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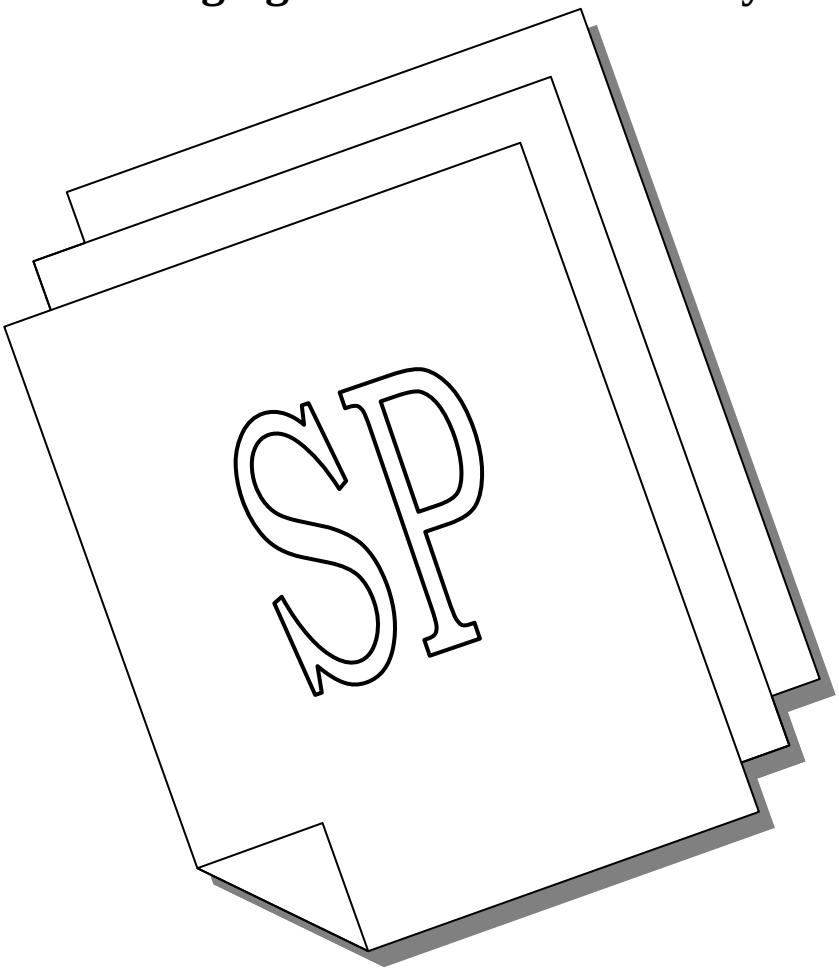

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Russian cultural institutions in Beer-Sheba: Building a community

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Abstract

The present study sheds light on the local cultural expressions characteristic of the Russian-speaking community in Israel. We analyzed three main cultural institutions established by the immigrants from the FSU in Beer-Sheba (a city in the Southern periphery of Israel): shows and concerts targeting immigrant audiences, Russian libraries and book stores. The study was based on three methods: interviews with municipal officials and Russian cultural entrepreneurs; participant observations in the selected cultural institutions; and in-depth interviews with the participant immigrants. The study discovered a rich cultural life in "Russian" Beer-Sheba, including numerous concerts of immigrant artists, as well as shows imported from the FSU, and a broad network of Russian libraries and book stores. They are established by immigrant entrepreneurs and volunteers without any public financial support. These venues can be seen as a "cultural import" to address the immigrants' feelings of nostalgia but the findings reveal that they have acquired a new meaning in Israel, serving as alternative community centers and helping their audiences to adjust to life in Israel.

Introduction

The large and unprecedented wave of immigration to Israel from countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) has attracted considerable attention in nearly all fields of social science research over the past 15 years. Studies concerning FSU immigrants addressed a wide variety of topics, including cultural and media activity among Russian speakers in Israel (Caspi & Elias, 2000; Elias, 2005; Horowitz & Leshem, 1998; Leshem & Lissak, 2001), job market integration (Raijman & Semyonov, 1998; Remennick, 2007), adjustment to school (Bolotin-Chachashvili, 2007; Epstein & Kheimets, 2000; Lerner, 1999) and Israeli army (Eisikovits, 2006), electoral patterns (Khanin, 2007), language acquisition (Ben-Refael, Olshtain, & Geijst, 1998) and many other issues.

Despite the importance of these studies in understanding key aspects of Russian-speaking immigrants' integration into Israeli society, most adopt an overly general outlook that does not differentiate among the various subcultures and social strata within this large and heterogeneous population. Moreover, most previous studies did not distinguish among the varied cultural processes taking place in "Russian" communities in the various localities. Even in those few cases in which research focuses on local activity, studies have been limited to Russian immigrant communities in major cities, such as Tel Aviv (Levin, 2001) and Jerusalem (Zilberg, 2000),

whereas cultural life on the "Russian street" in peripheral towns, in which FSU immigrants sometimes constitute more than 50% of the population, has merited almost no research attention to date.

