational loss in the home language, a social reality that has affected all immigrant groups in America. Consider the following snippet of online doggerel, which mocks the Russian abilities of second-generation kids, with the italics representing English words with Russian declensions:

Zarentovavl dvuchbedrumnyi apartment [I rented a two-bedroom apartment]

I dlia nachala vziav pol*paunda* ikry [And purchased a half-pound of caviar]

Ia ponial srazu-nado mnoi ne kaplet [I realized—I'm doing fine]
Moi *velfer* dast eshe nesmetnye daru [Welfare will help me out]
("Weekend")

This mixture of Russian and English into a new dialect, reminiscent of Larissa Remennick's report on the development of "HebRush" in Israel and similar to Spanglish in the United States, is quite common in diasporic situations. It occurs even in cases such as this, where levels of ethnic endogamy are high. The loss of the ability to read and write the heritage language in the US-born generation was routinely reported in my interviews. Parents sadly admitted the overarching reality of monolingual English being one generation away:

Our older son's best language is English, then Russian, and then Hebrew, which he learns in school. At dinner we speak in English. If we have the energy, we force him to answer in Russian; if not, he replies in English and we just accept it. (Interview 17)

Another interviewee pointed out a subtler shift. Those born in the United States or those who leave Russia at age seven or earlier lose the "soul" of the language, and it becomes a means of communication rather than a component of culture. Once this occurs, the psychological motivation of the elder generation to maintain the language attenuates.

A third reason that the Russian-speaking identity has not consolidated is that of neighborhood mixing, especially as Russophone Jews move out to New Jersey and to the wider job market in the United States. Once they leave the neighborhoods of high Russian-speaking concentration, children in public schools lose attachment to the language, especially in light of the overwhelming economic and social incentives to learn English well.

A fourth reason, according to local understandings, is that in America, anti-Russian stereotypes are common and act as a constraint on young Russophones; eager to make-it in America, they hesitate to exhibit their Russian-speaking heritage. Survey respondents, even in the New York area, show great ambivalence about being known as “Russian.” One respondent says, “In my neighborhood, in Brighton Beach, the general Russian population I consider bad people.” Another corrects friends who call him Russian and demands to be thought of as a “Russian Jew.” And another says, “Americans ... look down on Russians because they are not so religious and being religious is a status symbol.” One girl fears for her value on the marriage market, as many Americans “look at them [Russians] as lower” (Kasinitz 49–50).

A final reason for the erosion of a Russian-speaking cultural consciousness in the United States is the end of “intelligentsia” culture in an American environment that does not reward high culture. “In Russia,” one interviewee told me, “we used to be theatergoers, but here much less. At first we had language deficiencies in understanding. Also the acting level in Russia was higher than what we saw off-Broadway and in Chelsea, so we stopped going” (Interview 1). Or, in a more damning statement, “America is boring with no intellectual or poetic consciousness—this was the glue to the Russian language, that is now being thinned out” (Interview 8).

To sum up, a class divide separating the largely Jewish third wave and the predominantly Russian fourth wave, the inexorable intergenerational loss of language that is the fate of all immigrant groups in America, the expanded geographical spread of the Russian-speaking Jewish community, and the desire to highlight aspects of identity that are valued (religion, but not intellectual culture) have all worked to diminish the appeal of a Russian-speaking identity for Russophone Jews.

III. Becoming *Jewish* Americans (and Much to Their Surprise)

The data show that the Russophone Jews in New York are becoming *Jewish* Americans; they are taking on a religious rather than an ethnic Jewish identity as their dominant identity. This is a surprise for several reasons, most impressively because the population living in Brighton constitutes the subset of *refuseniki* that refused to go to Israel!

But there are other reasons to see this as an unexpected outcome. For one thing, most of this diaspora was raised in a secular Soviet culture, quite ignorant of the practice of Judaism. One immigrant reported to me, with humor in his voice, that on the Swissair flight to the United States from Vienna, the *refusenik* passengers were all presented with kosher food, since they were known to airline officials

as Jewish refugees. He had no idea what “kosher” meant. The passengers complained to the stewardesses that they no longer wanted to be discriminated against as Jews and that they should eat as normal people do (Interview 25). In another interview, the respondent tried to emphasize his religious orthodoxy. Yet when I asked if he had a bar mitzvah, he was ignorant of this core ritual that marks the passage from boyhood to manhood (Interview 18).

