

‘We Have Our Own History, Our Own Trauma, and Our Own Experience’

A roundtable discussion with Jews from the former Soviet Union about their experience as immigrants, where they fit into the American Jewish community, how they view rising antisemitism after Oct. 7, and which customs and recipes they’re passing down to the next generation

BY
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The Russian Empire had the largest Jewish population in the world by the late 19th century. In the closing decades of the czars’ rule, however, waves of violent pogroms spurred massive emigration; more than 2 million Jews left, the vast majority going to the U.S. Under Soviet rule, the Jews who remained were forbidden to leave, even as they were routinely persecuted for practicing their religion, and denied educational and employment opportunities. Jewish kids learned early to hide their Jewish identity; some were never told they were Jewish. Individuals who dared to apply for exit visas were typically denied; known as refuseniks, their families were then subjected to additional prejudice, particularly in the workplace.

More than 2 million Jews were still living in the Soviet Union when American Jews began organizing on their behalf in the 1960s—lobbying politicians and diplomats, but also building personal connections through letter-writing campaigns and “bar mitzvah twin” programs. Thanks in part to this international pressure, tens of thousands were allowed to emigrate in the 1970s, but by the time a quarter-million Americans rallied for Soviet Jewry on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 6, 1987, the numbers allowed to leave the USSR had slowed to a trickle. Under his policy of glasnost (openness), Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev relaxed restrictions in the late 1980s, and emigration skyrocketed, continuing in huge numbers in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. Well over 1 million Jews went to Israel, but hundreds of thousands also came to the U.S.

That might seem like the end of the story, but for those who immigrated, it was the beginning of a new one. For this discussion, we gathered a diverse group of Russian-speaking Jews who came to the U.S. from all over the former Soviet Union, and immigrated at various ages at different times over the past 50 years—some during the Soviet era,

others after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. We wanted to find out how they experienced this move across the world—how they were welcomed initially, and how things have changed since then. What barriers remain to being full participants in the American Jewish community, how were their political views shaped by their memories of life under communism, and what customs are they trying to preserve in their new home?

The Participants

Their ages, where they lived in the former Soviet Union, when they came to the U.S., and where they live now

Misha: 42. Born in Voronezh, Russia, but moved at age 2 to Nizhnekamsk, a small town in Tatarstan, immigrated in 1992 at age 10, now living in New York City.

Ellen: 57. Immigrated from Lviv, Ukraine, in 1993 at age 26, now living in Milwaukee.

Julia: 41. Born in Siberia, moved to Estonia (then still part of the USSR) at age 5 and to Moscow at 18, before immigrating in 2006 at age 24, now living in New York City.

Irina: 43. Born in Moscow, grew up in Odesa, Ukraine, immigrated in 1998 at age 18, now living in San Francisco.

Eugenia: “In my 70s.” Born in Kyiv, Ukraine, immigrated in 1979 at age 30, now living in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Lev: 41. Born in Baku, Azerbaijan, immigrated in 1992 at age 10, now living in Brooklyn.

Gennady: 43. Born in Odesa, Ukraine, immigrated (via Austria and Italy) to the U.S. in 1989 at age 8, now living in New Jersey.

Michael: 75. Born in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, immigrated in 1989 at age 41, now living in Boston.

Yuriy: 38. Born in Odesa, Ukraine, immigrated in 1996 at age 10, now living in the Bay Area.

Inna: 41. Born in Kyrgyzstan. (“My grandparents are from Ukraine and Belarus and WWII kind of threw people around.”) Immigrated in 1991 (“one month before the breakup of the Soviet Union”) at age 9, now living in Livingston, New Jersey.

Margarita: 38. Born in Kharkiv, Ukraine (“the week of Chernobyl, April 1986”). Immigrated to the U.S. (to Chicago, via Italy and Vienna) in 1988 at age 2, now living in the Bronx.

Raise your hand if you learned that you were Jewish from someone other than your parents. [Two raise their hands.]

Irina: In the Soviet Union, in schools, you were supposed to state your nationality, and when I was asked who I am, I said, “I’m Russian.” And our teacher and the head teacher looked at me and said, “Well, no, you’re not Russian, you’re Jewish.” And that’s how I knew. I was about 7. We didn’t really discuss Jewishness at home.

