

Teaching Jewish American Literature

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Teaching with Things: The Clutter of Russian Jewish American Literature

Clutter pervades a good deal of the creative work by the sizeable—and growing—cohort of Soviet-born writers who have begun to enter the Jewish American literary scene since the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹ Literary fiction, memoirs, and autobiographically inspired narratives by Anya Ulinich, Gary Shteyngart, and others overflow with stuff. Discrete objects become conduits for stories of migration and of encounters with new cultural contexts. Lugged in immigrants' suitcases, carried through ports of transit, and displayed and bandied about to impress unwitting hosts upon reaching termini, these items are wonderful focal points when teaching this fresh literary output written in the acquired English of its émigré authors (Boym, *Future* 327–36; Idov). In courses on Jewish American literature and the Russian Jewish experience, the clutter of these texts is an aid for teaching students how literary works can challenge seemingly established historical narratives—in this case, narratives about the place of immigrant Jews from the Soviet Union in the landscape of the Jewish experience in North America during and after the Cold War.

Both general readers and students may tend to view literary texts about the immigrant experience in terms of the binaries that deceptively appear at the surface level. The dichotomies of home/exile, old/new, native/foreign,

and familiar/strange offer a blueprint for reading literary texts about the immigrant experience and highlight differences between the origin points and points of arrival that immigrant writers explore in their work. For students, such binaries provide a shorthand for understanding the subject—as binaries in the learning process tend to do more generally. This understanding, however, conventionally frames the immigrant story as one of successful arrival and embrace of American and Jewish American values.

Unquestioned dichotomies, when used as a mechanism for comprehending course material, obscure the opportunities that literary texts offer to challenge established communal narratives. To the reader first sizing up these sets of opposites, the immigrant experience is likely to appear unidirectional: in this case, a movement from political oppression in the Soviet Union to freedom in the West, from the perceived inability to be meaningfully Jewish to open engagement with an understanding of Jewish identity in North America that tends to center on Judaism as a religious affiliation. This dichotomous understanding of Soviet Jewish immigration mirrors narratives about the influx of Jews from the USSR commonly told in Jewish American communities, narratives that view Soviet Jews primarily as beneficiaries of American Jews' involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement. Russian Jews were perceived to have been saved through the activism of the people they would come to reside among upon arrival in the West (Beckerman; Kelner).

Creative works by Russian Jewish émigré authors supply a range of provocative correctives to this narrative. They are populated with sets of ideologically charged objects that might appear, at first glance, to confirm simplistic understandings of the Russian Jews' immigrant experience, including, for example, the supposed paucity of markers of Jewish identity in their lives—a consequence of what Zvi Gitelman has termed, after Clifford Geertz, “thin culture” (Gitelman 22, 22–23). However, the exercise of examining these items closely can introduce nuances into the generalized and one-sided narrative that has taken hold in the last few decades in Jewish communities in the West. In this essay, I look at depictions of immigrant wares that—once introduced into the cultural landscape outside the Soviet Union—have come to encapsulate the miscommunication and miscomprehension between Russian Jews and Jews in North America.

In her graphic novel *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*, Ulinich deploys two different styles of drawing. On the one hand, she creates nuanced and detailed images in the parts of the book that narrate her eponymous

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protagonist's life as an adult. On the other hand, more simplistic drawings in the style of caricature dominate the chapters about the protagonist's childhood and teenage years in Moscow and her early years as an immigrant in Arizona. In the first set of caricature frames at the book's beginning, Lena Finkle's mother shows off her daughter's "gold medal" to a Jewish American couple visiting the newly arrived Soviet Jewish family. A rare and coveted award for completing Soviet secondary education with top grades, the object is a sign of distinction for her daughter and, implicitly, for the family as a whole, and Lena's mother wants it to make an impression on the Jewish American sponsors, whose recommendation will determine the family's immigration status. But upon seeing the medal, the visitors appear befuddled by the visage of Vladimir Lenin that happens to be stamped on the medal's obverse (2–3).