American Jews were stunned by the resistance of Russian-speaking Jews to standard religious practices. According to Kliger (152–7), “American Jews have tried to reach Russian Jews as Jews while derogating or failing to understand their distinctive Russian identity.” Indeed, for the Russian-speaking Jews, socialized into a society that is Eastern Orthodox and once Communist, the idea of communal Jewish life is unfamiliar. Many could not, upon arrival, understand paying for membership in a synagogue, and even wearing a *yarmulke* was seen by many immigrants as shameful. The Russians would not speak of their religion (*religia*), as American Jews do, but rather spoke of their faith (*vera*); to Russophones, *religia* connotes tiresome rituals, whereas *vera* refers to individuals contemplating their fate.

In a poll of Jews in St. Petersburg, only 1% of respondents connected their Jewish identity with the religious activity associated with “professing Judaism.” The results are the same for those who emigrated to Israel (Kliger 154). And in the US study of migrants, only 3.4% saw their identity as connected to “professing Judaism” (Kliger 154). In America, they speak of their religion in a way that does not set guidelines for behavior, lifestyle, or beliefs. Russian Jews in America disregard the synagogue, saying such things as “God can hear me without the synagogue.”

In another study, when able to give multiple answers to the meaning of being Jewish, only 11% of the Russophone Jewish immigrants said it is “to practice/profess Judaism”; 17% said they observe Jewish customs. So for the adult migrants, Jewishness has a secular flavor, as 33% say the meaning of being Jewish is “to feel oneself part of the [vaguely defined category of] Jewish people” (RINA, *Russian Jewish* 21). Kliger summarizes this situation thus: “As ... seen by mainstream American Judaism, Russian Jews in America continue to be as indifferent to Jewish heritage and Jewish communal life as they were while they were living in the Soviet Union” (152).

Jewish communitarian practices were foreign to these immigrants. To be sure, there are areas of common practice. Passover is the most observed holiday (this is partly explained by the organization of the community Seder, the ritual reenactment of the exodus). Yet a 1993 publication reported that less than 20% of the Jews in Russia actually participated in a Seder that year (Shapiro and

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Chervyakov, qtd. in Kliger 157). There are also some data in the United States indicating very high participation in fasting on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). However, the vast majority of young Jews from the FSU were not circumcised. A rabbi who has performed some 8,000 *bris* (circumcision) operations for this population reports that he gets cancellations on 20% of appointments, suggesting a kind of taboo against this sacred Jewish ritual among Russophone Jews. Moreover, Jews from the FSU initially placed little importance on keeping the Sabbath.

Not only were Jews from the FSU acculturated to a secular environment, but they cultivated highly cosmopolitan friendship networks in the Soviet period:

My closest friends, I think, are all Russian Jews, even though in Russia my closest friends were non-Jews. But here, practically everyone I know, and everyone I communicate with is a Jew from Russia. (Interview 1)

All my relatives in the US are married to Russian-speaking Jews. In Ukraine, many friends and colleagues were not Jewish, but here, I don't see any “Russians” here. I like the Russians, they're good people; the Ukrainians, they're good people but I don't see them. (Interview 4)¹⁷

Despite their rather incomplete and insouciant relationship to religious practices and faith, Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants into New York are becoming *Jewish* Americans (with a religious fervor unexpected to themselves); it is this identity that is beginning to regulate their social and political behavior. Why is this happening? Some answers from my interviews follow.

First, there is the historical power of the fifth line on Soviet passports, which indelibly classified them as Jewish by nationality in the context of Soviet social and political life. To be sure, because of their secular Soviet upbringing, they developed a secular version of Judaism, often to the chagrin of the American Jews who sponsored them. Yet Soviet passport policy helped reify their identity as Jews, a reification that had long-term consequences. Thus the Soviet bureaucratic heritage may well be part of the explanation.¹⁸

Second, there are instrumental reasons for a Jewish identity.¹⁹ After all, those who could make a claim to be Jewish got a free ticket out of the “madhouse” of the Soviet Union. Interview data speak directly to this theme:

In 1989 was the first time any kind of Jewish life was allowed in the USSR. People then could openly gather and study things Jewish. In Perm, over that five-year period before we left, we

had a chance to get well acquainted with aspects of Jewish life. A rabbi came to Perm from Israel in 1991. He was there for three years, and I helped him, as I spoke English. I helped get him an apartment and get settled. [Now his wife interjects.] Before that time, three young people from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs came from Israel, telling local Jews what they would receive were they to emigrate to Israel. People then in Perm couldn't believe there were people from the West standing before them in their town. At that time, you needed coupons for sugar, and we were giving these young people our names to receive an invitation from Israel. (Interview 17)

I came to the US in October 2000. My wife's mother was Jewish. But my wife's father was not. This allowed my wife and therefore us to get the status of refugees. I was afraid to come because I lacked knowledge of the language and was old—even today it is difficult for me ... [Vasily's wife interjects] When Vasily turned 60, it was time to retire. His pension was not enough to survive, so he started collecting stuff from the garbage to get money. He didn't want to come to the US; but we received refugee status, and one day we received a telegram allowing us to leave before November 2000, and we had to go. In US, we get SSI [\$400 per month each], food stamps, Medicaid [Vasily has had several operations, including a heart operation, without any need for payment], and a 50% reduction for use of public transport. (Interview 23)

Another interviewee (Interview 20) came to the United States in 1992. In the United States, he did blue-collar work in construction. He had a heart attack and could no longer work in construction. He then got a job working in a jewelry store. He went to a business college hoping to learn programming. He did not finish because he had two more heart attacks; he then had heart surgery at Lenox Hill Hospital, paid for by SSI. He ultimately became a manager of the jewelry store.

With refugee status (available to several religious groups in the Soviet Union, but most assiduously applied for by Jews), Russophone Jews had access to free world-class health care and other benefits. This was summed up nicely in Interview 10: "We gave nothing to America, but America gave us Social Security."

Third, in the United States, synagogues, yeshivas, and other Jewish associations play key organizational roles as assimilating agents. "Upon arrival HIAS met us at the airport and got us into a hotel" (Interview 7).

To be sure, there is a low level of community participation in general among the second-generation migrants, but most of that

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participation is in Jewish communal activity: 71% of the US-born generation participates in activities at Jewish Community Centers and 38% in Jewish summer camps (Kasinitz et al. 30). Similarly,

It was very interesting, the way it was all set up, because at the time NYANA [the New York Association for New Americans, a Jewish welfare association] was giving first month’s rent and a security deposit to the proprietor, which new arrivals did not have to pay back as this was a fund from voluntary contributions. But these people whatever they lent us, we paid them back, and then some [laughs]. In the meantime, they wrote off what they gave us as charitable contributions, which I found out later, which is OK. (Interview 11)

The support from Jewish communities was astounding to the immigrants. Interviewee 16 arrived in the United States in 1993. She is Jewish, obtained refugee status, and was accepted by a Jewish community in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that invited her family. She had an elderly brother already here, who did not have the money to sponsor the rest of his family. He appealed to this community in Indiana, which came up with the money for Anna, her son, his wife, and their daughter. The community in Fort Wayne took the family under its wing for a year. They got a beautiful, fully furnished two-bedroom apartment, a closet full of excellent clothes, a full refrigerator, and an envelope containing \$300. It was a small town, yet people came with their cars and took the family everywhere. During the interview, she repeatedly expressed her thanks to this community. Later, after living in New York for eight years waiting for an apartment in a home for the aged, her turn came up, and she has been living at that home for two years. She pays only \$158 per month for a room. She gets SSI, food stamps, and medicine provided, all as a result of her refugee status. She is now studying in a Hebrew college at a synagogue every Thursday to learn English, since hers is still rudimentary.

In another case,

NYANA found me a job in four weeks, and I got a job in Strawberry’s, a chain, as a salesperson, and that is how I learned English, together with a fellow-worker from Bosnia. I worked there. I was studying accountancy in a school, and then found a job as an accounts payable clerk ... My younger child was born here, and went to nursery school. We didn’t go directly to a Jewish Center. Igor is not a registered member of a Jewish Center; he doesn’t have the patience to sit through the prayers. But last year we went on a trip with a Jewish organization to Israel for a week. (Interview 17)

After this, Jewish and not Russian became the relevant identity category for this couple.