When your teacher told you that, did you do some investigating? Did you go home and say, “What’s going on?”

Irina: I cannot remember, but I remember a neighbor telling me that I need to go to Birobidzhan [a Soviet “Jewish Autonomous Region” established in Siberia in 1934 that had been largely abandoned by the 1990s] and I was probably maybe 8 or 9 at that point. And apparently my neighbor kid already knew what Birobidzhan was, and I had no idea.

Did anybody in this group find out fairly late in their childhood that they were Jewish from your parents?

Yuriy: We did some Jewish customs back in Ukraine, but I didn’t really know what they meant and nobody really explained why we did them. I didn’t know why my grandma would hide the matzo on Passover, or why I would get money on Hanukkah. We just did that stuff. It felt like a family tradition, but it was never discussed. And actually, I don’t remember how I found out that I was Jewish, but the awareness of being Jewish came to me actually in the United States, so after 10 years old.

And that awareness came in the U.S. just because suddenly you were in a place where Jewish identity was more overt?

Yuriy: I guess. I was surrounded by everybody else who spoke Russian—in our community, everybody was Jewish pretty much. I’m guessing that was probably the reason or the driver.

And you mentioned that in your childhood, there was matzo, Hanukkah candles—snapshots, but there was no bigger story explained about being Jews.

There was no temple, no synagogue in our city; there was no complete story.

Yuriy: Yes. Never wore a kippah, never stepped foot in the temple.

Can someone say more about the random signposts of Judaism in your childhoods without more explanation?

Misha: Two examples: Even though most of my 11 years in the Soviet Union I lived in Nizhnekamsk, which is in Tatarstan, every summer I would visit my [paternal] grandparents, both outside of Voronezh, which is Russia, but also my mom’s parents, who still lived in Berdychiv, in Ukraine. So I’d spend weeks or even a month or more, as a kid, in Ukraine. And I remember going with my grandma to a synagogue, she definitely took me to one, just as a tour, not for a service. And I realized in retrospect, “Oh, shit, that was a

synagogue.” I don’t remember if she explained much and, again, I was maybe 8, 9 ... Another one is my father at one point, I could have been between 8 [and] 10, asked me what I think the most important Jewish holiday is. From what I remember, I said Christmas. That was just a guess, because I had no idea. And this is a very obvious point to all my fellow Soviet Jews here, but religion was, even in the ’80s, pretty discouraged, which is why we didn’t know much about it. I’m not even sure how I knew about Christmas, because in Russia it wasn’t really celebrated; we had New Year’s, which was a very secular holiday. And my dad’s answer was Passover, which I think some Orthodox Jews would disagree with—they’ll probably say Yom Kippur. But the point is that this is how clueless I was.

Ellen: I knew from early childhood that I was Jewish. My grandparents spoke Yiddish, my father knew Yiddish as well, we celebrated New Year’s and Passover, but we were very secular, as most people were in our surroundings. There was no temple, no synagogue in our city; there was no complete story. We celebrated the holiday, but we didn’t know, I didn’t know. It was never passed to us until much later, until there was more freedom.

Gennady: What I knew about Judaism was, “Don’t tell other people that you’re Jewish.” I didn’t know that it’s a religion or it’s a race, just “Don’t tell people that you’re Jewish,” without anybody explaining to us what it meant. My grandparents who lived with us, they spoke Yiddish and we had matzo sometimes and I sort of put it together myself that these are Jewish things, but no connection of why and what. And then I sort of picked up things about the Holocaust and the fact that Nazis didn’t like Jews, and I knew that I was a Jew, but again, nobody really explained how, why, and what. No discussion of holidays.

Irina: My father would buy matzo when I was a kid—for our family and relatives. I never knew why we would get matzo. Also my grandma had separate pots and pans for meat and milk and that was very interesting. I could never explain why I couldn’t put meat into the milk pot.

I want to make sure our readers understand how dangerous it was to be publicly Jewish in the former Soviet Union.

We celebrated holidays behind closed windows.

Margarita: I was named Margarita for a reason: to hide our Jewishness. All my siblings have these saint names—Michael, Matthew, Michaela—and it was to protect us. I was named after Mendel Sholomovich, who was a cantor, generations ago, so the “M” carried.

