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SOVIET JEWS, RE-IMAGINED: ANGLOPHONE ÉMIGRÉ JEWISH WRITERS FROM THE USSR¹

Sasha Senderovich

'Dystopia' is my middle name. I was born in the Soviet Union, and then we moved to Reagan's America. (Gary Shteyngart, qtd in Solomon 2010)

WHEN THE BERMANS, the Soviet Jewish émigrés who are the protagonists of David Bezmozgis's story 'Roman Berman, Massage Therapist' (2003), arrive at the house of Jerry Kornblum, a well-to-do Toronto doctor who, together with his wife, has invited them for a Shabbat meal, a comic misunderstanding ensues. Roman Berman, the narrator's father, used to be a weightlifting trainer with the USSR's Olympic team – a position that bespoke connections with the Soviet authorities and a good deal of privilege. Upon arriving in North America at the height of the Soviet Jewry movement that rallied Jews in the West around the cause of Jewish emigration from the USSR, he hoped to succeed as a massage therapist by touting his credentials as both 'Soviet Olympic coach and refugee from Communist regime' – the latter, reluctantly, at the behest of his wife (Bezmozgis 2004b: 27).

The émigré family sets out to impress their native-born hosts:

My father was dressed in his blue Hungarian suit – veteran of international weightlifting competitions from Tallinn to Sochi. I had been put into a pair of gray trousers and a pressed white cotton shirt, with a silver Star of David on a silver chain not under but over the shirt. My mother wore a green wool dress that went nicely with her amber necklace, bracelet, and earrings. (31)

Bezmozgis's nearly cinematic attention to detail is ripe with comedy. The Bermans are not religious, so an outwardly displayed symbol that would successfully project that they are Jewish – the Star of David – is forced upon the couple's child to elicit compassionate feelings in the local Jews, Jews imagined as people who would fall for this type of outwardly worn symbolism. These carefully presented identities are out of place when Kornblum himself appears, in his own costume: 'a man in slacks and a yellow sweater opened the door. The sweater had a little green alligator emblem on it' (31).

The alligator emblem on Kornblum's yellow sweater might project a preppy look in the same way that the Star of David projects a clear Jewish identity, but the Bermans, fresh off the boat, are not familiar with the Lacoste brand. The reader sees Kornblum's attire

through the Bermans' eyes as if seeing it for the first time – a good example of what the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky famously called 'estrangement'. Estrangement seals the comic juxtaposition of those who perceive themselves as exiled Soviet intelligentsia overdressed for the occasion in their old world best with the affluent doctor with a tiny alligator on his sweater not dressed well enough to receive them. We also see the Bermans as they expect themselves to be seen by their North American Jewish hosts. Their old world attire is their native costume of sorts – and their image of themselves is consistent with what can be called self-orientalisation, a concept stemming from Edward Said's writing about how Western orientalis constructed the image of the orient in such a way that it has turned 'orientals' themselves into native informants who parrot the West's assumptions about themselves (1979: 323–5).

As the story progresses, the mismatched expectations of the two sides continue to accumulate. The Bermans had thought of themselves and their story of oppression as unique, but the Kornblums, it turns out, have invited friends who bring along another émigré Soviet Jewish family. This other family is a mirror image of the Bermans (dad, mom, son, all of them equally overdressed) but with litanies and stories of persecution, which anthropologist Nancy Ries has called the Soviet intelligentsia's 'discursive art of suffering' (1997: 83), that appear more impressive in the eyes of the hosts. Roman Berman's rival lifts up his shirt to show a scar from when his co-workers attacked him after they found out that the family had applied for an exit visa. This other family had been refuseniks and have literal scars to show for it, whereas, as the narrator puts it, '[we] knew some refuseniks, and we were almost refuseniks, but we were not refuseniks' (33). Unable to engage in sufficient litanies to prove their refusenik intelligentsia status, the Bermans concede that they haven't suffered as much as the imaginary Soviet Jews who existed in the minds of their hosts and whose more perfect incarnations now appear to be sitting across the table from them.

Adrian Wanner has suggested that 'Bezmozgis presents North American Jews as less than sympathetic characters . . . It becomes apparent that Kornblum has an ulterior motive in inviting the Bermans: he wants to enjoy stories about the horrible life of Jews in the Soviet Union' (2011: 140). This analysis places the blame squarely at Kornblum's door. What makes Bezmozgis's story work, however, is the amount of satire it casts not just in one but in both directions.

As much as the story lampoons the Kornblums and their expectations, the Bermans are not innocent either. Bezmozgis dwells on a peculiar mutual dependence that allows the Jews from the Soviet Union to imagine themselves in ways that dovetail with how Jews in the West wish to imagine them. Building on Said's work, Faye Harrison defines self-orientalisation as a process that 'complies with existing stereotypes. The orientalised subject absorbs the dominant sense of self-identity and uses it as a way of marketing to the outside world, remaining within understandable and understood frames of reference' (qtd in Georgiev 2012: 15). Imagined as their suffering Soviet brethren by their Western saviours, the Bermans internalise this projection and perform their constructed identity accordingly: their best attire to fit the intelligentsia stereotype, and their child's Star of David worn visibly over his shirt to make it clear that the suffering intelligentsia family is also Jewish in ways that the Kornblums would have imagined. What the Bermans learn, however, is that the other Soviet Jewish family at the dinner table has outdone them in their self-orientalisation.