With this high level of social support from Jewish organizations helping them to integrate, this diaspora community from the FSU began to imagine the “homeland” from which they dispersed as Israel rather than Russia. If this is the case, one would expect far more interest in Middle East politics than in politics within Russia. Data from my interviews confirm this:

I have no ties left in Russia. I don't miss anyone still there. But we do a reunion of people who emigrated from home. I have a Russian channel on TV, but I'm not interested in what is going on in Ukraine (when I left Ukraine, nobody cared about me; I only met anti-Semitism, forget it, I now have my country), but I'm interested in what is happening in the US, with terrorism, and with Israel. Last year I helped collect \$200,000 for Israel. I support people who care about us ... I know what's happening in Chechnya, but I'm not interested. Why I care about Iraq is that it is not far from Israel ... We need this war for Israel. (Interview 7)

We don't have Russian TV here [at home]; we don't watch much TV. We go to the Russian Internet sites. We don't follow closely Russian politics. Igor [the interviewee's husband] logs on to Russian news sites a few times a month, but he follows Israeli politics on the Internet every day. (Interview 17)

I'm interested in what goes on today in Russia, and Putin's totalitarian directions, but ... my friends find themselves interested more in the Israeli situation. (Interview 22)

These feelings are more than mere interest. They reflect a kind of deep concern for one's own people, and this people is defined as *Jewish*. For example, to Interviewee 1, I made a joke that the immigration flow would continue, as the next generation of Jewish migrants would likely be those evicted from the Israeli-occupied territories. She did not laugh; she said that Israel is a very sensitive subject, and she did not want to talk about it in this context.

But it was not only Middle East politics that revealed the interviewees' cultural identities. In their more-or-less accepted-as-cliché requirements for endogamy, they were also clear as to who their in-group was: the relevant set of marriage partners is *Jewish* Americans. One interviewee revealed explicitly that which generally need not be said:

It's my dream that my grandchildren will marry inside the Jewish community. We are a Jewish family. We have the

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opportunity here to continue my “nation.” This is very important. (Interview 7)

Supporting this desire for endogamy, the organizational network of Jewish associations sets a leisure-time agenda for these immigrants to be with other Jews. There is, of course, the synagogue.

When I arrived in New York, NYANA gave us a hotel for three weeks, until I found a flat on Avenue K and 31st Street. I went to the synagogue behind Hudde School. Every Saturday for two years I went to that synagogue. I didn’t understand anything, but had it translated. They gave me a Talmud in English, and I read it in English. (Interview 10)

This is so even when the immigrants have little interest in what the synagogue has to offer:

When I lived in Bayside, I relied on contacts at the synagogue, where I went to services every Sabbath [laughs]. I was a good Jew then. I’m not so good now. They did not provide social services, but I learned to read Hebrew, without understanding. I learned about the holidays which was very enlightening because I could not learn about them back home. (Interview 11)

But not only the synagogue. Interviewees revealed membership in a panoply of Jewish organizations: Jews from the Former Soviet Union (Interviewee 4); the United Jewish Federation (Interviewee 7); the American-Jewish Veteran’s Association (Interviewee 21, an officer and veteran of the Soviet Army whose group has a special interest in getting veterans’ benefits in the United States). These Jewish associational opportunities connect immigrants to the wider society, and, even though they are secular themselves, they draw their clients together as Jewish Americans.

Jewish-American identities—centered on support for Israel—can be strongly secular. But there are trends toward a religious cast to the emerging *Jewish-American* identities. The route is through the children. Many of the immigrants with school-aged children enrolled them in yeshivas (Jewish religious schools), based on the idea that they should learn something about the once-forbidden religion. Interviews of second-generation Jewish migrants from the FSU in the New York area reveal that 83% attended public high schools; 17% went to private, mostly Jewish schools (a higher figure for parochial schools than any other immigrant group in a larger study of second-generation immigrants in America; Kasinitz et al.). Sixty-six percent of those born in the United States (the “true” second generation) attended a yeshiva for at least one year, as most yeshivas waive tuition for first-year immigrant children. These

yeshivas were not academically demanding, but they were emotionally supportive and left a residue of religious ideology on the students who attended them.