Michael: We did have antisemitism in every quota: If you want to apply for a good job, you cannot go there, the same with the colleges. We can keep Jewish tradition, we have matzos, we’d celebrate Hanukkah, we celebrate Passover, we celebrate Yom Kippur. But we’ll keep it quiet at home like everyone else. You cannot show you’re Jewish, but they know who is [a] Jew.

Eugenia: I’m older than most of you and I grew up in the Soviet Union after the war; my grandparents were Orthodox Jews. My grandfather shuffled to that synagogue for as long as

he could manage to walk, and we knew that. We celebrated holidays behind closed windows, celebrated Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah, and Passover and that was it. My grandfather made his own kosher wine—I remember that because I was allowed to taste it and it was really good. In terms of religion, it was just laughed at. On my college application, I remember very clearly the question was, “Do you believe in God?” And if anybody answered, “Yes,” forget it, you were not going to college. Because God was the Communist Party, it’s obvious. You have to believe in the Communist Party. I mean, what else is this? Religion is a faith, so you couldn’t have double faith really, at least that’s what government promoted. And in addition to that, I remember that there were a ton of articles in big newspapers about how Jews were dishonest and dirty and how they send them to prison and all that. They always pointed out that these people were Jewish. I was never asked by my grandfather—who was Orthodox, they lit candles every Friday, he put his tallis on, and prayed every Friday night—to even go to synagogue because there was danger of being recognized.

Lev: What Eugenia is describing in the '70s might be very different from people's experience in the '90s when things are starting to open up and we had visitors from Israel and my dad started a Jewish club openly, which wouldn't have existed in the '80s or the '70s, so that's number one. And two is variety across geography: Things in Baku, where I'm from, were famously chill, so to speak. It was famously, to this day, a cosmopolitan city. And there was much less overt antisemitism that I think people very much experienced in Moscow, in St. Petersburg. Of course, there was institutional antisemitism in the way that Eugenia just described, even in Baku or in certain parts of the bureaucracy. But I think that your question assumes that it was all bad, all antisemitic for everyone from 1917 to 1991, and I think there is variety.

Julia, I know you said that it was a shock when you got to the U.S. and saw outward displays of Judaism. Can you talk about that?

Julia: I was born in the early '80s and it was still the Soviet Union, but it was already perestroika time, so it was much more chill, like Lev said. When I was old enough to go to second grade, the Jewish school reopened in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, where we lived, which was one of the Baltic states that became independent in 1991. So first thing they did is they reestablished a Jewish community and they reopened the Jewish school. The synagogue was destroyed during the war, so they rebuilt it. But even though they opened the school, it doesn't mean that the antisemitism wasn't there. From an early age, I knew it was embarrassing for me to admit to other kids that I went to Jewish school; that was something that I had to keep to myself the whole time. That was not something that you openly talk about—especially admitting that you were a Jew. We lived in these big high rises where kids all played together outside in the evenings and on the weekends. And I had a bunch of friends, but the fact that I was Jewish, that was never discussed, a hush-hush. I remember it was almost a weekly occurrence that we would have a swastika spray-painted on our school walls that they had to clean all the time.

The fact that, after Oct. 7, American Jews are starting to feel uncomfortable just now, and it's so shocking to them, that's how we were our entire lives.

Was it the same when you moved from Tallinn to Moscow?

Julia: When I moved to Moscow, I thought it was chill—I was wearing my Star of David necklace. But when I told everyone that I was from Tallinn, they were laughing at me and saying, “No honey, you’re not from Tallinn, you are from Tel Aviv and we know that.”

If I push you all ahead to arriving in the U.S., do you remember that contrast of suddenly seeing Judaism be so overt?

Julia: Oh my God, absolutely. It was shocking to me, it is still shocking to me to see that Jews would openly display, be comfortable with the fact that they’re Jewish, that’s like mind-blowing to me. I’ve never experienced that before in my life until coming here. The fact that, after Oct. 7, American Jews are starting to feel uncomfortable just now, and it’s so shocking to them, that’s how we were our entire lives—well at least for me, and especially older generations. So it’s like a big eye-opening moment for them, and it’s chilling for me, because I feel, personally, that America is the only country in the world, other than Israel, for a Jewish diaspora to be able to live comfortably. What is happening here right now, it’s like there’s nowhere else to go from here. This is really horrifying.

