
Excerpt from Chapter 3. *Soviet Jews in the US: Chasing American Dream*

The Second and the 1.5 Generation: Caught in the Middle

"What sort of Americans, and what sort of American Jews, will these immigrants become? Indeed, will they ever become 'Americans' at all? ... Ultimately these questions will not be answered by the immigrants alone, but also by their ambivalently American children...It is this second generation, now coming of age, who will negotiate new and different ways of 'being American', 'being Russian,' and 'being Jewish.' These choices are not always explicit, nor they are mutually exclusive, and as with all young people, their identities may fluctuate over time" (from Kasinitz et al. (2001) "The Next Generation: Russian Jewish Young Adults in Contemporary New York.")

The American scholars of immigration are increasingly interested in the process of social incorporation of the immigrants' children born in the US or brought here as children and adolescents. Typically, the research on the New Second Generation targeted young immigrants belonging to visible minorities (Asian, Latino or Black) whose experiences of assimilation are shaped by both parental social and financial resources and the racialized urban environments in which they come of age. The social dynamics experienced by young immigrants is often depicted as segmented assimilation, meaning that some segments of the immigrant youth experience upward mobility and join the White mainstream while other parts of it drop out of school and merge with the marginalized youth groups of their US-born co-ethnics (Rumbaut, 1996). The location of the Russian Jewish youngsters in the multi-ethnic urban mosaic of New York or San Francisco is rather privileged, as phenotype-wise they belong to the White mainstream and their parents are endowed with significant human capital, if not financial means. Although most of them are on the upward leading educational track, the dilemmas of ethnic identity and cultural affiliation are constantly present in their lives.

Although most immigrant parents are interested in transferring their language and core cultural values to the children, various minorities differ in their ability to develop and sustain the organizational framework catering to this task (Smolitz, 2001). Russian immigrant parents are both strongly determined to pass their cultural heritage to the next
generation and have enough resources to do so. The two main arenas of this cultural transfer are the family and various educational and cultural institutions established by and for Russian-speakers in every American city and town with sizeable presence of Soviet immigrants. Take for example Newton, MA: a town near Boston with a population of about 90,000 (an estimated 20% of them Russian Jewish immigrants), it has two mathematical and three chess schools established by Russian teachers, several musical and drama groups in Russian, Russian choir, a 'sports academy' in a nearby town run by Russian trainers, and any number of private teachers giving classes in the Russian language and literature, music, plastic arts, yoga and meditation (in Russian). You name it – it is there. Russian Jewish parents are extremely weary of the American teenage culture of laziness and mindless pastime playing computer games, surfing the Net, watching TV or loitering in a nearby mall plaza (let alone more dangerous hobbies of sex and drugs). They are determined to keep their children occupied from the end of the school day till bedtime, and they invest their hard-earned dollar and a great effort chauffeuring them around from one class to the next. If no grandparents were around to do the task, then mothers, who often work part time or have flexible hours, would take their kids to various classes; yet, Russian 'soccer moms' should rather go by the name of 'chess and math' moms. The goals of general intellectual and esthetic development, and Russian cultural continuity, merge in these prolific after-school activities. This is what good parenting Russian-Jewish style is all about.

When children become adolescents, they start making choices for themselves, dropping some activities and pursuing others. Their affinity with their Russian side also varies, and some may see no added value in speaking their parents' language and identifying as Russian. In my experience, the majority of the children who came to America under the age of ten saw themselves as Americans with an additional Russian streak (multiculturalism is cool these days!). By their mid-late teens, most of these kids would speak limited Russian (with an accent) to their grandparents, a mix of Russian and English to their parents, and English with their friends, regardless of their origin. I observed a similar speech pattern among immigrant adolescents in Israel, representing a mix of Hebrew and Russian with rapid code-switching, depending on the identity of their contact (Remennick, 2004a). A few examples of symmetric bilingualism among
immigrant youths (in the U.S., Canada and Israel alike) are found among the families where parents made an iron rule of speaking only Russian at home, especially if these youths also visited Russia on a regular basis (e.g., during summer vacations), and read Russian books. Yet, all these components of language maintenance were seldom present together, so the youths who came of age in the U.S. typically combined some Russian oral proficiency with a limited literacy.

I was fascinated by these girls' and boys' reflections on their mixed linguistic and cultural identity. As most of my young informants lived comfortably, studied in good schools, and did well academically, their self-confidence and self-esteem were rather high, not in the least tainted by their immigrant background. On the contrary, it turned out that having an additional ethnic streak, especially speaking another language, carried an added value among their American peers. For example, Dasha (17) in a prosperous California town said: "It's cool to be Russian, or Chinese, or French – anything different, non-mainstream adds to your halo and charm. When I meet my Russian pals in the presence of American kids, I make a point of speaking Russian with them, and everyone would envy my facility with the language and wonder what we are talking about..."

Dasha looked and sounded a 100% American teenager to me, complete with a nose ring and tattoos, her main hangout being the global youth village of Berkeley, yet she greatly enjoyed her summer trips to Russia with her (ethnically Russian) mother, spoke fluent if heavily accented Russian, and even read contemporary Russian novels (under her mother's slight pressure).