Ulinich draws the Lenin medal, which is not actually made of gold, inside a small decorative case with a transparent glass lid. Styled as a caricature, the picture humorously recalls the image of Lenin inside the glass-topped sarcophagus in his Red Square mausoleum in Moscow; Ulinich thus gives this iconic image, circulated widely inside and outside the Soviet Union, a satirical makeover. She employs a similar logic of caricature in drawing the Jewish American visitors in Hasidic garb, a costume that nonobservant Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union would likely associate with non-Russian Jews, no matter their level of religious practice. The labels "Moscow 1991" and "Arizona 1991" above these two neighboring frames in this panel further emphasize the contrast and the degree of miscommunication between the American Jews and the Russian Jews.

In this encounter, American Jews appear bewildered that the people they fought to liberate from the Soviet regime would show off an object marked by the image of the regime's founder. At the same time, the Soviet Jewish immigrants fail to convey that their story of recognized scholastic achievement within the Soviet system is one of the markers of a specifically Soviet Jewish identity. The story of how a gold medal came to be viewed as a Jewish object in the specific circumstances that Soviet Jews faced is also never told.

In a later chapter of the book, Ulinich further develops the narrative of miscommunication between Russian and American Jews. Another object is introduced into the story: a menorah belonging to a Jewish American woman, who uses it to educate the young Russian immigrant

cleaning her house about expected ways of being Jewish. If the Lenin medal depicted earlier represents the first half of a contrast between atheist Soviet culture and Jewish culture, the menorah represents the other half. The menorah signifies the ritual life that, in the established Jewish American narrative, is supposed to replace markers of Soviet ideology in the lives of these Soviet Jews as they transition from Moscow to Arizona and from what is Soviet to what is American. In drawing this encounter in caricature, Ulinich cleverly undermines this conventional narrative, showing—with the help of charged and carefully planted objects—that the acceptable unidirectional narrative may not reflect the reality of the Soviet Jewish experience. While the Lenin medal and the menorah appear at some distance from each other in the text, students can learn to link and connect these objects: the Lenin medal is one of a host of idiosyncratic markers of Soviet Jewishness that do not necessarily become displaced by markers of Jewish identity that are more familiar in North America.

Another Lenin image, a statue of the Soviet Union's founder in Leningrad, plays an important narrative role in Shteyngart's memoir, *Little Failure*. It, too, has a double: a Catholic pendant with an image of the Madonna and child, which Shteyngart picked up during his family's transit through Rome on their way to America (see also Bezmozgis, *The Free World*; Boym, "A Soviet Drop-Out's Journey"). Unlike the Lenin-menorah pairing in Ulinich's book—a pairing that intentionally amplifies, through caricature, the predictable attributes of a Russian Jewish and Jewish American encounter—Shteyngart's binary of the Lenin statue and the Madonna pendant challenges the reader to look beyond the two objects' initial appearances.

Stationed near the apartment building where little Gary's family lived until they emigrated, the Lenin statue looms large in the boy's imagination and in the memoir. One chapter is structured around the statue and the idiosyncratic image of Lenin it created for the impressionable boy. The chapter refers to Lenin as a beloved relation of sorts: "His full name is Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and I love him" (45). This proclamation is made in an earnest child's voice, but the satirical undertones of an adult writer conveying his childhood thoughts also peek through. Cleverly inserted between separate chapters focused on Shteyngart's mother and father, respectively, the Lenin chapter reproduces a cultural trope of Soviet children's literature in which the Soviet Union's founder is "Grandpa Lenin" and thus, implicitly, a member of little Gary's family. The statue widely known

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in Leningrad as “dancing” Lenin, with “his coat sexily unfurling in the wind,” provides a comforting and also entertaining presence for the boy who suffers from panic-laced asthma attacks (47). While an English-language reader might assume that the statue communicates Soviet ideology, for Gary it is also a site of filial bonding with his father, as the pair play hide-and-seek around Lenin’s granite legs.

Most importantly, Shteyngart turns the statue of Lenin into the generative locus of his creativity. The statue purportedly inspires the first novel by Shteyngart, “commissioned” by his grandmother and written when he was five. He describes the novel—now lost—as being a version of the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf’s story about a young boy’s travels with a flock of geese, but mixed with the ideological narratives and Lenin imagery that surrounded Gary in his early life. His decision to become a writer in this environment seems inevitable: “who wouldn’t under the circumstances?” Shteyngart queries rhetorically (55). Lenin in this context becomes the kind of superhero that a sickly Soviet boy needs to stimulate his imagination and to rescue him from the reality of his own helplessness.