Yuriy, I remember you telling me [in our pre-interview] that the Soviet Union “did their best to beat any semblance of Jewish life out of your parents.” What did you mean by that?

Yuriy: My parents, born in the early ’60s, are the most spiritually hollowed-out generation of Jews and it’s not their fault. My grandmother, who was born in the mid-’30s, kind of has one foot in each world, where she remembers practicing Jewish traditions and religion and also life under the party rule. Whereas my parents, they were now two generations removed from speaking Yiddish, from living in the shtetl, four decades under Soviet rule.

So your parents only really grew up with an absence of religion.

Yuriy: Being Jewish was associated with a real discomfort. In ways, they welcomed the erasure of religion because, like, now we don’t get singled out as much. They got singled out in other ways, like they couldn’t pursue the professions they wanted to pursue, the quotas that they were up against. But at a minimum they could just pretend to march to the beat of the same drum as everyone else. So they were incredibly spiritually hollow. I still feel this today, as my current family—my wife, my kids—as we gravitate more toward Jewish traditions, I’m trying to pull my parents along. It’s all so novel to them. In a way, I view this to be actually like a *purpose*, a rallying cry of our generation: We’re like this connective tissue. For our parents’ generation, at least as far as Eastern European Jews go, there was a risk of real extinction there—but then the mass migration has been leading to this revival.

I want to talk about that revival. Many of you have chosen a more connected institutional—even religious—Jewish life, giving your kids more Jewish education than your parents gave you.

Inna: I grew up with nothing Jewish back there in the USSR and when I came to the United States, there was not much more Jewish in my life, although in Queens there were synagogues everywhere. My parents were very far removed from this, they didn't feel a connection, I think. I had not seen a synagogue—even though I would pass them every day, I would never go inside. I wasn't bat mitzvahed, the only thing I knew about Jewish life there was that I was Jewish and there is such a thing called antisemitism. And when I came to the United States, I knew that it was OK to be Jewish, or *more* OK. We started doing some family dinners for Hanukkah and Passover, but nothing the way it's supposed to be, we just had family dinners and we started using Jewish names for them. I think that was as far as Jewishness went. I came to Jewish life myself when I was 30 or 31, about a decade ago, through Chabad. Chabad is fantastic for that. We started going with kids to small things like menorah-building events and Hanukkah on Ice, this and that. And then we went to a Shabbat dinner and I really felt a connection and my kids started going to Hebrew school. My kids have been teaching me Jewish things and I have been teaching *my* parents. So it's a little bit backward now, but I drag my parents to Chabad now and they actually like it. I'm like, "Why wouldn't you bring me yourself?" I can't blame them. I always say to my parents that they were taken out of the Soviet Union, but we can't take the Soviet Union out of them. That's what it is.

There was a risk of real extinction there—but then the mass migration has been leading to this revival.

Margarita: The American Jews did such a good job helping us get out—through that Soviet pipeline. I went to JCC day care when we arrived, so I was in these institutions that were Jewish, where I got these traditions and some of the oral history that they couldn't pass down to me. So I was passing it *up* in the house. I was the first one speaking English. No one could understand me, actually, because I was learning English at the same time as Hebrew, and no one spoke Hebrew, English, and Russian except Esther, this other refusenik in the JCC with me. So that was interesting to navigate, but I could. They were really good at getting us out, but not necessarily good at teaching us introductory access points to our own heritage.

You went to Jewish camp in a Chicago suburb—what was that like?

Margarita: I was expecting a memo at some point and no one gave me one; I really didn't know what was going on. Later, I went on to work at Jewish organizations and that's really where I picked things up. Wikipedia was kind of my Torah. Now I live in the Bronx and since Oct. 7, I've been pursuing more access points, so I'm connected with the Chabad here in the South Bronx. They really understand where I'm coming from. My dad's family lives in San Diego and they also are connected with Chabad. Chabad seems to be the ones that get that we need the introductory access points. I'll mention that my little sister was the first one to have an actual bat mitzvah. My brother had a party, but my sister went through studies and temple and the ceremony was so beautiful—the rabbi really got it. It was a group bar mitzvah ceremony and they brought up all the grandparents to stand with the graduates—or I guess you're not supposed to call them that, but you know what I mean—and the rabbi said, "This is as much for them as it is for you." They really got that, as

opposed to American Jews—where Jewish knowledge trickled down through oral history, we didn't have that luxury, so we're passing it up.