In this regard, an outstanding exception is a study by Horowitz, Shamai and Ilatov (2003) that focused on the life of the Russian-speaking community in the town of Katzrin over a ten-year period, including analysis of archival material and interviews with representatives of institutions responsible for integration of FSU immigrants. The findings show that despite its modest size (about 2,000 men and women), the Russian-speaking community in Katzrin succeeded in establishing impressive cultural institutions that assist immigrants in their social and cultural integration, including the Russian section at the municipal library, a club for World War II veterans, music club, chess club and more.

Notwithstanding its important contribution to our understanding of processes occurring in FSU immigrant communities on the local level, the aforementioned study provides only a general description of these processes and lacks in-depth analysis of each of the institutions mentioned. To fill this gap, the present study directs its attention to local cultural manifestations, focusing on the FSU immigrant community in Beer-Sheba, one of Israel's largest. According to statistics provided by the Beer-Sheba Municipality (2006), 57,617 Russian-speaking immigrants have settled in Beer-Sheba since the onset of mass immigration from the FSU to Israel. Hence this population constitutes about one third of all the city's residents, rendering Beer-Sheba the Israeli city with the third largest Russian-speaking population, following Haifa and Ashdod.

We intend to explore the cultural life of this community by focusing on key cultural facilities targeting Russian-speaking residents of Beer-Sheba: Performances, libraries and bookstores, describing their operative patterns and the principal features of their visitors, assessing the motives behind participation in local Russian cultural life and identifying the key functions the designated facilities fulfill for FSU immigrants. The study may thus clarify the nature of local cultural manifestations established by FSU immigrants and enrich our comprehension of the cultural mosaic of Beer-Sheba, capital of the Negev, centering on one of its largest and most varied ethnic communities.

Research methods

This study employs three complementary research methods: semi-structured interviews with key figures on the local "Russian street"; participatory observation of cultural events, libraries and bookstores; and in-depth interviews with organizers of these facilities and with the immigrants who visit or use them. We began mapping local cultural events for FSU immigrants by contacting employees of the Beer-Sheba Municipality's Absorption Department, requesting current information on municipally-run cultural institutions intended for FSU immigrants. In a similar manner, we gathered information about bookstores selling items in Russian, libraries that include Russian book collections, halls and theatres hosting the community's cultural events and ticket agencies for these events. Interviews were conducted with key figures involved in the cultural life of FSU immigrants in Beer-Sheba, including volunteers responsible for the establishment and operation of Russian libraries, producers of performances by artists from Russia, artistic directors of Russian theater groups performing in Beer-Sheba, owners and employees of bookstores carrying Russian-language material and representatives of ticket agencies handling Russian

cultural events in Beer-Sheba. We also used statistical data received from ticket agencies and the Beer-Sheba Municipality.

After completing the initial mapping of major cultural institutions, we selected several of these facilities for observation, ensuring appropriate representation of facilities in different parts of the city and aimed at different audiences within the Russian-speaking population. The facilities selected were: A bookstore located in the Old City, a library on Mivtza Ovda Street and two auditoriums: *Heikhal Hatarbut* [Palace of Culture] and the Municipal Conservatory. Observations of cultural events and of library and bookstore activity were conducted during May 2006. Researchers were present at the library on various days of the week throughout the two-hour period (7:00-9:00 PM) that the library is open to the public. Observations at the bookstore were conducted at similar times, recommended by employees as peak hours. At the auditoriums, we selected performances of various genres appealing to different audiences: An evening of romances performed by a well-known vocal duo from Russia; an evening of classical music performed by FSU immigrants; and an erotic dance show performed by a troupe from Moscow. We paid special attention to set design, audience makeup, and patterns of interaction within the audience and between it and artists or employees.

At the end of each observation, visitors to the facilities examined – audiences at performances, readers at the library and customers at the bookstore – were invited to participate in an interview conducted at the facility itself or later on at participants' homes (for a total of 28 interviews). In this interview, participants were asked to respond to questions concerning the frequency of their visits to the specific cultural facility or others and the roles these facilities fulfill, along with questions addressing various aspects of the participants' social and cultural identities and their integration into the host society.