Yeshivas made inroads. Irene, one of the interviewees in Kasinitz et al.'s sociological study, attended yeshivas from first grade through high school, and she became and remains (in her twenties) quite Orthodox

It was traumatic ... My parents ... did not want to be religious. They explained to me that they have been this way for this long and were not going to change. They said that when I grow up and have my own house I could do whatever I wanted, but that I am not going to change their life. (21–2)

I heard similar stories in my interviews, for example:

We have met new people here in Brooklyn, mostly at the yeshiva—where we take English lessons. Someone from Belarus, from Kishinev, from St. Petersburg, all of them Russian-speaking Jews, no Russian-Russians or Russian-natives (as we call them). Sometimes Russian-Russians come to the yeshiva to learn English, and we get to know them and those from mixed marriages. But at the yeshiva classes 95% is Judaism; 5% is English. (Interview 5)

Upon arrival, Galina spoke a bit of English, and Alexander some German. They had taken a course in English before leaving, but it did not work very well. Galina's granddaughter (who just graduated from high school in Brooklyn, and was ten when they arrived in the United States) was sent to a yeshiva, they claimed, because she would learn English more quickly there than in a public school (Interview 9).

I registered our daughter in a Jewish kindergarten in Brooklyn, on Coney Island Avenue and Avenue U ... We chose religious school for our kids, even though we felt that the quality of education would have been higher in a public school. But we felt we could help our kids in the secular subjects, no problem. But we knew nothing about Jewish subjects, so we had to rely on the school for that. We discussed this issue with our friends and thought about it a lot. Several friends feared that if our kids became religious, we would be separating ourselves from them, as they would have a different culture. But somehow I didn't believe this would happen, and we took a chance, and it didn't. We're as close to them as we always were. (Interview 24)

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Kasinitz et al.’s studies show that in the identities of second-generation migrants, the strongest formative effects are attendance in a yeshiva for more than a year, being a yeshiva graduate, and having visited Israel. Attending a yeshiva had twice the impact on respondents’ religious identities of any other factor. It is reasonably positive for all aspects of the identity, but more powerfully explanatory for the religious identity scale. The yeshivas, because they afforded a safe transition for newly arrived children, were a popular choice. Once chosen (as least for those who remained in the yeshiva system), they efficiently turned young Russian-speakers into practicing Jews (Kasinitz et al., Appendix).

Taught in yeshivas, or socialized in other synagogue programs, children begin to “convert” their parents or, better, to turn their secular ethnic notion of their Judaism into a religious one. In the Kasinitz et al. study, we learn of Juliana, aged eighteen, born in the United States shortly after her parents emigrated. After her birth, her mother became increasingly observant and joined the Orthodox community:

She wanted me to get Jewish education because in Russia she was not able to. The Jewish schools wanted a woman who was religious, who kept all the laws, who covered her hair. So my mother conformed a bit. She did that just so I can go to a Jewish school. And then as I learned the customs, I started prodding my parents to follow them. (22)

The same theme came through in several of my interviews. One elderly respondent saw the trends clearly: “But if the grandchildren are losing full facility in Russian,” she said, “they have remembered what they got in synagogue as children.” At this point, her daughter interjected: “What she is trying to say is that the grandchildren are more Jewish than I. We were not taught the religion, but our children were” (Interview 4). “My closest friends, however, became Orthodox,” noted Interviewee 22. “And so are their children. They observe everything. Their children, influenced in the local synagogue, induced them into Orthodoxy. Their parents followed them.” Another respondent revealed that “in the US, we became interested in Judaism, and it became part of our lives. Our children not only became interested, but they became religious” (Interview 24). The data reported in Table 1 lend support to this idea that, over time, the Russophone Jewish community in New York is becoming more self-identified as Jews.

My interpretation of the data in Table 1 is that the longer Russophone Jews stayed in the United States, the more religious they became. An alternative interpretation (which cannot be ruled out) is

Table 1: Evidence of identity choice: Religious attitudes of Russian-Jewish immigrants in New York

Percentage who agree	Freshmen (< 3 years in New York)	Sophomores (3–6 years in New York)	Juniors (6–9 years in New York)	Seniors (> 9 years in New York)
Being Jewish is important or very important	63	65	65	79
Judaism is most attractive	41	46	54	64

Source: RINA, *Russian Jewish* 9

that those who left the Soviet Union earlier were more religious to begin with. Here is the interpretation of the study’s authors: “It is our feeling that the number who adhere to Judaism has increased . This may indicate a real increase in the belief and practice of Judaism or an assimilation into American habits of ethnic-religious identification” (RINA, *Russian Jewish* 4). In either case, we see a progressive shift, for the Russophone Jewish community, to a more religious identity.