Upon Gary’s departure from Leningrad, the memory of the Lenin statue marks the disappearance of the familiar and the boy’s longing for it. “Do you dream of me?” Shteyngart queries, addressing the statue in warm and familiar terms, suggesting that the object, which little Gary has domesticated into his imagination, might grieve the boy’s departure (63). A series of objects—all of them temporary replacements for the statue—accompany little Gary during his family’s transit through Vienna and Rome: they include the Moscow Olympic Games pin that Gary wears on his shirt on the plane out of Russia and a candy wrapper imprinted with Mozart’s portrait, which is gifted to him upon the family’s arrival in Austria. In Rome, however, one object outlasts all the others: “a little golden medal depicting Raphael’s *Madonna del Granduca*” that the boy buys in a church gift shop while touring the city with his grandmother. Confused by the unfamiliar surroundings, Gary keeps locking himself in the bathroom and crying: “alone, I let the tears drop out of me with complete hot abandon as I kiss and kiss the beatific Virgin, whispering ‘Santa Maria, Santa Maria, Santa Maria’” (90). The pendant is so central to the story of Shteyngart’s journey that an entire chapter—following the sequence of chapters about Gary’s father, Lenin’s statue, and Gary’s mother—is named after this putative new family member: “My Madonnachka.”

For students who have just read *Little Failure* as a story of Russian Jewish immigration to America, the suggestion of pairing the Lenin statue and a Catholic pendant depicting the Virgin and child might, at first, appear confusing. However, when students read past the surface expectations of the text, they perceive a more complex relation between these objects. The unease that little Gary experiences while en route to America exacerbates the anxiety with which he was raised in the Soviet Union—anxiety determined by the fact of his being “born a Jewish person,” as Shteyngart’s mother reportedly puts it. Mrs. Shteyngart’s comment draws additional family stories into the narrative: the movement of older family members from the Pale of Settlement into big cities, the murder of relatives during the Holocaust, the anti-Semitism experienced by little Gary’s parents in the postwar Soviet Union, and so on. In this context, the statue of Lenin, domesticated into the boy’s imagination, alleviates Gary’s Soviet Jewish anxiety, and later, to the asthmatic, sickly, and dislodged Jewish child, the Catholic pendant provides as much comfort as the statue did before the family’s departure: “Haloed Baby Jesus is so porky here, so content with his extra, protecting layer of flesh. . . . What a lucky boy Jesus is” (90).

On the surface, the pairing of the Lenin statue and Catholic pendant suggests the opposition of Soviet iconography with Christian-inflected belief. Like Ulinich’s Lenin-menorah pairing, however, Shteyngart’s objects anchor the Soviet Jewish story that floats through his memoir in bits and pieces that can be gathered only through the exercise of close reading. Objects that appear in other literary works written by émigré Russian Jewish authors in English present possibilities for similar and somewhat simpler pedagogical exercises: those objects include a Star of David pendant forcibly placed on a Russian Jewish immigrant child by a Jewish American host who wants the new arrival to have a recognizable Jewish appearance (Ulinich, *Petropolis* 153–60); and a similar piece of ethnically and religiously marked jewelry that Russian Jewish immigrant parents force their child to wear because they assume their Jewish American hosts will want to see such a clearly articulated and thus easily relatable attribute of Jewish identity (Bezmozgis, “Roman Berman, Massage Therapist” 31). The profusion of objects akin to Ulinich’s and Shteyngart’s Lenins (and the objects they are paired with) offers a useful set of pedagogical tools for those studying the literature of the Russian Jewish immigrant experience. The narrative turns that these objects induce challenge students to delve deeper into these rich creative works.

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Note

1. See, for example, Furman; Katsnelson; Levantovskaya; Senderovich, “Scenes” and “Soviet Jews”; Wanner, *Out of Russia* and “Russian Jews.”

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