Bezmozgis is one of a cohort of émigré Jewish writers from the Soviet Union who have started to publish in English during the last decade. Their work, I will argue, is

characterised by their reflection on this intriguing self-orientalisation by émigré Soviet Jews which resulted from them being imagined this way by Jews in the West.² These writers' stories make us question past assumptions about Soviet Jews and offer a distinctive perspective on the way that Soviet Jews construct narratives attractive to their American Jewish counterparts, and how, in turn, they are constructed by those narratives. Who are the Soviet Jews, these works invite us to ask, and how are they different from the concept of 'the Soviet Jews' that has crystallised in the imagination of Jews in the West?³ How can we differentiate between a set of experiences that may be shared among Jewish émigrés from the Soviet Union and the constructed nature of narratives about these experiences?⁴ How do those in the new cohort of Jewish writers from the former USSR make their English-language readers question Cold War dichotomies and why do they repeatedly point to ways in which Soviet patterns of thinking were not always so different from those in the West?⁵

To the extent that scholars have begun to take an interest in the steady flow of Anglophone fiction by Jewish émigrés from the former Soviet Union in recent years, their focus has been on the difficulties of contextualising the authors' Jewish identities in relation to the notion of Jewish identity in North America.⁶ This essay leaves the task of qualifying and quantifying the Jewish identity of émigré Soviet-born authors aside and, instead, offers a different set of observations about this ever-growing literary output.

First, with a few exceptions, this emerging corpus of texts has so far been marked by a certain amount of irony about both the desire (exemplified by Bezmozgis's *Bermans*) to fit into the context of a (North) American Jewish environment and the constructs that native-born American Jewish hosts have deployed in understanding the new arrivals. In turn, however, these writers' mastery of the English language, coupled with their familiarity with the Soviet Jewish narrative, allows them to point out curious similarities between Soviet and American ways of thinking that enable them to explore how the existence of 'Soviet Jews' has shaped the Jewish imagination in America.

Second, these literary texts' oft-ironic questioning of myths about 'the Soviet Jews' must be situated within the post-9/11 context in which they have begun to appear. Jerry Kornblum may be eager to see the scars of his Soviet Jewish guests in early 1980s Toronto and his Soviet Jewish guests may be eager to show them, but what might be the added significance of this story when it is told in the initial years of the twenty-first century? I will argue that the Soviet Jewish story has had a particular appeal in the post-9/11 world, because some of the politicians shaping this world were influenced by it; and that, in turn, a number of the Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers who have begun writing in English in the past decade have started to question the validity of this received narrative.

To address these questions, I will examine a set of recurring tropes in stories and novels by David Bezmozgis, Anya Ulinich, Nadia Kalman and Gary Shteyngart: the distinction these works hint at between real and imagined Soviet Jews, the place of Israel in the story of the migration of Jews from the Soviet Union to America, and the applicability of the legacy of dissidents to contemporary realities. As I will argue, these tropes recur in works of fiction by Soviet-born Anglophone émigré Jewish writers because of the wider cultural and political context of the early twenty-first-century America in which this body of literature has emerged.

In her novel *Petropolis* (2007), Anya Ulinich offers another example of the type of encounter that Bezmozgis mapped out in 'Roman Berman, Massage Therapist'. Sasha Goldberg, the novel's Soviet-born protagonist, ends up, for a period of time, staying with an American Jewish family in the suburbs of Chicago. The host family's surname

is Tarakan, which means ‘cockroach’ in Russian. The Tarakans, as befits their caricature of a name, are an exaggerated portrait of American Jews, but so is Ulinich’s depiction of Sasha’s Siberian hometown, named Asbestos-2, which is a kind of oversaturated portrayal of a Soviet industrial wasteland. Ulinich sets up these hyperbolic Soviet and American polarities to highlight the imaginative work of one about the other.

Sasha, who, like the self-orientalised child narrator of Bezmozgis’s story, has been made to wear a Star of David pendant around her neck, is asked to attend an evening gala called ‘Operation Exodus’, aimed at raising funds for the benefit of Soviet Jews (Ulinich 2007: 155). The name of the event, which references a 1990s campaign to resettle post-Soviet Jews, highlights the near-ritualistic place that Soviet Jewry occupied in the American Jewish mindset: it evokes the ancient Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and Leon Uris’s novel about Jewish migrants to Palestine.⁷ Ulinich describes the event thus: ‘After the last of the guests were seated, Mr. Tarakan began to speak . . . Sasha heard Mr. Tarakan say “thousands upon thousands of Soviet Jews,” “freedom,” and “hope.” Trained by years of Asbestos-2 schooling, her mind automatically tuned out the speech’ (157).

Ulinich’s description of the gala deconstructs a basic Cold War dichotomy that pits that which is Soviet against that which is not. Sasha’s Soviet schooling, in which words like ‘Lenin’ and ‘the state of workers and peasants’ would have been routinely blanked out by any student who heard them too often, is presented here as the appropriate background from which to understand Mr Tarakan’s speech, even though it is supposed to be anti-Soviet by definition, in so far as it promotes the Jewish immigration that the USSR seeks to thwart. This equation makes the structure and the style (though not the content) of a speech in defence of Soviet Jewry no different from the clichés of a Soviet schoolteacher.

Sasha Goldberg is not the only ‘example of Soviet Jews’ (157) present at the Tarakans’ fundraiser: there is also Yulia, a young woman from Kiev. While Sasha is sceptical about being paraded before the donors because she realises that she is being seen as a kind of ‘oriental’ native informant by her American Jewish hosts, Yulia, in a speech that relies solely on self-orientation, is more than willing to play the part:

My mother and I have been fortunate to slip through a crack in the Iron Curtain, to escape anti-Semitism and oppression, but thousands of Jews are still trapped in the former Soviet Union, unable to worship openly. Because of your efforts, many of them will receive the gift of freedom. In the name of all the Jews from the former Soviet republics, I would like to thank everyone present here. You will be in my prayers tonight. (156–7)

Ulinich, in satirical mode here, fills Yulia’s speech, like Mr Tarakan’s, with keywords that emphasise her mastery of the language of her American Jewish benefactors and her ability to exploit it as a poster child for the Soviet Jewish cause. These keywords should theoretically make Sasha tune out from the speech just as she had tuned out from Mr Tarakan’s appeal, but in fact Sasha finds herself paying attention to the details of Yulia’s speech and wondering whether Yulia really prays, ‘and to what’ (158). Additionally, by paying attention to Yulia’s words along with Sasha, the reader can identify an inconsistency in Yulia’s speech: this benefit on behalf of ‘Soviet Jewry’ is occurring at a time when the Soviet Union itself has ceased to exist.