Performances

Performances by Russian-speaking theater groups and local artists take place frequently in Beer-Sheba, often competing with those of well-known artists from the FSU on tour in Israel. Two agencies are responsible for most of the latter performances: *Cruise International* (1992) and *Rest International* (1996), both established at the initiative of FSU immigrants. These agencies bring Russia's most popular contemporary actors and singers to Beer-Sheba, along with veteran stars from the Soviet golden age, trendy rock and rap groups, and major theater companies from Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Data provided by *Cruise International* show that FSU immigrants residing in Beer-Sheba are sworn culture lovers; the ticket sale rate in Beer-Sheba is higher than that of other cities with FSU immigrant populations of similar size. According to the quantity of tickets sold, Beer-Sheba occupies third place among Israeli cities, following Tel Aviv and Haifa. Agency data also reveal that from May 2005 to April 2006, some 36,000 tickets to performances catering for Russian-speaking audiences were sold in Beer-Sheba – an average of 0.63 tickets per Beer-Sheba resident of FSU origin.

For observation purposes, we selected three performances that took place in Beer-Sheba during May 2006. The first two were held at the Municipal Conservatory, with ticket prices ranging from NIS 36 to NIS 56. One was a classic Russian romance evening with two artists from the FSU: Singer Leonid Serebrennikov, who was very well-received in Soviet Russia, together with film star Natalia Guseva. The second

was an evening of classical music marking the 250th birthday of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, performed by local musicians, all FSU immigrants.

Despite their disparity in terms of artistic character, the impression gained from these two performances was very similar. During each, audiences inundated the artists with support and affection and even conversed with them during the performance. At the performance of Russian romances, the audience displayed impressive familiarity with the lyrical texts and joined the singers in most of the songs. The Mozart evening took place in a similar atmosphere, with one difference: The names of some of Mozart's works were translated into Hebrew – a gesture to the few people in the audience who were not Russian speakers. The literary part of the performance, that including Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*, was conducted in Russian alone. On several occasions, the actors tried to address the audience in Hebrew, but the Russian speakers expressed their displeasure and the performance continued in Russian only.

Audience particulars, too, were virtually identical for both performances. The average age was about 70, with women constituting about two-thirds of the turnout. According to ticket agents, these features are common to audiences for all such events: Inexpensive performances by currently or previously popular Russian artists are attended primarily by retired persons. Their motivation is clarified by one woman who attended the Russian romance songs performance:

> *It is not easy to explain why I spent NIS 56 of my monthly stipend and another NIS 17 on a taxi to come here. It's not because I wanted to hear beloved songs marvelously performed, or, more correctly, not only because of that. I have a television and a record player at home, so I can hear records and recall the years when I was young. It's also not a childish desire to meet some singer or other face to face. I come here for something else. What is important to me is that there is a Russian artist on stage and the hall is full of our people. We're all sitting in that hall together, not as a random assembly of individuals. We are like one group, like one commune. We are more than just 200 Jews gathering together. I don't like to be part of the masses, but here in the hall, I don't feel that way. I feel like part of the people. I experienced similar sentiments only in 1945 when there was a parade marking the Red Army's victory over the Nazis and we all heard it on the radio … Here, I really feel like I'm in charge (Fira, 83, in Israel 14 years).*

Fira's remarks indicate that her chief reason for coming to the performance is not only interest in Russian culture but the need for a shared community experience, a kind of spiritual unity with other immigrants from the FSU. Hence it is no coincidence that she compares her feelings during the performance to those of one of the most significant experiences in her life – celebrations of victory over Nazi Germany. In comparing the two experiences, she stresses the common features of both: A sense of high self-worth and national pride. Fira then notes that this feeling enables her to feel at home in Israel as she enjoys Russian culture together with other Russian speakers.

The third performance selected, an erotic dance show, differed substantively from the first two. It was performed by a well-known Moscow troupe of 40 dancers at *Heikhal Hatarbut*, with ticket prices ranging between NIS 130 and NIS 290. The audience at this performance was far younger than those of the others (average age: 45-50), with an equal number of men and women attending. Like their counterparts at the other performances, the people in the audience were particularly well dressed, underscoring

the contrast between the sparkling jewelry and elegant evening gowns and weary faces attesting to lack of sleep.

Although the name of the performance was *From the Lido to Moulin Rouge*, half the works were based on popular Russian motifs, such as *Kalinka Malinka*. It is interesting to note that even though the "exotic" dancing featured complex choreography and elaborate settings, what excited the audience most were performances of renowned Soviet songs, such as *Moskva! Zvonat kolokola!* (Moscow! The Bells are Ringing!) and *A ya idu, shagayu po Moskve* (I Walk Through the Streets of Moscow). At the concluding verses of each song, the audience rose to its feet and applauded.