Data on the religious attitudes of second-generation migrants (Kasinitz et al. 41–8) suggest a religious consolidation over time in terms of principal identity:

- 40% of the second-generation Jews born in the United States, but only 10% of the sample that came to the United States as children, consider themselves Orthodox or Hasidic.
- 89% of the second-generation Jews born in the United States, but only 65% of the sample that came to the United States before 1988, display Jewish objects in their homes.
- 63% of the second-generation Jews born in the United States, but only 37% of the sample that came to the United States before 1988, claim to attend synagogue.
- “Those born in the US are the least likely to report that most of their friends are Russian but the most likely to report that most of their friends are Jewish” (Kasinitz et al. 30).

These data support the view that the second-generation migrants are strongly attached to Jewish symbols, Jewish organizations, and a Jewish way of life, more so than their parents.

All these ethnographic points add up to a clear choice in cultural identity. As one interviewee puts it,

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Everyone calls us “Russian Jews.” Nobody mentions us as “Jews.” In Russia, everyone who mentions “Jews” says “go to Israel.” Here we came, and they call us “Russian.” We are not satisfied with “Russian.” We would like to be “Jew,” not “Russian.” (Interview 7)

Russian-speaking Jews have come to see themselves both socially and culturally primarily as “Jews” with a strong religious component. Thus the identity paradox: coming from a resolutely secular social world in the Soviet Union, Russian-speaking Jews in the United States have come to see themselves both socially and culturally primarily as “Jews” with a strong religious component. Meanwhile, in the religiously defined Israel, Russian-speaking Jews have come to see themselves, both socially and culturally, primarily as Russian speakers and tend to be quite secular!²⁰

IV. Concluding Speculations

The New York Russian-Jewish diaspora that forms the basis of this article has, like any identity group, multiple cultural repertoires and many possible identities. In the 2000 RINA survey (*Russian Jewish* 16–8), respondents were allowed to self-identify among fourteen possible identities. The result:

- 71% of the respondents had “Jewish” in the category mix.
- 31% said merely “Jew.” This was by far the highest identity
- 6% said merely “American.”
- 4% said merely “Russian.”
- 56% connected their Jewish identity to some nationality.

This article has addressed the question of which aspect of the Russophone Jewish cultural repertoire has been and remains likely to be activated as the primary identity, and found it to be *Jewish American*. To explain this outcome (with the implicit comparisons to Israel and to the “near abroad”), a model emphasizing the demographics of the group and the general categorization scheme of newcomers within the host country would probably be sufficient. However, the processes by which it occurred (and the strong religious infusion within the Jewish identity) require a thicker level of description. The ethnographic accounts presented here show that the middle generation found in their Jewish identities a way to address the closing of opportunities during the period of economic stagnation in the Soviet Union. With this identity came the opportunity to migrate, an opportunity that they carefully exploited. Once they left, they were in the hands not of Tammany Hall politicians (as earlier

Irish immigrants to the United States, for example, had been) but of Jewish agencies that helped direct them to synagogues and their children to yeshivas. The children took their lessons at yeshiva seriously and pushed many of their parents into a religiously based Jewish identity. They identify with Jewish Americans generally, increasingly take the religious appeal of the identity seriously, and have limited social ties to non-Jewish Russians. As a result, the descendants of those who upheld the cosmopolitan ideal of secular Judaism in the nineteenth-century Pale of Settlement are today becoming the immensely successful de-cosmopolitanized *Jewish Americans* in Brighton.