In her speech, Yulia refers to ‘the former Soviet Union’ and ‘the former Soviet republics’. Now that official Soviet atheism has disappeared together with the USSR, the issue of emigration for the purpose of free religious expression is no longer the desperate necessity

that Yulia implies. Yulia has learned to mimic a Cold War discourse that resonates in the American Jewish community, which is all the more appealing because she is the beneficiary of such a discourse. If, in Bezmozgis's story, seeing the bodily scars sustained by a refusenik is timely, as some Jews in the Soviet Union at that time had been refused exit visas and were waiting to emigrate, here the oppressive regime, though it is already in the past, continues to exist as a discursive construct that can still be played with. In other words, in Ulinich's novel there is no more Soviet Union – but there are still 'Soviet Jews' imagined in a very specific way that conforms to the values of their American brethren.

The Tarakans want to show Sasha off at their fundraiser. In fact, Mrs Tarakan's own sense of Jewish identity depends on doing her part to help, as she says to Sasha, 'people like you'. To do her part to help, Mrs Tarakan gives Sasha a kind of crash course in Judaism – evidence that her own sense of Jewish identity relies on making the non-religious Soviet Jews more 'Jewish' in the sense of 'Jewish' in the United States, which has much more to do with religion than it does in the former Soviet Union. In a further element of the plot that upsets Mrs Tarakan's conception of Jewishness, Ulinich's novel hinges on a brilliant twist: Sasha's Soviet Jewish identity – even though any identity is a construct – is an imaginary construct several-fold. Sasha Goldberg, despite her name, is not Jewish either in ethnic terms or in terms of upbringing: her father, Victor, born to a Russian woman and an African man visiting Moscow in the 1950s, was adopted by the Goldbergs, a Jewish couple, who died in a car accident when he was a teenager (Victor spent his adolescence in an orphanage). One-quarter African and three-quarters Russian, Sasha has the deceptive appearance of someone who is an 'other' – seen by some as black and by others as Jewish. Moreover, Sasha herself has come to the States not as a Soviet Jewish refugee, but rather as a mail-order bride in search of her half-African father, who himself had left the Soviet Union several years earlier, claiming to be a political refugee (his real reasons for leaving, however, were not political). In Ulinich's novel, which satirically exaggerates many things, the racial and ethnic underpinnings of Sasha's identity, which shift more than the likes of Mr and Mrs Tarakan expect, call attention to the claim that no identity is ever fixed.

Re-evaluating why exactly Soviet Jews – or, in the case of Ulinich's novel, those imagined as 'Soviet Jews' – come to America entails questioning the purpose of the fundraiser the Tarakans put on in the Chicago suburbs. In fact, Ulinich's novel elides another important fact, which has generally been elided in the memory of American advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jews: American Jews mostly did not campaign for the right of Soviet Jews to resettle in America, but for their right to emigrate to Israel.

Providing a good illustration of American Jewish collective memory of the Soviet Jewry movement, *Refusenik*, a documentary produced in 2009, presents the struggle of Soviet Jews to resettle in Israel without ever mentioning the several hundred thousand Jews who ended up in North America in the process.⁸ Despite the fact that the film was shown widely on the Jewish film festival circuit in the US, it did not prompt a wider conversation about what the film omitted as far as the destination of many Soviet Jewish émigrés was concerned.

David Bezmozgis has begun to address this lacuna in the American Jewish cultural imagination about the Soviet Jewry movement. Some of his work has focused on the so-called dropouts – the vast majority among Soviet Jews who left the USSR on Israeli exit visas during the 1970s and the 1980s without any intention of proceeding to Israel. In 'An Animal to the Memory' (2004), while the narrator's grandparents decide to continue on to Israel when his family arrives in Vienna (which, along with Rome, served as a midway

point for Soviet Jewish émigrés), the boy's parents refuse to follow: 'We were bound for somewhere else. Where exactly we didn't know – Australia, America, Canada – but someplace that was not Israel.' The narrator's parents try to avoid representatives from the Jewish Agency milling around Vienna's train station; they try even harder to avoid these agents' questions, which the narrator sums up: 'Why were we rejecting our Israeli visas? Why were we so ungrateful to the State of Israel, which had, after all, provided us with the means to escape the Soviet Union?' (Bezmozgis 2004c: 67).

In his novel *The Free World* (2011), Bezmozgis devotes his attention fully to the exploration of these questions. Bezmozgis focuses on the Krasnianskys, a family from Riga who spend six months in Rome in 1978 awaiting their visas to places beyond western Europe. The family's patriarch, Samuil, is an old communist who remembers his Yiddish-language socialist upbringing fondly. He is also a Second World War veteran who left Riga reluctantly, whereas his two sons – one, an opportunist, another, a skirt chaser – are happy to seize the possibilities that emigration has created. Calling into question the lofty associations with Western freedoms that the novel's title ironically suggests, Bezmozgis focuses on a fairly average Jewish family leaving the Soviet Union in search of better opportunities, rather than protagonists who seek freedom of worship or freedom of expression.

Their choice not to continue on to Israel may have more to do with their sense that opportunities were more readily available elsewhere than with any ideological stance. However, an ideological rationale for rejecting Israel is presented to the Krasnianskys by another character they encounter in transit. In Rome they come into contact with Lyova, who at that point has been in Rome for several years awaiting his visa to America. His trajectory is more unusual than the Krasnianskys': he had left the USSR earlier for Israel and has now left Israel in the hope of getting to America.