Community affiliation issues, discerned during the observation, also arose in interviews with members of the audience. Apparently, attendance at such performances imparts a sense of pride at belonging to the large and cultured community of FSU immigrants. Interview findings show that participation in Russian-language cultural events constitutes a kind of mirror for participants, enabling them to look at their community and themselves and compare their situation with that of other community members. Such introspection largely nurtures a positive view of the community among participants and thus raises their self-worth as members thereof:

> *This is not the first time that I came to see a performance in Russian ... For example, we recently went to a Gesher Theater play. People in the audience were respectable, my age, some came with their children ... How did I feel? I felt good about myself. I saw many elegantly clothed Russians, together with their children. I was happy that Russians are not only cultured people but also financially established. This means that it's possible to live here, it means that it's all right. Our people aspire for mobility and often attain key positions. It hurts me when I see Russian immigrants who are shattered and poor. It worries me very much because suddenly they can fire you and what will happen then? At a performance by Agutin [well-known Russian singer], the singer himself was not most important for me, but rather it was important for me to see successful Russians. When I see other people who succeed, I don't envy them. On the contrary, when I see that others have made it, I'm happy for them. I congratulate them. And when I come to a performance, I'm essentially among them and that says that I'm right up there as well (Leonid, 49, in Israel 9 years).*

Leonid, a former engineer and currently a manufacturing plant employee, seems to express some doubt about his ability to integrate in Israel and advance up the socioeconomic ladder. Visits to plays and performances by popular Russian artists allow him to meet successful Russian-speaking immigrants, compare their situation with his own and nurture hopes that his personal destiny will resemble that of the well-established immigrants he met at the performance, reinforcing his self-confidence by associating himself with the higher economic strata of the immigrant population.

Russian libraries and bookstores

Supplementing the varied and frequent Russian language cultural performances in Beer-Sheba is a linked network of seven libraries that also constitute significant foci

of community cultural life development. While their number is indeed impressive, however, the conditions prevailing at these libraries are rather dismal. Most are situated in small, crowded shelters and private apartments throughout Beer-Sheba, with no suitable facilities for book storage or reader service provision. Library workers receive no salaries for their work; only one librarian receives compensation of any sort for her efforts – a 15-ride city bus ticket. Information about these libraries may be obtained from Russian-speaking employees at the Municipal Library who refer readers to the Russian libraries nearest to their homes, as well as from Russian-speaking passers-by, who display remarkable knowledge of library locations, indicating the centrality of these libraries in Beer-Sheba's Russian communal life.

For a more thorough assessment of Russian library operation, we conducted a participatory observation at the oldest such library in Beer-Sheba, called *Not By Bread Alone*, with some 10,000 volumes and a readership of about 1,000, open three evenings a week from 5:00 to 7:00 PM. Its nominal membership fees – NIS 5 monthly – are applied for acquisition of new books. The library was first set up 27 years ago, long before the mass wave of immigration began. A bookcase with Russian classics such as Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Nekrasov and others remains from that period, but we noticed that it is rarely accessed by today's readers, who prefer romantic novels, thrillers and science fiction. Our impression was corroborated by our interview with the librarian:

> *Most of our readers are regulars who have been coming here for many years. They consist primarily of older people who take out various types of books, some serious and some easy novels. The older women take romantic novels to warm their hearts and to feel emotional, while the men prefer detective stories, history, politics and Judaism. Other people like to read books about Antisemitism, about Jewish history … We also have a bookcase with children's books, but children don't come here. Apparently, they already read Hebrew … New books are very expensive, but we buy some every month. We already have no place to put them, but we won't have it any other way: If we don't buy new books, no one will come here. Our readers thirst for new books.*

The library is located in the shelter of an old apartment building and is very crowded, with nearly 10,000 books crammed into a tiny 20 m² area, rendering many of them just about inaccessible. Sometimes, books are piled up to the ceiling. For that same reason, the premises cannot accommodate all readers, some of whom have to wait their turn outside until there is room for them. Yet despite the poor conditions and crowding, the library enjoys vast popularity among readers. Our observations noted that readers arrive at a frequency of about 30 an hour, but because of the crowded conditions, they spend only a short time inside – about 12 minutes. Visitors make sure that they are properly attired and most appear as though the visit to the library gives them a special reason to get out of the house: No one comes in with shopping bags or briefcases, only books.

At the entrance to the library, visitors generally recognize friends and acquaintances and conversation shifts from books to everyday affairs, only to be curtailed unequivocally by the librarian: "*Tovarishchi* (Comrades)!" she says to visitors in an official-sounding tone of voice reminiscent of the Soviet Union: "Quiet, please! You are in a library!" The word "library" serves as a kind of code that arouses memories of Russian library culture. Accordingly, even though the shelter in which this Beer-

Sheba library is located in no way resembles the elegant halls of Soviet libraries, the librarian's request immediately halts all conversation, to be resumed only when visitors leave the site.

