SOVIET-JEWISH AMERICAN WRITERS COME OF AGE

By ANDREA JACOBS

EDUCATION & CULTURE

Sasha Senderovich tells a story

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rof. Sasha Senderovich as a master analyst of an exciting literary wave founded by Soviet-Je-

ish American authors who came here as chil-


dren. Their contemporary twists on the immigrant experience dominate bestseller lists, pile high on night-

stands and are Kindle-devoured near and far.

Each book offers revelatory insights that both delight and dis-


comfort American Jewish readers.

It began with Gary Shteyngart's The Russian Debutante's Handbook (2002) and the birth of Vladimir Gir-

shkin, "one of the most original and unlikely heroes of recent times," critics hailed.

Soon other writers penned their interpretations of Soviet life and American transplantation. David Bezmozgis, Ellen Litman, Alina Simone, Lara Vapnyar and Anya Ulinich.

Most of them are the same age, "at least a chunk of them," says Senderovich.

Simone, Lara Vapnyar and Anya Bezmozgis, Ellen Litman, Alina Simone, Lara Vapnyar and Anya Ulinich.

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"The Beet Generation," coined in 2008 as a hip descriptor of the trend, makes Senderovich bristle.

"I wouldn't call it that for a couple of reasons," he says. "It plays on existing American stereotypes of the Old Country," like borscht. "American-Jewry already has a partic-

ular mythology of the Old World that dates back to turn-of-the-cen-

tury immigration at Ellis Island. These writers are really differ-

ent. Some left the Soviet Union as children, some as teenagers. But they all grew up in the Soviet Union, which Americans still view through a Cold War prism.

"What they are doing is far more radical than beets and borscht."

Senderovich, who says the Ameri-

can Jewish literature, says. "Authors who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s have access to the Pale of Settlement. They are not running away from pogroms. They hail from the Soviet Union, a Cold War super-

power, and bring stories with them to the American public has received as myth."

Other discrepancies amplify their separate tracks.

"There's language," Senderovich says. "Authors who arrived in the US at the turn of the century and started writing in English were native Yiddish speakers. The main language of the Soviet émigrés is Russian.

The new Russian writers are more authentic Russian literature." Senderovich adds. "Many, many American Jews were told that their grandparents ran away from Russia to avoid serving in the army. Again, it's almost impossible to verify.

"All immigrants have access to mythmaking."

Enter the novel, a prose form that unleashes the deus ex machina while often retaining and utilizing past memories. Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird is one of the most beloved examples of inventive reten-

tion.

Family narratives exchanged for untold decades evolve into the stuff of legend, embellishment and outright deception.

"But these tales have a function," Senderovich says. "There is some degree of truth in them — 'truth' in quotation marks."

Boris Fishman's novel A Replacement


Shteyngart, whose parents set-

tled in Brooklyn, wrote that in the absence of TV and cable he absorbed the Russian classics in his youth. The immense body of Russian literature "influenced émigrés Soviet-Jewish writers and distinguish-

en them from Henry Roth — although Roth was in no way illi-

trated," Senderovich says.

Soviet-Jewish writers have churned out several autobiograph-

ical-based novels. Out of 10 or an col-

lective works produced thus far, he descripts Shteyngart's Little Failure as the only memoir.

Similar to other American Jews, the émigrés are starting to question their ancestral lore — stories passed down from generation to generation with-

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SendROVICH

What was it like to be a transplant to America?

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Boris Fishman's novel A Replacement...
Sendrovich says that today’s ex-Soviet writers are filling the “gaps and empty spaces” that deviate from the traditional story. “They are talking about and challenging previ- ouss assumptions. That’s one of the values of this generation of writers.”

Sendrovich suggests the gray areas between good intentions and self-satisfying fictions may underlie the entire foundation of the American Jewish account of the Free Soviet Jewry movement. It’s a disturbing thesis he’s willing to support with facts.

The Soviet Jewry movement in the US, which was active from the mid-1960s all the way into the late 1980s, encompasses a whole generation of American Jews, he says. “That movement was the glue that defined the American Jewish community after the Holocaust.”

There is no doubt that American Jews wanted to save their Soviet brothers and sisters — but Sendrovich claims certain falsehoods and fictions permeated the larger picture. “American Jews saw their Soviet counterparts as spiritually cut off from the Jewish people,” he says. They assumed that Soviet Jews were like them and wanted to practice Judaism. “It became a huge surprise when Russian Jews arrived in the US and the vast majority had absolutely no interest in Judaism.”

The American Jewish community also thought that Soviet Jews would immigrate to Israel. “This was another big lie. The establishment — the federations — were pressured by the Israeli government to basically create a demographic advantage for Israel’s population.”

During that period there was no direct flight from Moscow to Tel Aviv. Emigrés traveled to Vienna and were held in transit camps where they waited for supposed visas to Israel. “About 85% were what we call dropouts,” Sendrovich says. “Most preferred to go to America, Canada or other destinations.”

In his second book, The Free World, he details the transit atmosphere “and completely ripped away the narrative of Soviet immigration conventionally known in America.”

A free market concept in the former Soviet Union was still the place to go for tired imaginations. “No matter how much professional education you get, I believe that literature is still the place to go for those deeper connections.”

Perhaps this is why he applauds Fishman’s work, who look like me.”

Many of them think they should be majoring in business, management or similar fields,” he says. “I don’t ever want to see a generation of people who only one they ever take in litera- res who shake up cultural conven- tions by penning new narratives and new formations.

“The autobiography is impor- tant for them because they can inte- grate their stories into fiction,” he says, “but I think they will have to find a way to keep their stories out of their own lives.

Shifting attitudes reflect the soar- ing cost of a university education, whichSendrovich says has quadrup- led over the past decade. “People don’t have the luxury of simply open- ing up their minds to the universal principles of life.”

“Besides, how long can you write for tired imaginations. ‘I’m writing a book because I am an assistant professor on the tenure track. It’s a job require- ments to the human condition by majoring in liberal arts are gone. “Liberal arts definitely serves this function for some students,” he says, “but there are many challenges. Over the past few decades, and especially during the recession, things have become very tough.”

Since he began teaching in 2010, Sendrovich has observed a steady stream of students moving away from liberal arts in favor of study- ing a profession. “Many of them think they should be majoring in business, manage- ment or similar fields,” he says. “They aren’t approaching college as a place to receive a liberal arts education.”

“This is sad, because the Ameri- can tradition is very different than other academic systems in the world that focus on professional training early in college.”

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