Russian teenagers living in New York were somewhat more ambivalent about the meaning of their Russian label, given all the negative stereotyping of Russian Jews as gangsters, black market traders and pimps found in the media. For one thing, their families usually had a rather modest lifestyle, residing in small urban apartments and often hardly making ends meet on a single salary, as the other parent was either missing or unemployed. Since in many parts of New York Russian immigrants form the second largest ethnic minority after Hispanics, most public schools have significant numbers of Russian-speaking students, who lump together socially and hence retain their cultural boundaries for a longer time, compared to schools in other cities with few Russians present. At the same time, due to their solid knowledge base imported from their previous
schooling in Russia, they easily master the American curriculum (especially in math and sciences) and can therefore concentrate on learning English. In a matter of year or two their English proficiency reaches almost the native-born level, but they would often continue to mix the two languages (code-switch) with other Russians. By and large, former Soviet students are usually catching up with the top of their US-born peers, closing the language gap much faster than other immigrant students (Hispanics, Chinese, Korean, etc.). The dropout rates among them are also much lower (Palatnik and DeAngelis, 2001).

For the majority of the former Soviet youths, coming of age in the multi-racial social milieu of a large American metropolis (especially New York) has been both challenging and exiting. New York public schools became the arena of their first encounter with ethno-cultural diversity and often-hostile relations between different groups. Russian students had to define their stance vis-à-vis the African-American, Latino, Chinese and other minority groups, often comprising a majority of the student body. In the more problematic schools of Manhattan and Queens, the relations between the Russian Jewish and the Black "crowds" were often rather tense, as Russian immigrants represent all the social traits despised by the poorer black youth as part of "acting White" syndrome, i.e. striving for academic achievement, keeping quiet in class, wearing dull mainstream clothes, and showing no interest in drugs and guns. For example, Genia, a 15 year-old boy, who came with his single mother from Minsk four years ago, put it like this (in fluent English):

My school is a jungle, and every ethnic tribe tries to survive the best they can. We have a majority of Black students, all coming from the tough neighborhoods with a lot of drugs and guns going around. Another large group are Latinos; they used to be rather quiet when their English was still poor, but by now they tend to stick with the Blacks and became more aggressive. There are seven Russian kids in my class, and we usually go together, just for the reasons of safety, not necessarily because we like each other... The study is easy for me, I hardly do any homework and get straight A-s, but it is not my main concern... I wish I could switch to a private school, but my mom cannot even dream to afford it.

Other young informants, usually college students, emphasized that they actually enjoyed the multi-racial and multi-cultural makeup of the city, finding this an exciting change from the homogeneous White human landscape of their Soviet cities. Tania, a 17
year old from Tashkent, said that she disliked other Russians in her class as they were arrogant and often made fun of her clothes, hairdo and "provincial" ways. "I befriended a group of Latina girls and a few times they "took care" of my Russian torturers, so that finally they left me alone. Since then I go out with Latinas and even learned some Spanish." Other informants told me that living, working and studying with other ethnicities made them more liberal, broadly thinking, and less prejudiced against any otherness than are their parents and than they themselves had been before coming to the US. In a recent survey, over two thirds of respondents agreed (fully or to some extent) with the statement that immigrants made New York a better place to live. On the other hand, hostile encounters with racially different peers can reinforce the feelings of otherness and in-group preferences among young Russian immigrants (Kasinitz et al., 2001).

The above-mentioned study offers a snapshot on the lives of the 1.5 and second generation of Soviet Jewish immigrants as part of the larger research scheme called The Second Generation Project in New York. It examined in some detail the acculturation process of the youths and young adults (ages 18-32) belonging to several large immigrant groups of this "Gateway City" (Kasinitz et al., 2001; 2003). Data for the Russian component of this research was collected between 1998 and 2000 and included 300 structured telephone and 40 in-depth personal interviews with young Russian-speaking immigrants, most of whom were Jewish. Both the informants and their parents were well educated; many were still in college or in graduate school and often worked full-time as well to help their families financially and pay their tuition. The majority was single and lived with the parents, both for the reasons of high rental costs and strong emotional ties with the family. The choice of college was often driven by proximity to home and expediency of getting a degree, with quality and prestige being secondary considerations. Not surprisingly, the study pointed to a strong negative association between age at arrival and the extent of acculturation, those born in New York of Russian parents being the most American and the most Jewish at the same time. The in-depth interviews tapped on several interesting tendencies among young Russian New Yorkers.

These youths witnessed a difficult plight of their parents to regain their former occupational status and make their way back to the middle-class, with a varying degree of success. Most fathers and all but few mothers started their life in New York toiling in
manual jobs among other multinational immigrants. Many families had lived for years on end on social assistance, although by the time of the study only the grandparents still received it as their only income. These struggles left deep impression on the young people and boosted their own strong drive for education and economic success, repeating the story of the previous generations of Jewish migrants (Simon, 1997). All but few of them had started working part time in fast food, catering, and other services back in high school and knew rather well that money comes with a lot of sweat. In their own choice of education and career, most opted for the prestigious and well-paying occupations in finance, law, management, computing, and information technology. In the sample of 300, over a dozen informants worked as financial consultants and brokers on the Wall Street.