Who are the regular visitors to the library? Observations and interviews with library workers reveal that most readers are older immigrants, aged 50-70, with women slightly outnumbering men. Most subsist on their monthly welfare checks or odd jobs and do not speak Hebrew. Taking these characteristics into account, it may be claimed that Russian libraries serve indigent immigrants who would be almost totally detached from cultural consumption were it not for simple and inexpensive access to the written word. This impression was verified also during interviews with library visitors: Many indicated that the library is virtually the only means of fulfilling the cultural needs they had developed by virtue of the social status they had enjoyed in the FSU and lost on arrival in Israel, as expressed by Tatiana (44, 10 years in Israel), a pharmacist who now works as a nanny and cleaning woman:

> *In 1996, when I came to Israel and first began looking for a job, the girl at the employment agency told me: "Go to this address and tell them: Ani menaka (I'm a cleaning woman). Remember that word, m-e-n-a-k-a." Since then, such words have been imprinted within me. In the afternoon, I work as a cleaning woman at Soroka Hospital and in the morning I work as a nanny … My co-workers are good women, but uneducated. The same is true of our neighbors – I live in the Dalet neighborhood [one of the poorer parts of Beer-Sheba]. Obviously, I would like to go to the theater. Artists from Russia come here frequently, but we don't go because it's expensive. That's why the library is the only place for me. It's accessible to me. I don't need a license [Tatiana is alluding to the professional license she would require to work as a pharmacist in Israel] to read Haruki Murakami or Paulo Coelho. Here, I feel that I have a status that suits me, with which I can really identify. When I read a book, I'm not a nanny, I'm not a cleaning woman – I'm me.*

Besides its function as a significant means of enabling immigrants to maintain a cultural consumption style suiting their original social status, the library plays an equally important role as a central site for realization of intra-communal relations. On several occasions during observations, we noticed that some visitors made advance appointments to meet others at the library: "When will you be coming here again? I'll be there too and then we'll go for a little walk." We heard such things said often at the library. Moreover, some readers even used library books as a kind of living "personal ads" to meet other people in the community who share their interest in books: A telephone number and the name "Zina" was written on the cover of a novel by Olga Larionova; a telephone number, a drawing of a bear and the name "Oleg" on a book by Henry Precht; and the following impassioned appeal on a book by Sergei Lukianenko: "Friends, anyone who loves Lukianenko, contact me!" (a telephone number was included as well). This phenomenon is also known to the librarians, who display a lenient attitude and do not erase the inscriptions or try to find or punish the perpetrators. "What can I do? Maybe they need it," one librarian told us.

To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, we chose a phone number written on a book at random and dialed it. And that is how we got to know the person who wrote it in. His name is Boris, 39-year old, who has resided in Israel for ten years. In our conversation, Boris said he wrote down his number on the book about three years

ago and that is how he managed to meet new friends who live in Beer-Sheba and share areas of interest with him. He met with some only once but has remained in contact with others to this day. Moreover, Boris is now engaged to the sister of one of the readers he met through the book. In this case, the book served as an efficient means not only of making friends but even of finding romance within the community.

According to librarians, this phenomenon is more typical of younger readers. The older ones do not write on books and even repair them and glue torn pages back together. Such behavior conforms with observations in the extensive research literature on the Soviet Russian intelligentsia, for whom books are sacred and awe-inspiring, as one participant explained:

> *When I go to the library, I take a good look around me to see if there's a bag of books left there. Our people don't throw books into the street. It's only Hebrew books that you'll find in boxes on the street … If there's no need for books found around the house or no room at home or one's grandchildren don't read, people bring the books here and put them near the library door. The library doesn't always adopt these books, because they're mostly old and unpopular; besides, there is no room in the library to store them. But there will always be people who will take those books home. They put the books here [near the library door] the way one leaves a baby at an orphanage (Slava, 62, in Israel 13 years).*

Slava's remarks show that even a closed library helps immigrants preserve the value of a book, as it has become the customary location at which "orphaned" books, abandoned by their owners, find their way to new families. Interviews also showed that most participants brought large book collections with them to Israel, but only rarely did they read the books they owned. Most felt the need to read new and trendy books. Gratification of this need is a key function of Russian libraries, as indicated in Yakov's (67, 12 years in Israel) response to the question of why he makes sure to visit the library weekly:

> *Why do I need new books? For Jews, books are always precious. The Jews are called "The People of the Book" for good reason. I have a large book collection at home and I never sold or threw out a book. But I'm interested in reading what's being published now. I enjoy reading thrillers about what's going on in Russia today because there's no more accurate description of everyday life in contemporary Russia than in suspense stories. They won't report it in the news and you won't see it in the movies – not because they're hiding it, but because they've already gotten used to such things and pay no attention to them. In a book, however, you read descriptions of dark stairwells, yards, storerooms, cafés, schools, markets and streets. When I encounter such descriptions, I realize that I made no mistake when I decided to move to Israel.*

For Yakov, the new books offered by the library constitute a reliable source of information on contemporary life in Russia and serve as justification for his decision to leave the FSU. Similarly, many other participants who visit Russian libraries regularly made comments such as: "The newspapers lie and it's not clear at all what contemporary films are today." It appears, therefore, that for many readers, the new Russian books are the only source of trustworthy information, especially regarding Russian affairs.