Michael: I didn't have my grandparents—they got killed in Holocaust. And I remember going— *[He pauses, emotional, and can't continue.]*

Take your time.

Michael: Every year on *keyver oves* [known in Hebrew as *kever avot*, a time when it is customary to visit loved ones' graves during the High Holidays], I was to going to visit the grave. My parents spoke Yiddish and I learn a lot from them. In my city, it was [like] a Jewish state, it was part of Ukraine, but before WWII, it was about 40 temples in my city; after WWII, they destroyed basically all of them. Some they're converted to TV stations, to a warehouse. But I remember, because I have my bar mitzvah and I have a mezuzah. Every time when I go to school I kiss the mezuzah. I know a lot of my friends, they speak in Yiddish—[when] they want to hide something from the other people, we talk between us in Yiddish.

I always say to my parents that they were taken out of the Soviet Union, but we can't take the Soviet Union out of them.

Ellen: As far as Jewish life, we celebrated some holidays at home. We had matzo, but conscious effort toward Jewishness? It was the end of the '80s, maybe beginning of the '90s, during perestroika, we felt some waves of change. And during that time, teachers from Israel started coming to our city and they organized ulpan classes. We thought we would immigrate to Israel, a lot of our friends and family were leaving. So we started those Hebrew lessons and that surprised me, I felt some sort of immediate connection on a magnetic level, I don't know, it sounds too spiritual. I really enjoyed that. It was partially because of the energy that those teachers brought to the classes, I really loved it. When I came to the United States, I started looking for the same, and it wasn't easy to find those conversational classes. Eventually I found one, and it's through that class I met some wonderful people and that became some connection for future explorations.

Can I see a show of hands: How many of you would say you have a synagogue? *[Hands raise.]* I see five out of 11. Does anyone keep kosher? I see two of you saying sort of. How many of you have a Christmas tree—no judgment! I see seven of you.

Yuriy: We call it a New Year tree.

Misha: New Year tree, not a Christmas tree.

Ellen: Yes. New Year's tree.

Eugenia: New Year's tree, of course.

Yuriy: Soviet habit.

Eugenia: So now you have to clarify. Because it's not a Christmas tree. It is New Year's tree. I don't set it up at Christmas, I set it up *after*.

Ellen: It's totally different, yes.

Irina: New Year's was the only nonpolitical holiday in the former Soviet Union and that is why people still carry it on.

Am I right that it *looks* like a Christmas tree?

Lev: Yes. It's the same thing but it doesn't have—

Irina: —it doesn't have a religious connotation like that—

Yuriy: It's completely secular.

Michael: Nothing to do with religion.

Ellen: There was no Santa Claus in—

Michael: No, it was. Ded Moroz was like Santa Claus.

Eugenia: But Santa Claus means Saint. Ded Moroz means Grandfather Frost. So it's a very different connotation.

Michael: They looked like the same.

Lev: I think that was a decision when we came here to drop the New Year's tree, not because it's Christian—it's not, I absolutely agree with everyone who said that it's secular, although it's adapted from Christmas, it is secular, it has a red star at the top, etc. We had that in Baku, we dropped that, many of our friends are continuing it, just like folks on this call. That was a conscious choice among many choices—affiliation, bar mitzvahs, brises.

Inna: I am trying to drop the New Year tree, but my kids don't let me drop it. It started off with grandparents insisting on it because it had nothing to do with Jewish or not Jewish, it was just like always a happy moment in the Soviet Union, it was when the tree was up, you have gifts, you have chocolates, tangerines in a little bag, it was happiness, basically, overall, so we brought that here. And now this past year I refused. I did not want to put it up and I made a point that we're not putting it up and then I come home to see the tree up. It's like we can't get rid of it.

Can someone tell me which customs you brought to America or held onto for your families that Jewish Americans listening to this might not know about or understand? Specific rituals or foods?

Inna: Veal tongue. It's not very popular here, but it's something that I like still. My kids think it's gross.

There's a certain dominant narrative, and it's not mean-spirited that we're left out of that narrative, but I do observe it.