Lyova describes his decision to immigrate to Israel in the first place:

I know it's hard to believe, but I was a military man, a tank officer. I grew up on my father's war stories and I also wanted to be a hero. But instead of a war, I drew Czechoslovakia. I was one of those poor bastards on top of a tank in Prague, pointing a submachine gun at a bunch of students. Pretty girls in raincoats spat at me. After that, I was done with the army and the Soviet Union. And when people started applying for exit visas, I didn't think twice. (Bezmozgis 2011a: 125)

Lyova's stint in the Soviet army – as he relates it in the novel – was in the beginning shaped by stories of the heroism of Soviet soldiers during the Second World War, the war itself (referred to as the Great Patriotic War in the USSR) being a potent nation-building myth in the Soviet Union in the postwar years. However, for Lyova, this heroic myth crashed in 1968 during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia which ended a period of liberal reforms there. Lyova emigrated to Israel shortly thereafter but another disappointment awaited him there in the wake of Israel's Yom Kippur War of 1973, in which Lyova participated as an army reservist:

When the war ended, they sent me to Gaza. Once again I found myself on top of a tank pointing a gun at civilians. When they saw us coming, women clutched their children, and the men turned to face the walls. In Czechoslovakia, I had consoled myself with the thought that my people weren't responsible. The Russians were doing it, and I was a Jew. In Gaza, I couldn't think this. With me was an Israeli, another reservist with a wife and kids. He said, *It's shit, but it's our shit*. For me, this wasn't an excuse, this was the

problem. I'm sure there is much I don't know about America, but I know that their sons don't have to go and do this. (126)

Like Ulinich's Sasha, who pays no attention to an anti-Soviet speech in support of Jewish emigration because of its Soviet-like rhetoric and style, Bezmozgis's Lyova draws a parallel between Israel's suppression of the Palestinian Arabs and Soviet actions in Czechoslovakia. For Lyova, both societies, which valorise military heroism, find themselves in situations where war has failed to be heroic for some – though certainly not most – of their citizens, who begin to see their soldiers turn into occupation forces left to stare down innocent civilians. Just as the occupation of Czechoslovakia causes Lyova to become disenchanted with the Soviet ideal and prepared to bolt to Israel, the occupation of Gaza now makes him flee from the Jewish state. (Lyova's certainty that America is different from both Israel and the Soviet Union itself seems ironic given that the remark is made only about three years after the end of the Vietnam War. Moreover, by making Lyova sound so naive about America, Bezmozgis is being tongue-in-cheek with his own knowledge of the Iraq War, which was being drawn down as *The Free World* was published.)

As Lyova seeks a visa to America and the Krasnianskys await their papers, Bezmozgis, like Ulinich before him, reveals the consequences of seeing non-Soviet parts of the world through a Soviet pair of eyes. In this particular case, Bezmozgis reveals how many Soviet Jews chose to move to America in part out of opposition or resistance to Israel, and/or scepticism about its self-heroising narrative. As it appears to the novel's protagonists, Israel, like the Soviet Union, requires an ideological commitment from its citizens, whereas to some Soviet Jews the preference in emigration is for a life without the need to subscribe to a new ideology – as Lyova puts it, he wants 'the country with the fewest parades' (278). Of course, as these writers also make clear, moving to America does, in the end, involve choosing an ideology – one of consumerism (for example, Kornblum's Lacoste sweater is a symbol of Western consumerism that the narrator of Bezmozgis's story is keen to observe). Yet while American Jews in Ulinich's novel imagine that Sasha Goldberg is helping to raise money for Soviet Jews to move to Israel, Bezmozgis's Lyova calls into question the extent of Israel's appeal to the new émigrés.

The prisoner of Zion – a courageous person sacrificing everything for the sake of wanting to fulfil the Zionist dream and emigrate to Israel, and thrown in jail for his convictions – is a figure who reigns supreme in the cultural imagination of many Jews in the West in relation to the Soviet Jewish experience.⁹ However, just as most Soviet Jews leaving the Soviet Union at the pinnacle of the Soviet Jewry movement did not emigrate to Israel, so most Jews in the USSR were not dissidents. Several works by Anglophone émigré Jewish writers from the Soviet Union have focused on the figure of the dissident, calling its persistent claim on the present-day experience into question. Some of these works feature characters who claim to have been dissidents and whose stories make claims on contemporary relevance; Nadia Kalman's and Gary Shteyngart's literary constructs of dissidents within their respective comic novels are particularly notable.

Nadia Kalman's *The Cosmopolitans* (2010) is a twenty-first-century version of the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem's classic *Tevye the Dairyman*, written in instalments between 1894 and 1914. Kalman's work is perhaps the funniest novel of the émigré Russian Jewish literary output in English – a true equal-opportunity satire where nothing and nobody is spared the writer's wit. The novel features Osip Molochnik (whose last name literally means 'dairyman' in Russian), his wife Stalina (named after the dictator) and,

in the vein of *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), the musical based on the Tevye stories, three daughters on the brink of marriage. Milla, the eldest, chooses a spoiled American Jew instead of the high-achieving Russian Jew her parents had picked for her. Yana, a radical feminist, weds a Bangladeshi exchange student in what her family sees as defiance of her own views about women's equality. Finally, Katya, a drug addict who involuntarily quotes Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev (she is the product of her mother's extramarital affair with one of Brezhnev's speechwriters and this reason is cited to explain her hilariously strange ailment), falls for a no-goodnik with a mouth full of gold teeth who floods the Molochniks' house when he attempts to drown himself in the bathtub. Kalman's wit targets the older generation of Jewish émigrés from the Soviet Union who, it turns out, have constructed their family history as far more heroic than it was, and the generation of the daughters and their romantic partners, as well as the various non-Russian Americans who come on the scene.