Besides identifying the regular readership that visits Russian libraries, it is important to determine who does not do so. Findings of observations and interviews with library employees indicate that regular readers are immigrants aged 50 and up, whereas younger immigrants (including children and youth), are not part of the Russian library readership. We found an explanation for the absence of working age immigrants during observations at Russian bookstores, whereas reasons for the younger immigrants' lack of representation were partly derived from conversations with adolescents who often gather in the courtyard of the building where the library is located. One girl, Nina (14, 4 years in Israel), responded to the question of why she does not visit the library located in her building as follows:

> *It's impossible to find anything in the library because of the way the books are arranged. I asked one of the "grandmas" [referring to the librarians] where I could find the "Interview with a Vampire" series but they had never heard of those books. It was as if they were not librarians but just sit there. They know where to find the romantic novels that they like, but they don't know where the books that normal people read are. We have different areas of interest. I have very few friends who visit libraries. They download books from the Internet and if the book is really good, they buy it.*

Nina's remarks imply that Russian libraries have not become cultural centers and meeting places for youth, who maintain that librarians are not familiar with books aimed at a younger audience and sometimes even respond with condescending answers such as: "I cannot help you. I do not read this kind of literature." The cultural gaps between the library workers and the youth preclude dialogue between the two generations of immigrants and thus neutralize the potential of Russian libraries as a tool for intra-communal cultural continuity.

Economically well-established immigrants aged 30-45 are rarely seen in libraries because they prefer buying books at Russian bookstores. The options are numerous and varied: Beer-Sheba has 11 bookstores catering to Russian speakers. Unlike the public libraries, dispersed throughout the city to serve readers who do not own cars, nearly all Russian bookstores are situated in the Old City, far from residential neighborhoods, often located one next to the other.

For observation purposes, we selected a bookstore called *Sputnik*, located in the Old City. Because the show window is largely concealed by apparel displayed at the adjacent clothing store, bookstore workers play Russian songs over loudspeakers aimed at the street to attract customers. The layout is long and narrow and the dense piles of books inside are reminiscent of the library described above. The entrance display features world classics and works in prestigious fields such as philosophy and psychology, as well as books about Israel. *"Not that anyone buys these books," notes one salesman, "but it's important for them to be here. This is the face of our store. A person who comes in sees that it's a respectable bookstore. Even if he only buys a page turner, it makes the experience more pleasant."* Unlike these display books, science fiction, romantic novels and various handbooks may be found inside the store. Near the cashier is a counter with information booklets on shows and concerts for which tickets are available at the store. This feature is typical of most Russian bookstores in Beer-Sheba, that also serve as community information centers: They sell tickets to performances and plays geared for Russian speakers and provide information on organized tours from Beer-Sheba to all parts of Israel.

Bookstores have fewer visitors than libraries – about 20 people an hour, six or seven of whom actually buy something. There was room for all customers inside the store, so that no one had to wait on line outside as they did frequently at libraries. The staff tried to pay attention to all customers simultaneously, attempting to discover the cultural tastes of each. It appeared to us that many customers are regular visitors, as the staff knew them by name. Unlike library visitors, bookstore customers tended to stay on for long periods of time, sometimes more than half an hour, examining each shelf and conducting literary dialogues with the staff. On more than one occasion, additional customers joined such discussions, with the salesperson's permission, in utter contrast to the formal library atmosphere in which visitors are asked to maintain exemplary silence.

In contrast to retired persons visiting the libraries, the average age of customers at bookstores is 35-45, with roughly equal representation by men and women. Most customers carry shopping bags, indicating the visit to the bookstore is part of a shopping trip rather than a spare-time activity like visiting the library, an observation apparently explained by the bookstore customers' better financial status, enabling them to afford a more varied selection of cultural activities than library members. It appears, therefore, that Russian bookstores and libraries do not compete with each other because they appeal to different kinds of clients. Moreover, interviews with the bookstore owner indicated that the two types of facilities also differ regarding the kind of books they offer readers:

> *The selection of books we have at the store is very different from those at libraries. I know this because the libraries buy books from us and we give them wholesale discounts. For them [library readers], reading is, to paraphrase Wissotzky's song: "shooting up and sinking into oblivion". A person takes a thriller, romantic novel or science fiction book – all kinds of books that you can't stop reading once you start, but you cannot do anything with the information afterwards. You read it and forget it. In the library, you won't find books about psychology, or encyclopedias. Those are the kind of books people want to have at home. There's even no reason to take classics out of the library. They have to be at home so you can come back to them. Them and us are simply two different things.*