Margarita: Salat Olivier, as a New Year's dish. It's a very intricate potato salad, lots of chopping involved, but you have to mix delicately.

Michael: There's another dish, it's called kholodets, everyone knows.

You're all nodding. What's in it?

Eugenia: You would be shocked to learn what it's made with.

Tell me.

Michael: From the chicken, from the rooster for the most part.

Eugenia: Oh, I remember pigs' feet.

Julia: You can make it from different kinds of meat, I think it's called aspic in English, it's like a meat Jell-O kind of thing.

You kind of lost me at meat Jell-O.

Julia: It's really good with mustard and horseradish.

How about sweets?

Michael: At every Jewish wedding, we have fluden dessert. This fluden they make from nuts, and they put some onion. It can stay even one year.

Yuriy: That's concerning, if it can last a year.

Michael: No, it's very nice.

Eugenia: It's a fruitcake.

Any other traditional foods before we move on?

Gennady: There's one whose translation is "herring under fur coat," which is *selyodka pod shuboy*. And then the gefilte fish that you guys have here, especially in the stores, is very different than the gefilte fish my grandmother and mother made. Like, ours is like brownish, and the ones they sell in the stores here is white and sweet and not very good. I prefer the ones that my mom made.

Michael: You're right!

I understand that many Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants, when they arrived in America, didn't feel welcomed by the more established Jewish institutions, that there was a sense that there was another species arriving.

Gennady: They were welcoming in their own way. Let's talk about the Orthodox community. Unlike Chabad now, which really has a great approach, the Orthodox community was like, "OK, these people are here, they don't know anything about Judaism, they're sort of lower class, because they didn't learn anything. And instead of gradually teaching them and welcoming them, we'll tell them what kosher is, we'll tell them: Shabbes, this is what you do, this is what you don't do. We're not really going to explain it to them. And yeah, we'll welcome them, but sort of unconsciously we were looked down upon as well. On the other hand, if you look at the more progressive—the Federations of the world, the JCCs of the world—they liked Russian Jews in a sort of curated way. So we'll come to an event, maybe tell our story, they'll give us a little welcome package or so forth, but on a socioeconomic scale, we were nobodies. And even though it wasn't in our face, I felt it, I think a lot of people felt it. Even now, if you go to a Federation or something like that, in five minutes the person you're talking to, he's going to tell you what boards they're on, what boards their parents are on, what buildings are named after them, and most of us are like, "Well, I don't have any buildings named after me." And both with the Orthodox community and I would say the secular progressive community, they also understood that we're not going to become donors anytime soon and in most of these communities, the size of your donations kind of sets you apart. So I think we felt sort of being second-class citizens in both of these groups.

We came to our Jewishness later in life, at different stages, and we have more appreciation for this as compared to American Jews, who are—especially now—way too assimilated.

Irina: What I always felt was that the American Jewish community, after they've done so much for the Russian-speaking Jews, thought that they're bringing people into the promised land and once they arrive, they'll start practicing Judaism right away and they will go to the synagogues. And especially in the '80s and '90s, the synagogue attendance was depleting and they're like, "Oh, we're going to replenish the synagogues with these new people that are coming and they will be so eager to do everything." And that just didn't happen. People didn't know how to do Jewishly, and to second what Gennady was saying, they didn't feel particularly welcome, it's not that they were *not* welcome, but it was just hard—language barrier, income barrier, obviously. And I think that adds to the question you asked about how many people go to synagogues, and people were reluctant to raise their hand, because it's just not a common practice in our community, at least as far as I can see.

Lev: I was 10 years old when we got here. I was 11, 12, 13 in the first years that we were acculturating here. I've never heard of a true negative experience. I think there was always a sense, as people have mentioned, that we're new, we're greenhorns, we're getting used to things. But we had a volunteer lady who met with us in the first couple of years, a senior

citizen who was probably doing good work, who kind of helped us along. There was another family in Brooklyn Heights that I think did the same for a couple of months. In New York City at least, there was plenty of infrastructure. There was of course, NYANA [New York Association for New Americans], the nonprofit that helped new arrivals. To this day I do find, again, in Jewish spaces that the story of Jewish history that the American Jewish community tells itself, is the story of immigration in the 1890s to 1920s. So my children, who now receive free Jewish books from PJ Library, it's excellent, great service, but whenever a story comes in about immigration, it's always about, "Oh, Yetta came, and oh, look, the Statue of Liberty! She was on the Lower East Side selling knishes." That's part of our history, but what about the million of us who arrived in the 1990s on Delta airplanes to JFK and not onto Ellis Island? Or what about the earlier migrants—Sephardi migrants in the 19th century or German immigrants who came in the prior waves, right? There's a certain dominant narrative, and it's not mean-spirited that we're left out of that narrative, but I do observe it.