One night, at a performance of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Stalina has an epiphany that she subsequently describes in her comically broken English. Scoffing at Americans who imagine that Russian Jews are poor, backward and in need of civilising (like Tevye's family in the musical), she rejects the idea that émigrés came to America for financial reasons: 'We come for freedom,' she says, 'not pantyhose. I can get new pantyhose on black market' (Kalman 2010: 122). A showdown follows in which Stalina impresses her version of the family's narrative on to her daughter and her daughter's American husband:

They [American Jews] think we are only talking *spletnya* [rumours], who marries who. We had bigger fish. Who is in jail? Who is expelled from party, who is making protest, who is printing *samizdat*? You know how we decide to immigrate? . . . To show that we are free people, and not afraid of the worst punishment. And then they [Americans] take us to supermarket and expect that we will have fainting over food. Five different kinds of apples. (122)

Fiddler on the Roof, as the cultural product most emblematic of how American Jews in the 1960s conceptualised themselves as having emerged from Russia a couple of generations before Stalina and her family did, provokes Stalina's realisation about how she and other Soviet Jews have been 'orientalised' by the American Jews. Unlike Bezmozgis's Bermans, who are keen to present themselves as fitting such stereotypes – to indulge their self-orientalisation – and find a way to use them as they ask the natives for help, Stalina's rejection of this self-orientalisation is more neoliberal in nature, angling to present Soviet Jews not as people who need to be helped but rather as those who claim to know the true value of freedom. Stalina's broken English and the plot's numerous twists resulting from Stalina's superstitions obscure the message she is trying to convey to her children – that the search for freedom was the primary motivating factor in immigration; and, as a result, the message gets garbled. With Stalina's voice rising to an even higher pitch in the bar, the scene is more a kind of embarrassing acting-out than a way for the generations to actually relate to each other. In Kalman's novel, the younger generation has no way to relate to the parents' stories except through myth, the implications of which to their own lives are not clear.

Similarly to Kalman, Gary Shteyngart offers his own version of a freedom-loving parent who tries to impress upon his son his Jewish dissident credentials in *Absurdistan* (2006). In the process, his novel questions whether the dissident narrative could be a useful model for the next generation. Of the three novels by Shteyngart to date, *Absurdistan* is the most

biting exercise in satire, tackling allegorically some of the problems of the post-Cold War world: America's involvement in wars in the Middle East; the country's penchant for multiculturalism; and Shteyngart's own literary success as an émigré writer and the appeal of émigré narratives in the American literary marketplace.¹⁰ Where the popular account of émigré Russian Jewish discourse sees the Soviet and American experiences as polar opposites, Shteyngart, like Bezmozgis, Ulinich, Kalman and others, explores the Soviet experience as a way of understanding life after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including in America.

The novel's protagonist, Misha Vainberg, 'age thirty, a grossly overweight man with small, deeply set blue eyes, a pretty Jewish beak that brings to mind the most distinguished breed of parrot' and a son of the '1,238th-richest man in Russia', is unable to return to his beloved America, where he had attended college and remained for several years afterwards (Shteyngart 2006: 3). The narrator dedicates his first-person narrative to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 'with that cloying Russian affection that passes for real warmth'. His experience with the INS has not been positive; the agency will not let him back into the country because his father has killed a certain businessman from Oklahoma (vii). The novel follows Misha and his trials and tribulations across the former Soviet expanses, including the fictional oil-rich republic of Absurdsvani (the eponymous Absurdistan of the title), as he tries to return to America at the behest of his recently deceased father, Boris.

One of Misha's strongest memories of his father touches upon the elder Vainberg's credentials as a dissident and a Zionist: 'For his dissident Zionist activities in the mid-eighties (particularly for kidnapping and then peeing on our neighbour's anti-Semitic pooch in front of the Leningrad headquarters of the KGB), my father had received a two-year sentence' (57). The heroic image of the dissident Zionist came to define the popular image of the Soviet Jew and those who suffered such trials were endowed with a sense of moral authority. By contrast, in *Absurdistan*, the incarceration gives Misha's 'beloved Papa' something less heroic but no less useful: an important set of connections in the underworld, which became Russia's newly made capitalist elite when the Soviet Union fell apart. The elder Vainberg's self-identification as a Jew transmitting the tradition to the next generation reaches its full parodic expression when he forces his son to be circumcised by drunken Lubavitchers when Misha moves to America, and the circumcision is tragically botched.

Beside the consequences of Boris Vainberg's heroic deed, the description of the deed itself ironically deconstructs an act that would have normally passed for Zionist resistance. In the comic world of the novel, urinating on a dog constitutes Jewish self-defence because the dog is said to be antisemitic. Moreover, the whole performance is said to be dissident because the protester stages it in front of the headquarters of the KGB, the Soviet secret police which, among its other operations, tracked Soviet Zionists from the 1960s to the 1980s. Like Ulinich's Sasha Goldberg, who is highly attuned to the use of ideological buzzwords, Shteyngart's Misha locates 'anti-Semitism' and 'the KGB' within the same sentence as he shares the memory of his father.

Misha is conscious that he can evoke his father's 'dissident' and 'Zionist' legacy in dealing with impressionable US officials. At the US consulate in St Petersburg, while demanding to see the *chargé d'affaires* to press the case for his American visa, Misha trots out his story: 'I am Misha Vainberg, son of the famous Boris Vainberg who peed on the dog in front of the KGB headquarters during the Soviet times' (68). In Misha's case, his choice to deploy his father's supposedly heroic legacy is doubly dubious, because in the end his

father's less heroic accomplishment (his killing of an Oklahoman businessman) actually prevents him from receiving his American visa.