The bookstore owner asserts that his customers want classics, encyclopedias and handbooks, the kind of books that it is important to have at home so you can read them when necessary (handbooks and encyclopedias), or to attest to one's cultural breeding (classics). But what do visitors say about their reasons for visiting bookstores? Interviews show that some do not come there for books, but rather for favorite magazines that they read in the FSU:

> *At the bookstore, everything is very expensive. If I had more money, of course, I would buy something [costly]. But I go to the store regularly on the tenth of the month and always ask for the latest issue of Krestianka" [Farmer Woman]. In Russia, I always had a subscription … Sometimes, I ask to see other magazines. I stand in the corner quietly and leaf through them all. I go through the articles and sometimes, if it's really interesting, I'll even read half an article. What I like, I buy. The sales girl laughs at me. She says: "Why buy it? You've already read it all!" But she just says that for a joke. She knows that after I go through everything, I'll always buy something (Sveta, 42, in Israel one and a half years).*

It is important to emphasize that Sveta differs from the Russian intellectual stereotype. She is a single mother with seven children and only has partial secondary education. In the FSU, she worked in agriculture and in Israel, she subsists on an income stipend and lives in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Beer-Sheba. As her remarks indicate, bookstores enable her to continue the cultural consumption to which she was accustomed in the FSU (magazines aimed at the working class) and thereby maintain continuity and stability in her life.

Like Sveta, who belongs to the lower socioeconomic strata among FSU immigrants, older customers, aged 60 and up, most of whom subsist on their modest old-age benefits, do not visit bookstores to buy anything. Rather, they come to keep abreast of new performances by Russian artists taking place in Beer-Sheba and to buy cheap tickets:

> *I don't buy books. I have a room in a very small hostel with no place to keep new books. I keep only old books, some with my late husband's bookmarks. Sometimes, I reread them. But I go to the bookstore regularly for tickets to performances. Marvelous artists come here, but you have to go to the store often because the cheap tickets are grabbed up very quickly. Besides, it's the cheaper performances that have little to no advertising. If you don't get to the store in time, you won't know about them. That's why I try to visit the store at least once a month. I take a notebook and pen with me, sit near the cashier – she already knows me very well – and make myself a list of all the performances a month in advance (Ninel, 79, in Israel 14 years).*

It thus appears that for many visitors, the bookstore is a source of cultural information of interest to the Russian-speaking community, including the latest news about popular singers, along with schedules of and tickets to their shows. Moreover, some participants noted that simply visiting the bookstore is a kind of cultural ritual for them that is no less important than actually buying a book:

> *I go to bookstores to buy books, of course. If I have errands in the Old City, I always stop in. When I see the Russian bookstore sign, it immediately draws me inside. I buy a book when I want to make myself happy … I look around, see what other people are taking, talk to the saleswoman. I ask her what's in vogue now, what are people buying today. There are people who buy books via the Internet, of course, but that's not for me. The Internet is just a machine. The store is a ritual. I come there, buy something and everyone sees what I buy. Then I go home and show my family: "Look what I bought!" Sometimes I get to know new singers. There's a new bard (Russian chanson singer), for example, Timur Shaov, with whom I became familiar through the store. Once, during a visit to the store, they were playing a song whose lyrics included the words "and to feel your Jewishness with delight," cynically, of course. At the time, I had been in Israel for only two years and this "Jewishness" was not exactly a great delight for me. The situation was miserable. So I asked the salesman about that singer and he also sold me a ticket to his performance. I went to the show and since then I've been listening to him (Alexander, 39, in Israel for 7 years).*

Finally, a marked absence of adolescents and young adults (ages 20-30) was noted among bookstore customers, as it was among library readers. One possible

explanation is that most people in these age groups arrived in Israel when they were very young and can neither read nor write in Russian. This explanation is supported by Niznick's (2003) study of Russian immigrant youth, indicating that fewer than 10% of them had read even one complete book in Russian; most Russian texts that they did read were brief press items, advertisements and television program listings. Most adolescent immigrants thus view Russian literature as *terra incognita* because of their limited knowledge of the written language. Similar findings were obtained in a study by Elias and Lemish (forthcoming) on media consumption patterns in families of FSU immigrants, showing that parents quickly relinquish their concerted efforts to teach their children to read and write in Russian, making do with the spoken language necessary for routine, everyday communication.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that Beer-Sheba has a rich and varied Russian-language cultural life. It ranks among the top three cities in Israel regarding ticket sales for Russian artists and also boasts a dense network of Russian-language libraries and bookstores. The activities of each of such facility are administered from the bottom up by private entrepreneurs and volunteers, all of them immigrants from the FSU; none have any financial or administrative affiliation with official institutions such as the Ministry of Absorption, the Ministry of Education and Culture or the Beer-Sheba Municipality. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that in contrast to the findings of Levin (2002) and Zilberg (2000), all cultural facilities identified during research are intended for broad sectors of the immigrant population and not limited exclusively to an intellectual elite.