Misha: My family and I arrived in November 1992. I was 10, I turned 11 in a few weeks. I went to public school for two months just because I had to, but switched to private school: the Hebrew Academy of San Francisco. The school was run by an Orthodox rabbi, I guess, but at least 80% of the kids there were former Soviet Jews, from all kinds of republics: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, any and every republic. So the only non-Soviet Jews I encountered for the most part were "Americans" to me. They were really cool to us, I mean, it was a small school, where I made some friends who I'm still friends with till this day. That's certainly where I got a certain Jewish education, but the only thing I would say is, I wish they would've taught more actual Jewish history. There was definitely the emphasis on Hebrew and Talmud, and then other regular classes, like physics and English and math. But not enough emphasis on Jewish history. But overall, it was quite a communal, pleasant experience.

Julia: When I first immigrated, I was never looking for a Jewish organization or any sort of connections, I just kept to myself. But I feel like post-Oct. 7, we need each other and I feel like it's an act of rebellion now to be visible, to take the space. We need each other for support.

Can anyone speak about whether you saw an improvement in the Jewish welcome, in particular, over time?

Gennady: Yes, definitely an improvement. From the Orthodox side, they're not beating you over the head with, "You must be kosher, you must keep Shabbes." Chabad really knows their audience, they have a good program where they understand who they're talking to and they're coming at you moderately and most importantly, they're not criticizing you or whatever you're doing or not doing. And again, the Federation, the JCCs, I think they've done the studies, they've done the surveys, they've hired people, actually people like ourselves, who understand Russian-speaking Jews, understand all the things that didn't work. And now it's more of *us* creating programs for *us* and guiding programs at these big organizations, which I do say it's a big improvement.

While we may not be as well-versed in all the customs, traditions, etc., we have never taken our Jewish peoplehood for granted.

Ellen: I agree with what Gennady said. And also the longer we live here, the more we *become* those other American Jews, I guess. We find the people that are close to us ideologically and build friendships and that's how we become closer to them, to each other.

Irina: I noticed that there is a switch, maybe 15, 20 years ago it started. There were a lot of organizations that invested into welcoming—basically there is a talking Russian-speaking Jew now, on many boards. And I also think that it's because our immigration was very successful and people are now making real big money, and that's also a factor.

Julia, can you address the political bent that we heard about in our pre-interviews, that Russian-speaking Jews are more right-leaning because of what they saw in the former Soviet Union?

Julia: What I call myself is the completely disillusioned liberal. When I came here, I was 24 years old, I wanted to be helping the disadvantaged, the minority groups, all that. I started working for Human Rights Watch, went to film school, started working for a very left-leaning big media corporation, where I quickly learned that for most journalists who came to work there, there was a double standard whenever they were covering news from Israel. It was crazy to see. And the way they're seeing Jews now—as people with white privilege—to me personally, as a Soviet Jew, it sounds so crazy. Also, COVID policies are a completely separate topic of conversation, but I don't think I will ever be voting Democrat again.

Yuriy: There are a couple of reasons why Soviet or Russian-speaking Jews lean right. And this is not a justification, it's simply an explanation. Number one, is this trauma from communism, and they see everything through that lens. It's such an intensely allergic reaction toward anything that may just smell like socialism. Whether validated or not, that's number one. Number two is the immigration issue. This is me channeling them: "We came here legally, we stood in line, we paid our dues, we pay our taxes," right? And associating, of course, the Democratic Party with open borders and the Republican Party with tighter immigration policy. Now, in our family, we have a really interesting dynamic. I have my parents and I have a sister who's 12 years younger, so it's almost like three generations in one family. My parents are Republican to the core, and they're really influenced by those pillars that I just alluded to. My sister who's 26, she went to UC Berkeley, she wasn't able to withstand the pressure. She marched with BLM, and she is almost on the polar opposite side. And then you have me, who is unaffiliated and I vote both ways and I stick to the issues that are important to me and I don't play for either team.

