

Larissa Remennick.

Russian Jews on Three Continents. Identity, Integration and Conflict.

Transaction Publishers, 2007, 408 pp.

US \$49.95 hardcover (978-0-7658-0340-5)

As the author points out in her opening sentence, “a dozen or so books have been written about the dramatic story of Soviet Jews, their lives in the shadow of state-sponsored anti-Semitism, and their two recent waves of emigration.” So why the decision “to add yet another volume”? She provides the best answer to this self-posed question herself: her superb book stands out “in three main respects: its time and place frame, analytical concepts, and authorial identity.”

First the time and place frame. As Remennick makes clear, timing is everything in migration, be it departure, choice of a destination country, or the terms of settlement and integration. The 250,000 Jews who emigrated from the USSR during in the 1970s encountered radically different conditions from those of the subsequent wave of 1.6 million Jews who emigrated two decades later. While emigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s became much easier than during the communist period, immigration to most Western countries (except Israel and Germany) became much more difficult. With the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government cancelled its special refugee program for Soviet Jews, thus drastically reducing the number of admissible Jews from the former USSR. At the same time, moving to Israel became much easier with the reopening of its embassy in Moscow, the initiation of direct flights between Tel Aviv and several major FSU cities, and the closure of the transition camps in several European cities, which had allowed Soviet emigrants ostensibly destined for Israel to obtain visas for other Western countries. In fact, 75-80% of the 1990s Russian Jewish migrants opted for Israel, with the remainder settling in the U.S. (on the basis of family reunification), Canada (admitted as skilled migrants under the Point System), and Germany (admitted as special refugees). Relatively few settled elsewhere. The integration experiences of most of these migrants were generally more difficult than those of their predecessors in the 1970s, especially in Israel, where the number of migrants was so overwhelming that, in the beginning, the Great Russian *Aliyah* “looked very much like a human disaster” (55).

Based largely on the author’s own comparative research in the four countries, the book presents an informative and comprehensive picture of various facets of this latest, and likely the last, wave of Russian Jewish immigration. To illuminate the social forces behind the Soviet Jews’ decision to emigrate, Remennick first explores the formation of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish identity against the backdrop of Soviet and Jewish history and culture. She identifies as the chief social characteristics of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry its secularism and Russification, high levels of urbanism, educational attainment, intermarriage, intellectualism, and cohesive family networks. While there was strong sense of in-group ethnic solidarity, Jewish communal life was virtually non-existent. Remennick also reviews the different emigration dilemmas facing individuals comprising the various migration waves since the 1970s, and discusses some of the consequences of the shifts in the social composition of the migrants. In her view, emigration decisions in the 1990s were driven primarily by pragmatic rather than ideological considerations, and by push rather than pull factors. The personal narratives of many of her informants also suggest that “the decision to leave everything behind and rush into the unknown was partly irrational, boosted by the social panic, by seeing that most of their Jewish friends, colleagues neighbors, and everyone else were on the move, with the ensuing ‘fear to remain the last Jew in Russia, alone and trembling’ ... ‘leave now or never’ was a popular motto of the time.” (46).

What about the analytical concepts employed by the author? As she examines various encounters with Western market economies, cultures, and local Jewish communities, Remennick relies on both conventional and innovative frameworks and methodologies. She found levels of educational attainment and the size and the geographic location of the cities the migrants came from to be highly correlated with “human capital” variables, but success in integration was also influenced by gender, age, “pure” or mixed ethnic background, and marriage to non-Jews. For example, female immigrants to Israel and the U.S. were occupationally more flexible and resilient, and also better at mobilizing social support than men, despite experiencing greater occupational downgrading. Age was equally significant: older immigrants experienced greater problems of uprooting and readjustment than younger ones. At the same time, youths who came to Canada directly from the former USSR had more severe adjustment problems than those who re-emigrated with their parents from Israel, since the latter “were familiar with the schooling system other than Soviet, had better knowledge of English and were generally more secure and ‘seasoned’ as repeat migrants” (302). Adolescent boys and younger teenagers experienced the greatest social and learning problems integrating into Canadian society. Among the Russian-speaking elders, those in Canada have led less satisfying lives than their counterparts in Israel. The latter’s Zionist feelings have made their resettlement to the Jewish state “meaningful in spiritual and moral sense” while those who came to Canada have had no such sense of home, and no similar motivation to integrate into what they have perceived “as a completely alien society” (302). Relying entirely on welfare, many elderly informants living somewhat uneasily in Germany “believed that there is nothing wrong with being supported for years by the money of German taxpayers, seeing this aid as a form of historic retribution for the Nazi crimes” (335).