Finally, an Israeli intelligence agent definitively denies the story's relevance: 'In the seventies, a drunk, charming *refusenik* was sort of poignant. *Shabbat shalom in Leningrad* and all that. But by the nineties, your father was just another Russian gangster . . .' (304). The statement comes from the mouth of a Mossad agent – an Israeli official who hints at the appeal and usefulness of the *refusenik* narrative to the Israeli state apparatus in the Soviet period, a narrative that may have expired afterwards. The novel is a satire: in no way does Shteyngart suggest that someone's experience as a *refusenik* would necessarily lead him to become a criminal mastermind, but Misha might have guessed that in his father's case, the love of Jews somehow coexisted with criminal activities. That sort of juxtaposition sat right on the elder Vainberg's bookshelves, which held 'the collected texts of the great rabbis, the *Cayman Islands Banking Regulations, Annotated in Three Volumes*, and the ever-popular *A Hundred and One Tax Holidays*' (76).

The elder Vainberg urinates on his neighbour's antisemitic dog in front of the KGB in what is presented as an act of Zionist dissidence, and presses the case for Jewish emigration to Israel in a comically outlandish way. But even the elder Vainberg eventually becomes disappointed in Israel when he gets to visit the previously mythical country:

He lived in an abstract world where the highest form of good was . . . the state of Israel. To move there, to grow oranges, to build ritual baths for menstruating women, and to shoot at Arabs – this was his lonely goal. Of course, after socialism collapsed and he finally got a chance to get drunk and happy-fisted on a Tel Aviv beach, he discovered a goofy, unsentimental little country, its sustaining mission nearly as banal and eroded as our own. I guess the lesson is – freedom is anathema to dreams nurtured in captivity. (234)

The last sentence of this ironic reflection on the Jewish state finds resonances of the Soviet Union in Israel: both countries are powerfully structured by an ideology. Just as the Soviet version of socialism was a dream nurtured in captivity (including, in Lenin's case, in Czarist jails), his father's Zionist dreams were likewise nurtured in the captivity that was the Soviet Union itself. Freedom to turn such dreams (including dreams of 'shoot[ing] at Arabs') into reality is anathema to both. The equation of the Soviet experience and Zionism, imagined as its apparent opposite, lingers over this description: Shteyngart's comic fiction, like fiction by other émigré Jewish writers, blurs the border between realms that were long held to be distinct.

Why have émigré Soviet-born Jewish writers highlighted in their works unexpected parallels between certain Western and Soviet ways of thinking and ideologies, often with the help of satire and irony? Granted, many Jews from the former Soviet Union would dispute the analogy between Soviet values and American or larger Western ones, to judge by the Russian-language Jewish émigré press in America, Israel and other countries. Moreover, most émigré ex-Soviet Jewish communities, whose politics tend to the right in a rejection of anything that appears 'leftist', perceive and protest against a completely different analogy between the West and the Soviet Union: they see the United States slipping dangerously into a Soviet-like socialism – a position not attuned to the criticism, from the left, that what in the US passes for liberal politics is actually quite conservative. 'Socialism' in this case becomes a code word for negative associations with the Soviet experience.¹¹ Émigré authors, who have grown up on their parents' generation's narratives, have created

a body of fiction that works through common narratives about the Soviet experience and have opened up a space for a new generation to hammer out its own perspectives about that experience and its influence on post-emigration attitudes and identities. This kind of work seems to have been essential for a generation of young writers who are likely to continue to offer their interpretation of Jewish life in the Soviet Union from the vantage point of émigrés writing in English, and of the Soviet Jewish immigrant experience in America and other places.¹²

By disrupting established narratives, the new generation of writers has begun grappling with issues of the present day; the most recent novel by Gary Shteyngart provides a case in point. Intriguingly, the narrative present in *Absurdistan*, published in 2006, ends on 10 September 2001 – a day before the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The events described in *Super Sad True Love Story*, published in 2010, take place in the near future in a post-apocalyptic Manhattan. The skyline, marked by the Freedom Tower, points us towards the post-9/11 context (the Freedom Tower is a skyscraper build on the site of the destroyed World Trade Center). By avoiding setting these two novels in the present and by describing America in dystopian terms, Shteyngart offers new ways of understanding America's present and near future. He does so in part by referencing a point of similarity between what America has become and what the Soviet Union was perceived to have been: that is, a complete surveillance state.¹³ The United States, he suggests, has appropriated a discourse of 'freedom' (embodied, among other manifestations, by the Freedom Tower) not unlike the discourse present in the authoritarian Soviet state. The legacy of the Soviet Jews' fight for freedom, moreover, buttressed the American discourse on 'freedom', which was understood to exist in opposition to Soviet tyranny.

Super Sad True Love Story is a dystopian novel but, like any description of a dystopia, it appropriates aspects of actual cultural discourse and exaggerates them to a point where the real world itself comes to seem dystopian as well. In the world of the novel, the citizenry has voluntarily surrendered to complete observation, in part through their penchant for constant wireless connectivity and their desire to share facts of their lives with complete strangers. The American economy was long ago eviscerated by a financial crisis and is now run by China, US troops are engaged in a war with Venezuela, and a very powerful Secretary of Defense (who is Jewish and is said to be a great friend of Israel, referred to in this novel as 'SecurityState Israel') is the de facto leader of the country.

In Shteyngart's novel, Lenny Abramov is a nearly middle-aged protagonist in a country obsessed with youth and youthfulness. Lenny is a Russian Jew only by virtue of being born, in America, to émigré Soviet Jewish parents – this distinguishes him from Shteyngart's early characters, who end up in America as children or young adults. Abramov may be fully American but, given the series of transformations that America has undergone, being American does not prepare him well for living in what the country has become.

Lenny describes his family just as he is about to be subjected to intense questioning by something called the New York Army National Guard, one of the institutions of the newly dictatorial America: 'My parents were born in what used to be the Soviet Union, and my grandmother had survived the last years of Stalin, although barely, but I lack the genetic instinct to deal with unbridled authority' (Shteyngart 2010: 41). In other words, skills that one would have acquired in the Soviet Union are the skills that are now necessary in America. America, far from being the bastion of freedom it may have seemed from the vantage point of the Soviet years, now appears to be as much of an authoritarian state as the Soviet Union.