I don't feel like I'm an immigrant anymore. I feel I'm the part of this country.

Eugenia: When we first came here, our understanding of "Democratic" sort of resonated with the democracy that we thought socialism was. Once we could register, we registered Republican, but then I began to think—I was in education and I realized what the Republican agenda is: basically to keep as many people down as they can, so they would

have as cheap labor as they can have. And of course, many years ago I switched to being a Democrat and I would never vote Republican.

We're going to go to the last question. What is one thing that you would want the wider American Jewish community to understand about Russian-speaking Jews in America?

Irina: If you want people to be a part of your community, you have to welcome them into the community. Bring them in and adjust your programs or your approach for that.

Ellen: Include us. We bring many interesting stories and histories with our immigration and we are not little brothers and sisters, we are an important piece of this pie.

Margarita: Share introductory access points with us. Share stories. I remember once someone told me about looking at the flame in your nails on Havdalah and that was so witchy and beautiful to me, I didn't know about that.

Eugenia: Acceptance is not easy, but do endure it.

Gennady: Our view of the world is informed by a unique experience of immigration, which led to extreme poverty for most of us and having to climb out of that extreme poverty into success for the community as a whole. And then if you go backward, the experience or the stories that we heard from our grandparents about the Holocaust and the period after. If your family was here for generations, you sort of missed all of that.

Inna: As Russian-speaking Jews, we came to our Jewishness later in life, at different stages, and we have more appreciation for this as compared to American Jews, who are—especially now—way too assimilated. Sometimes they forget they're Jewish and they consider themselves more white, where we realized on Oct. 7, it's not exactly so. I feel that a lot of them are not understanding what is happening now. I don't necessarily need their acceptance. I feel I'm American just fine without having them accept me or not. I feel like they should join us. We should all be coming together, American Jews, doesn't matter what kind of speaking—Russian-speaking, Portuguese, we should all be coming together. Yes, we came to this later and they've been here a couple of generations before us, but we're really the same people.

Lev: We have our own experience that may not comport with American Jewish assumptions or expectations about politics, foodways, religiosity, guilt. We have our own experience just like other Jewish immigrant communities, be they Bukharan Jews, Syrian Jews, [that] have their own experiences that don't necessarily align with sort of the dominant narrative told *by* American Jews *to* American Jews about the American Jewish experience.

Yuriy: While we may not be as well-versed in all the customs, traditions, etc., we have never taken our Jewish peoplehood for granted. We have never fully let our guard down and probably we're not as shocked by the events post-Oct. 7 and all the backlash. And that

makes us really effective allies in the fight against the awakening of history's greatest evil, antisemitism.

Julia: I think what Yuriy said is beautiful. All my American Jewish friends were so shocked after Oct. 7 by what was happening. It was like a rude awakening for me—it was like the biggest nightmare to be seeing this happening here in the U.S. and in the Western world. And I think that Soviet Jews, we have our own history, our own trauma, and our own experience. I can feel antisemitism in my gut.

Misha: What I want American Jews—especially who have been here for multiple generations—to know about the experiences of Jews from the former Soviet Union is pretty much what I want *any* American to know: We are an enormously diverse group of people. The Soviet Union was just geographically enormous, whether it's big city or small city even if, let's say if you grew up in Ukraine, growing up in Odesa would be very different than, let's say, in Berdychiv, which is a very small town. So what I would want them to know is, as Lev said, to check their expectations and to really take seriously the differences. I would like American Jews and generally all Americans to appreciate the uniqueness of the experiences of former Jews from the Soviet Union, as an immigrant experience. We may not fit the expectation of either what an immigrant is or should be, or what a Jewish immigrant is or should be.

Michael: I think I don't feel like I'm an immigrant anymore. I feel I'm the part of this country.

Is there something that you would say to American Jews who maybe don't understand the Soviet Jewish experience?

Michael: It's tough to explain Jewish mentality from the Soviet Union and people who are born here, they're from two different planets, they cannot understand us. But they will understand us some day.

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/the-minyan-jews-former-soviet-union>