Over half of the sample (53%, including those born in the US) continued speaking Russian at home and at least sometimes with their Russian friends. About 90% said their oral Russian was fluent, but only 62% could also read well and only 49% wrote well in Russian. Several informants reflected on the change in their attitude towards their Russian origin: while during the first years upon resettlement they were driven by the impulse to conform with the mainstream American youth culture and spoke English in most settings, in their twenties many rediscovered the world of Russian literature, enjoyed their ability to speak Russian with family and friends, and generally reappraised their cultural heritage as an asset rather than a liability. Despite their fluent English and cultural competence in American urban living, over two thirds (68%) said that most or all of their friends were of Soviet origin (not necessarily Jewish), while 22% had a mixed circle of friends, and only 10% befriended mainly non-Russians. The Russian-based social networks played important role in the lives of these youths: although only 18% said that most of their co-workers were other Russian Jews, over 40% found their current job via co-ethnic friends or contacts. Many also met their dates and fiancés via co-ethnic grapevine or common hangouts and disco clubs (Zeltzer-Zubida, 2000; Kasinitz et al, 2001).

As expected, the questions about the participants' Russian, Jewish and American identity revealed a rather dynamic and complex picture, endorsing the assertion that ethnic identity is always situational and elastic rather than primordial and fixed (Castells, 1997). The Russian component was rather deeply carved in the self-concept of most
young immigrants due to the linguistic practice in the family and frequent socializing with other Russian-speakers. The American/New York identity was also rather firm, as most perceived New York as their home, did not intend to leave the US, shared the basic American values of liberty, individualism, and respect for law; over 60% were already naturalized or in the process of gaining citizenship (this is a very high rate given that most were relatively recent arrivals). The Jewish segment of their identity was the most fluid and contradictory one; yet it was significantly more pronounced among young New Yorkers than among their counterparts in other US cities with a lesser Jewish presence and fewer Jewish cultural institutions. About half of the sample had attended a full-time Jewish school (Yeshiva) for at least one year, not because their parents wanted them to turn to religion, but because they perceived these schools to be safer and having higher education standards than regular public schools (the tuition waiver for new immigrants was also enticing). In practice, most parents were disappointed by the amount of religious indoctrination and weak secular curriculum of these schools and soon removed their children from Yeshivas, so that 83% completed public high schools. Yet, the Yeshiva experience left an imprint on many Russian youths: they are more knowledgeable and often more observant of the Jewish traditions than their peers outside New York. Eighty percent of the sample said that they had a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people; 42% attended synagogue at least once a month, 44% had bar-bat mitzvah, and 45% lived in the households where Shabat candles were lit and donations to Jewish charities were regularly made. A small minority of Yeshiva graduates became religiously observant Jews (baalei tshuva) (Kasinitz et al, 2001).

The young generation of Russian Jews manifests a greater propensity for self-organization and community life than their parents. Although their regular participation in the mainstream Jewish organizations and in the urban civic associations is relatively low (about 35% and 20%, respectively), in several large cities young Russian Jews established informal social groups of their own. The examples include the youth club called Mishpukha (family in Yiddish) in Greater Boston and the 79ers’ Association in the San Francisco Bay Area. While the former was formed under the sponsorship of the Synagogue Association of Massachusetts and one of its goals is reinforcement of the Jewish identity among its members, the latter has a largely secular orientation and aims at
creating a social network for the similarly minded co-ethnics. Its home page opens with the statement: "Generation-R: All American on the outside, Russian Jewish émigré on the inside. You emigrated as a kid or pre-adolescent and grew up here. Your Russian is rusty and your Judaism is... God only knows. A generation of Russian-Jewish-American hybrid culture molders – Generation R" (www.tribe.net). The group's name reflects the initial intent to outreach for those who came to the US with their parents around 1979 – the peak year of the first Jewish emigration wave from the USSR, but later on came to include all members of the 1.5-generation regardless of the arrival time. Although this group has also been established with the aid of the local Jewish Federation, its agenda is set by the members, including the discussions of cultural issues (e.g., the concept of love in Russia and America), trips to the FSU, and attempts to set up interesting cultural activities in Russian for the children of the 79ers.

My more recent research among Russian-Jewish second generation in New York and Boston (Remennick, 2010) suggests that a significant fraction of these young Americans manifest lively interest in Israel, have travelled there with their parents or alone (for example as part of Birthright program), and express support for Israeli causes whenever they can. This is especially true among those youths who had experienced formal Jewish schooling in the US and as a result manifest stronger Jewish identity, regardless of their interest in religion. Many others are drawn to Israel as a ‘romantic alternative’ to their settled and routine American lives deprived of risk and adventure. Yet others have personal connections to Russian Jews living in Israel, since many extended families and social networks had been split in the early 1990s by their members’ migration to the West vs. the Middle East. Hence the transnational interests extended between America and Israel (and sometimes former Soviet countries too) are potentially more common and intense among young Russian Jewish Americans than among their non-immigrant counterparts.