The subtext of Shteyngart's novel is deeply political. Just as Halliburton's oil drilling in the fictional Absurdistan implicitly alluded to America's oil industry-backed Iraq misadventure, so the future dystopia of *Super Sad True Love Story* evokes the post-9/11 'war on terror', a campaign conducted in the name of 'freedom' but actually destructive of civil liberties. This link between post-9/11 America and the US fight against the Soviet Union is not merely imagined. Natan Sharansky – the famous Soviet Jewish dissident who spent nearly a decade in jail in the USSR for his Zionist convictions – helped America justify its war on terror. In his 2004 book *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*, Sharansky, who was then a minister in Israel's right-wing government, made a case for America as the enforcer of freedom around the world. Sharansky defined freedom in his book simply as the ability to speak freely in the middle of a town square without fearing arrest (Sharansky 2006b: 40–1). The book was written in English and published in the United States at a time when it had already become clear that the US government's claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, used by the George W. Bush administration as a pretext for expanding the 'war on terror' to Iraq, were unsubstantiated. Bush met with Sharansky in the White House in the autumn of 2004, shortly after his re-election, to discuss the book, embraced Sharansky's logic and presented Sharansky's concept of freedom as the new *raison d'être* for America's involvement in Iraq.¹⁴

Sharansky became a model for Bush not only because of his writing but because of his biography; the story of the world's most famous dissident-turned-important-Israeli-politician appealed to the White House as well as to the American public. When Bush's popularity tanked two years later in 2006, Sharansky defended him in an op-ed published in *The Wall Street Journal*. Titled 'Dissident President', Sharansky's op-ed gutted the definition of 'dissident' just as severely as he had gutted the definition of 'freedom' in his book three years earlier: 'There are two distinct marks of a dissident', he wrote. 'First, dissidents are fired by ideas and stay true to them no matter the consequences. Second, they generally believe that betraying those ideas would constitute the greatest of moral failures' (Sharansky 2006a). Drawing on his personal experience as a dissident and the moral authority that came with it, Sharansky called on Bush to remain steadfast in his policies, which had by that point been subject to worldwide discussion and debate. In doing so, Sharansky was – ironically – calling for an authoritarian style of leadership to defend a specific view of 'freedom' rather than promoting engagement in the free and open debate characteristic of democratic societies.

Cold War discourses emerged in force during the Bush administration, a trend attributable in part to the fact that several of Bush's key advisers came of age politically and intellectually during the Cold War, and one of the chief causes that had motivated these advisers was the Soviet Jewry movement.¹⁵ A prominent and morally authoritative Soviet Jewish dissident played an important role in the American (and, more broadly speaking, Western) political discourse. Sharansky's reappearance on the public stage may help explain the new and persistent caricatures of the figure of the dissident by Shteyngart and other émigré writers. In a certain sense, Sharansky, by continuing to channel Soviet-era wisdom and saying what he, given his biography, was expected to say (in his op-ed on Bush as 'dissident', the byline identifies Sharansky as a one-time political prisoner), turned into someone whose cultural capital relied in no small part on a continued process of self-orientalisation as well. The visible interjection of this kind of self-orientalisation into public discourse in the early twenty-first century has most certainly influenced writers such as Shteyngart who, rather than taking Cold War stereotypes and typologies as straightforward

models for present-day politics, turn to satire and caricature to question these self-orientalising models' substance and applicability.

Instead of indulging a discourse such as Sharansky's that pits Soviet ways of thinking against Western approaches, Shteyngart, like other émigré writers of his generation, stands Sharansky's logic on its head. Fearing that he might get fired from his job at a company that works to offer indefinite life extensions to a select group of wealthy customers, Lenny Abramov makes a list of action points that would help him improve his work situation and, more generally, his adaptability skills: 'Seek similarities with Parents – they grew up in a dictatorship and one day you might be living in one too!!!' (Shteyngart 2010: 51). America, in this presentation, is quickly becoming like the Soviet Union, rather than its polar opposite, when it comes to open debate and personal freedoms. Assessing this similarity in fiction has perhaps been the most lasting – and the most political – contribution by émigré Jewish writers from the Soviet Union writing in English in the past decade.

Answering questions from a *New York Times* reporter about his reasons for writing a dystopian novel, Shteyngart replied: "'Dystopia" is my middle name. I was born in the Soviet Union, and then we moved to Reagan's America' (Solomon 2010). The statement is a succinct suggestion – which, of course, is itself a product of a kind of liberal bias – that to understand the experience of present-day America, one needs to re-evaluate the Soviet experience that used to appear as the polar opposite of what could be possible in the United States. In Shteyngart's witty formulation, Reagan's America, which, to a great extent, produced a certain kind of dystopian discourse about the Soviet Union, was itself a comparable dystopia.

Shteyngart and his peers – writers who can move between the worlds of Soviet narratives and their American experiences – can help their readers navigate this terrain of unlikely analogies. The ability to move between these worlds, however, is itself a matter of speculation both for this generation of writers, whose own recall of Soviet experiences is relatively thin, and for the next generation to come after them. In his parents' house on Long Island, Shteyngart's Lenny Abramov observes the pictures of Moscow that his parents have hung in their upstairs hallway. Among the photos of different landmarks is one of 'the gothic Stalin-era skyscraper of prestigious Moscow State University, which neither of my parents had attended, because, to hear them tell it, Jews were not allowed in back then' (Shteyngart 2010: 136). Lenny's parents have told him what to him are half-mythical stories that present antisemitism as the central feature of the Jewish experience in the Soviet Union, and Lenny knows to mistrust them ('to hear them tell it' implies scepticism). The Soviet experience has begun to pass into the realm of mythic narrative, which like other culture-structuring narratives is meant to give subsequent generations ritualistic ways of understanding their present as the consequence of a historical experience. Lenny doesn't say that the story is not true – it may very well be true and most certainly was true at least to some extent – but the emphasis here is on those in the younger generation who cannot know for sure and are left to figure out the implications of such narratives on their own.