Remennick’s comparative analysis of intra-ethnic modes of integration and acculturation is greatly enhanced by her adoption of a transnational perspective. In turn, the framework of transnationalism leads the author to focus on several fascinating topics, such as the emergence of vibrant multi-centered global Russian Jewish diasporas, the formation of hybrid ethno-national identities, multilingualism, and the role the Internet and satellite TV in promoting a thriving Russian ethnic sub-culture. The author convincingly argues that most Jews from the Soviet Union strongly identify with and cherish Russian culture, which they wish to preserve and transfer to the next generation. Those who feel isolated from the mainstream in their host countries manage their integration by seeking kindred souls in the familiar local and global Russian social spaces, and even those who are well integrated in their new homelands have stayed plugged into their old social networks.

Finally, there is the issue of the politics of location of the researcher, what Remennick calls “authorial identity.” One cannot stress enough the importance of her status as an ethnic insider, a Moscow-born and raised Jew, who immigrated to Israel in 1991. Having a life trajectory similar to that of her informants has enabled Remennick to establish common ground and trust with her informants, who felt confident that she would ask them the right questions and not misinterpret data which she obtained from them through unobtrusive observation and in-depth interviews. Being an ethnic insider familiar both with the Soviet Union and Western societies has also enriched Remennick’s analysis, since her own experience of migration and intercultural translation has enhanced her ability to move with equal facility among several perspectives. However, being an insider of one specific ethnic group implies an automatic status as an outsider of another. Thus, when the author learned from her Jewish Russian German informants about tensions and mutual antipathy between two categories of former Soviets now living in Germany – Russian Jews and ethnic Germans (the so-called *Aussiedler*) – she was unable to compare the Jewish attitudes with those of the *Aussiedler*. None of the several potential informants she approached, “agreed to be interviewed by an Israeli researcher, and even if they did they would probably have refrained from expressing

their true thoughts and feeling” because of her personal identity. She found an indirect confirmation of anti-Semitic attitudes among the *Aussiedler* “from reading a bi-lingual newspaper, several magazines and websites published by Russian Germans in Berlin, Frankfurt and Dresden” (350)

Remennick tackles an enormous range of issues of sociological interest, which are all presented and interpreted with care and sensitivity. All chapters have informative sub-headings, providing a good indication of the issues covered. In the Israeli chapter, by far the longest in the book, sub-headings such as *Russian Jews and Israeli Judaism: Jewish Goyim and Simply Goyim; Immigrant Engineers: Elite Specialists and Technical Proletariat; Superiority Complex as a Flipside of Social Marginality; Breadwinners, Caregivers and Sluts: Russian Immigrant Women in Israel;* or *The 1.5 Generation Shopping for New Identity: Between Russian and Israeli* speak largely for themselves, as do the gems in the U.S. women’s issues chapter: *The Family Sandwich: Relations with Parents and Children; Sisters or Strangers: Relations with American Jewish Women*. The German chapter, aptly entitled “The Promised Land in the Heart of Europe: Identity and Social Incorporation among Former Soviet Jews in Germany,” has sub-headings such as *The Loss of Professional Identity and Welfare Dependence; “Idealists Headed for Israel, Pragmatics Chose Europe”;* *In the Land of Former Nemesis: Relations with Native Germans;* and *Experiences of Younger Immigrants*.

There is really nothing negative I can say about this splendid book. It is clearly written, informative, and addresses a range of fascinating migration, labour market, ethnic, and identity issues. It is highly recommended to all those who are interested in Jewish, Israeli, European (German and Russian), North American, and global studies.

Alena Heitlinger

Department of Sociology

Trent University

aheitlinger@trentu.ca

Amongst other books, Alena Heitlinger is the editor of *Emigré Feminism: Transnational Perspectives* (University of Toronto Press, 1999) and author of *In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism: Czech and Slovak Jews Since 1945* (Transaction Publishers, 2006), both reviewed in *CJS Online*.

<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/russianjews.html>

August 2007

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online