Cultural facilities similar to those identified in the present study also functioned in the FSU. As such, one might posit that they constitute a kind of "cultural import" intended to gratify pre-existing cultural needs. We maintain, however, that the operation and activities of these facilities in Israel differ from those of their overseas counterparts. Moreover, they also assumed a new significance that was not familiar to their users before immigration. For example, the elegant public libraries of the Former Soviet Union far surpass their Israeli counterparts in quality, but may not enjoy as much demand as the Russian libraries of Beer-Sheba. The former stood out for their large but rather deserted halls, with only a few readers (mostly children) visiting throughout the day, while the latter enjoy great popularity among their readers who are even willing to wait in line(!). Russian bookstores also underwent a transformation when they are transplanted to Israeli soil, turning into vibrant cultural centers at which one could obtain information about performances in town, buy the tickets and even learn about new artists from the immigrant community itself.

The new emerging cultural phenomenon tends to develop under conditions engendered by immigration and is nourished by two needs typical of immigrants: Preservation of one's original identity and intra-communal communication. Indeed, research findings show that these facilities not only form the basis for cultural activity intended to preserve affinity with the original culture but also help develop and maintain intense intra-communal relations. This is particularly true of libraries, at which many readers use the book collections to form new ties with other Russian speakers who have similar taste in books. One qualification is in order, however: The meager conditions of libraries render it difficult for them to turn into more active intra-communal communications centers, as the lack of space and limited hours preclude additional community activities, such as meetings of reading groups or

evening poetry readings (that are common in larger libraries, for example in Jerusalem (Zilberg, 2000).

Another finding of interest is the difference in clientele among the various cultural facilities examined. For example, classical music performances or those of old-time stars attract an older audience aged 60 and up, while those of current artists enjoy popularity among middle-aged immigrants. A similar distribution prevails among visitors of Russian libraries and bookstores, the former preferred by retired persons and the latter by younger adults (ages 35-50). We may conclude that these facilities offer their visitors cultural products of differential content, suiting the cultural characteristics of different age groups comprising the population of immigrants from the FSU (for similar findings see also Elias (2005) on the local community of FSU immigrants in Germany).

Age differences and their attendant cultural features are not the only reasons for differences among audiences visiting different types of facilities, however. It is also important to consider the prices of the various cultural events: The cost of a ticket to a performance by trendy artists and troupes is far greater than that of a ticket to a classical music concert or a show featuring stars from the Soviet Era. Different types of performances thus appeal to immigrants of different income means, reflecting not only age differences but also socioeconomic stratification within the FSU immigrant population. Similarly, the low membership costs at Russian libraries (NIS 5 monthly) enable even the most impoverished immigrants to use the library's services, whereas bookstores appeal to the more economically established strata.

Despite the variety of services and products offered by Russian cultural performances, bookstores and libraries, that ostensibly meet a very wide range of cultural needs and differential financial capabilities, young people up to the age of 30 were notably absent among the audiences, customers and readers. This being said, during research, we identified two nightclubs intended for young immigrants in Beer-Sheba and also found an informal youth organization called *Roleviki* (based on D&D club format), whose activity consists primarily of role playing based on stories in books popular among youth. Follow-up studies would be required to assess the local cultural life of young immigrants, focusing on the special facilities set up in Israeli cities by and for representatives of the second generation of FSU immigrants.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on cultural life in the "Russian street" of Beer-Sheba, that involves many of the city's neighborhoods and accounts for both veteran and new immigrants of the Former Soviet Union aged 40 and up. The findings not only contribute to a better understanding of Russian community life at the local level but also uncover cultural processes that are apparently unique to immigrant communities in general because of the immigrants need to preserve their original cultural identity and maintain intra-communal communication. To corroborate this claim, we need comparative studies of cultural life of Russian-speaking immigrants in other Israeli cities and extension of this research to immigrant communities in other countries, such as the United States, Canada and Germany.

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Pavel Tokchinsky – chess games in a park, Ashdod.

Vitaly Katson - Mikhail Volkov’s concert, Ashdod.

Igor Evdosin – immigrant nannies and children in a park, Bat-Yam

Vitaly Katson – street musicians, Ashdod.

Mikhail Feldman – march of the veterans, Jerusalem.

Igor Evdosin – caregiver with an old woman, Bat-Yam.

Igor Evdosin – in the Russian book store, Haifa.

Pavel Tokchinsky – the two soldiers: grandfather and grandson.