The implications of these narratives are thus less about the meaning of the past than about the ways in which the past is or is not relevant to the present. Surveying his parents' photos of Moscow, Shteyngart's protagonist notes: 'As for me, I have never been to Russia. I had not had the chance to learn to love it and hate it the way my parents have. I have my own dying empire to contend with, and I do not wish for any other' (136). Trying to make

sense of how their generation can relate to the Soviet legacy, the new cohort of Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers have been writing their vision of America.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture in Leipzig, Germany for hosting me as a visiting research scholar in May 2013 – an appointment that allowed me to work on this essay. I thank Natasha Gordinsky, Joshua Lambert and Mark Lipovetsky for reading drafts of this essay and providing valuable feedback.
2. In addition to the works discussed in this essay, the list of recent works by Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers writing in English includes, among others, works by Yelena Akhitorskaya, Boris Fishman, Sana Krasikov, Ellen Litman, Irina Reyn and Lara Vapnyar.
3. For the purposes of this essay, by ‘the West’ I generally refer to the United States and Canada. Though there are now Soviet-born émigré Jewish writers working in German and Hebrew, in Germany and in Israel respectively, the phenomenon of émigré Jewish authors from the former Soviet Union writing in English since 2002 is mainly a North American one.
4. I call these narratives ‘constructed’ not because they are not true but rather because they may have been rehearsed, clothed – in Bezmogis’s story, literally so – and presented in ways that make the Soviet Jewish story believable and appealing to Jews in the West. Noting the difficulties of capturing the extent of the phenomenon of this literary output by ‘Russian-American’ authors, as she calls them, Yelena Furman observes that ‘contemporary Russian-American writers can be most succinctly characterised as Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants who live in North America and write in English’ (2011: 20).
5. As Amelia Glaser has noted about the new cohort of Soviet-born émigré writers, ‘[i]t is significant that since the end of the Cold War, a group of writers has emerged that is not always critiquing Russian culture, or American culture, as such. Rather, they are engaging with both cultures simultaneously, allowing the intersection to reveal substantial differences as well as unexpected similarities’ (2011: 17).
6. Yelena Furman helpfully summarises the discussion of the authors’ hybrid identities in her article (2011: 22); Adrian Wanner discusses the peculiarities of the authors’ Jewish identities in light of both the nationalities policy in the Soviet Union – the writers’ country of birth – where they were considered ‘Jewish’ in their official documents, and in the countries of their destinations where they had to, in various ways, confront their cultural identity as ‘Russian’ newcomers (2011: 6–8).
7. See Gal Beckerman (2010) on the Soviet Jewry movement. Among other issues, Beckerman notes the role that involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement played in shaping post-Holocaust American Jewish identity and in helping American Jewry to flex its lobbying muscle.
8. Acknowledging problems involved in wading through statistical data on immigration as reported by various branches of US government, sociologist Larissa Remennick concludes that ‘the total size of the Russian-speaking Jewish population in this country is estimated at between 600 and 750 thousand’ (2007: 175).
9. To a great extent this narrative is shaped by the experience of Natan Sharansky, the Soviet Union’s most famous Jewish dissident, whose imprisonment catalysed a major international campaign for his release. Sharansky’s subsequent memoir, *Fear No Evil* (1988), solidified his presence in the cultural imagination of Jews in the West.
10. The protagonist’s evil double in Shteyngart’s *Absurdistan* is a caricature of the author himself, who is presented as capable of duping naive American readers into lapping up his stories: ‘Let me give you an idea of this Jerry Shteynfarb. He had been a schoolmate of mine at Accidental

College, a perfectly Americanised Russian émigré (he came to the States as a seven-year-old) who managed to use his dubious Russian credentials to rise through the ranks of the Accidental creative writing department and to sleep with half the campus in the process. After graduation, he made good on his threat to write a novel, a sad little dirge about his immigrant life, which seems to me the luckiest kind of life imaginable. I think it was called *The Russian Arriviste's Hand Job* or something of the sort. The Americans, naturally, lapped it up' (2006: 54–5).

11. 'When Russian Jews naturalise and show interest in politics, they usually exhibit conservative and right-wing views; in America they vote for the Republicans, in Israel, for Likud and other nationalist (but nonreligious) parties' (Remennik 1998: 253).
12. At the time of writing (2014), several new books have just been published that I was not able to consider in this essay, including Gary Shteyngart's memoir *Little Failure*, Boris Fishman's debut novel *A Replacement Life*, Lara Vapnyar's novel *The Scent of Pine*, Ellen Litman's novel *The Mannequin Girl*, Anya Ulinich's graphic novel *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*, David Bezmozgis's novel *The Betrayers* and Yelena Akhitorskaya's novel *Panic in a Suitcase* (all 2014). On most of this new literary crop, see my review essays in *Tablet Magazine* and *New Republic* (Senderovich 2014a; 2014b; 2014c).
13. In *Super Sad True Love Story*, Shteyngart – quite uncannily – predicted events that occurred in real life shortly after the book's publication, including the Occupy Wall Street protest movement in 2011 and the arrival of Google Glass technology (Shteyngart 2013).
14. In the preface to the second edition of *The Case for Democracy*, published in 2006, Sharansky recounts his meeting with George W. Bush in the White House and their discussion of what would become known as 'the Bush Doctrine'. In this preface, Sharansky implicitly takes credit for Bush's ideas (2006b: xi–xiv).
15. Paul Wolfowitz, Bush's Deputy Secretary of Defense, for instance, started out as an aide to Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson, one of the key figures in the Soviet Jewry movement who influenced a number of neoconservatives.