Notes

1. The research for this paper was conducted when the author was a fellow of the Russell Sage Foundation. It was originally prepared for the conference on Changing and Overlapping Identities: Latvia facing EU Enlargement, held in Riga on 17–18 September 2004. The author thanks Juris Rozenvalds for the stimulation and invitation to write this paper, an earlier version of which was published in Latvia. The author also gives thanks to Inna Stavitsky for her logistical support in Brighton Beach, to Anna Gurfinkel for her research assistance, to Zvi Gitelman for sharing data, and to Kanchan Chandra, Viktor Makarov, Inna Stavitsky, Aivars Tabuns, Sidney Tarrow, Zvi Gitelman, and Khachig Tölölyan for their critical comments.
2. S.M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan wrote the seminal paper on the question of the social and cultural foundations for dominant political cleavages, and a large literature has followed in its wake. See Kalyvas for an analysis of the rise and fall of Catholicism versus secularism as a dominant cleavage in Western Europe.
3. RJI is the term used by the leading scholars who study this population. But a substantial part of this population is neither *russkii* (Russian by nationality) nor *Rossiane* (citizens of the Russian republic), inasmuch as many immigrants are from Ukraine, Moldova, and other former Soviet Union republics that are now independent states. Therefore in this article, when not referring to the work of other scholars or directly quoting interviewees (where context matters to know precisely which population is being described by the term “Russian”), I will call RJI’s Russophone or Russian-speaking Jews.
4. The de-secularization of second-generation Russian Jews reported here is consistent with the findings of Rina Cohen, who reports on secular Israeli migrants to Canada whose children experienced a religious awakening.
5. Larissa Remennick shows the viability of a Russian-based identity in Israel.
6. On counting votes for activating cultural identities, see Chandra (chap. 4) and Posner.
7. The image of Russian Jews yearning to practice their religion was exploded in these pages by Fran Markowitz, with data showing that most Russian Jewish émigrés in the United States spurned opportunities to practice their religion and portrayed themselves as cosmopolitans seeking assimilation into a Soviet identity. My interviewees reported the same. Markowitz’s suggestion that Russian high culture would be preserved in diaspora as part of a transnational community, however, is not supported by my interviews. For a review of this literature, see Zisserman-Brodsky.
8. On the identity choices of Russians in the “near abroad,” see Laitin.
9. In doing this, Mary Waters set a new standard.

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10. “Cosmopolitan” is a loaded word in Soviet discourse. Under Stalin it connoted (as opposed to “internationalist,” which was a term of praise) a bourgeois sophistication that was antithetical to equality. In this article I use the term in its conventional sense: those people who identify as sharing a fate with all peoples of the world and not just their own group.

11. This heroic work, consistent with my periodization, took on a different valence after the war. In *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* n.d. there is a personal memoir written thirteen years after emigration of the everyday experience of anti-Semitism in post-war Soviet life: “Nothing will erase the memories of my childhood, from which I remember bitter anti-Semitic remarks that ‘they’ . . . all went to Tashkent, and Russians had to fight for them . . .” (“Trinadsat”).

12. The title of this Russian-language daily newspaper, published in New York, means “New Russian Word.”

13. All translations from Russian-language sources are by the author and were checked for accuracy by Anna Gurfinkel. Ms Gurfinkel attended all interviews, which were conducted in a mix of Russian and English, and translated when necessary.

14. Anderson’s study was reported in *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* on 26 July 2004 (“Strana”). The newspaper story featured a photo of “our compatriot” Sergei Brin, co-founder of Google.

15. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a federal income supplement program funded by general tax revenues (not by Social Security taxes). It is designed to help aged, blind, and disabled people who have little or no income; it provides cash to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. It took intervention by interested authorities to permit Russian-Jewish immigrants to tap these funds.

16. I have changed the informants’ enumeration of waves to make it consistent with Russian historiography. In standard accounts, the first wave was after the revolution; the second, post–World War II; the third was the Jewish migration of the 1970s; and the fourth took place during and after perestroika in the 1980s and early 1990s.

17. Zvi Gitelman reports in an e-mail message that in his research in Ukraine and Russia during the Soviet period, the friendship circles of Jews were hardly more cosmopolitan than for those who emigrated. This merits future research.

18. See Suny for an account of the persistence of Soviet-imposed national identities. But why their national identity project was so successful while their attempt to socialize citizens as “new Soviet men” was so unsuccessful is a puzzle that remains to be solved.

19. See Werth. After the reforms allowing freedom of conscience passed following the 1905 revolution in Russia, large numbers of Jews sought to register themselves as Baptists. The Stolypin government refused to recognize these conversions, since they were interpreted not as faith-based but as instrumental. The converts judged the costs of becoming a Baptist to be low and the potential benefits of being able to trade in Russia proper to be high.

20. For more on Russian immigrants in Israel, see Gitelman, *Becoming Israelis*; Gitelman, *Immigration and Identity* (34–7), showing that in Israel the younger cohorts are less “Jewish” than their elders.

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