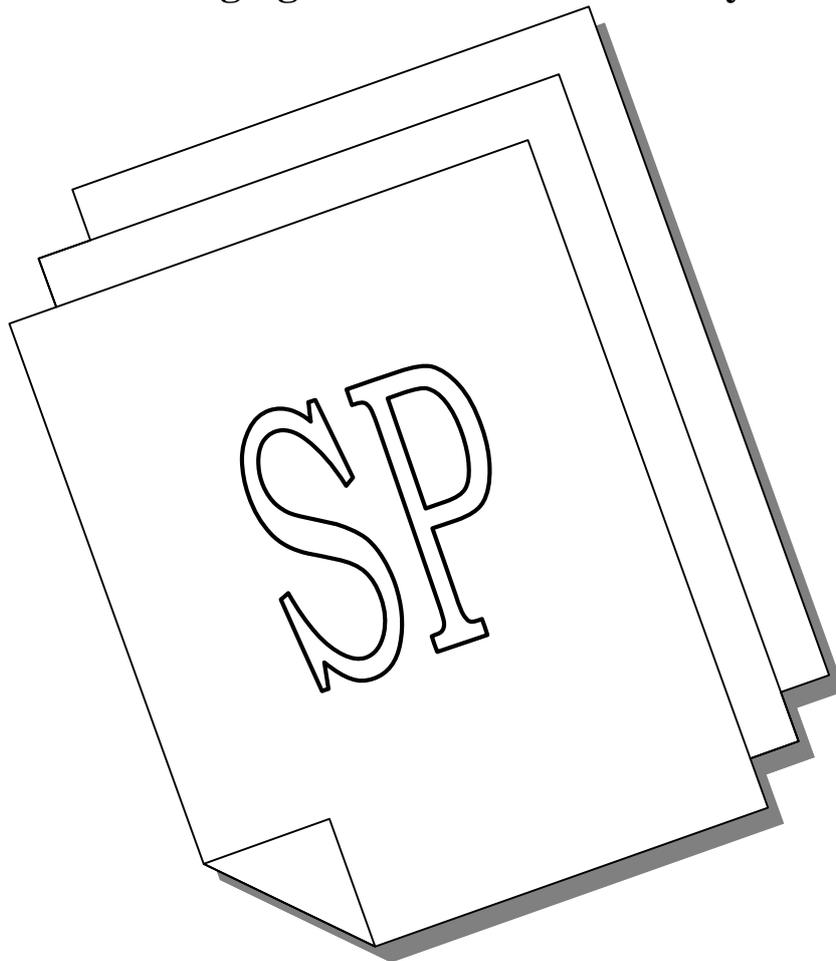


# *Sociological Papers*

## **From State Socialism to State Judaism: 'Russian' Immigrants in Israel and their Attitudes towards Religion**

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# "Strangers in the Homeland:" Social Integration of Non-Jewish Immigrant Women in Israel

## Introduction

As part of the recent wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union (FSU), about 330,000 non-Jews came to Israel as spouses of Jews or partly-Jewish offspring of ethnically-mixed families<sup>1</sup> (Cohen and Susser, 2009). An on-going controversy surrounds the host of social issues stemming from the definition of Judaism as state religion and pertaining to the statuses and rights of non-Jewish residents, particularly in marriage, family reunification, and burial. An inherent conflict between civil and religious (Halachic) definitions of Jewish identity caused a paradox situation, whereby thousands of immigrants have been granted citizenship by the Law of Return, but denied some basic civil rights, because the religious establishment does not recognize them as Jews (e.g., if their father, not mother, was Jewish). Until recently, only two partners from the same state-recognized religion (Jews, Muslims and Christians) could legally marry, each in their own religious framework. In September 2010, the new law was passed allowing two non-Jews to marry in the civil court, solving only part of the problem – because most couples consist of a Jew and non-Jew or partial Jew. Many immigrants are frustrated by their inability to bring to Israel their non-Jewish relatives – elderly parents or adult children from previous marriages. If one of the spouses is Jewish and the other is not, they have to be buried in different cemeteries, often located far apart. The additional problems that non-Jewish immigrants may face are tacit discrimination and negative stereotyping commonly found in Israeli public opinion and mass media (Sheleg, 2004; Kenigshtein, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to examine the experiences of non-Jewish women, wives of Jewish husbands, who came to Israel after 1990 under the Law of Return. The goal of the study was to explore these women's experiences of being married to Jews in the FSU before migration, as well as their lives in Israel as non-Jewish citizens. Specifically, we examined these women's perceptions of religious practices, Jewish holidays, and conversion (*giyur*), as well as their political views and the discourse on citizenship.

## Participants and methods

The study is based on the qualitative analysis of 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Russian women, recruited via researchers' social networks and further snowballing, mainly from the towns of Central Israel and Haifa area. The informants were aged between 35 and 65 and moved to Israel as part of mixed families, on the average 13 years ago. Fourteen informants were married to Jewish men (plus two were divorced) and had children (two women had four children; all the rest had two, mostly adolescents or young adults). Nine out of 16 informants, especially older ones and those without higher education, worked in unskilled jobs, such as cleaning, elder

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms "ethnically-mixed" or simply "mixed families" instead of "interfaith families" used in the US literature, since Jewishness was defined as ethnicity in the FSU, and most spouses in such unions (Jewish and gentile) were secular, i.e. of no faith.

or childcare, or as sellers in stores. The younger and better educated informants worked as professionals or white-collar workers, for example in the high-tech industry. Eight women came originally from Central Russia - five from Moscow and St.-Petersburg and three from other Russian towns (Kaluga and Ryazan); the rest were from Siberia (3), Ukraine (2), Latvia (1), Belarus (1), and Uzbekistan (1).

The interviews were conducted in Russian and took place at different locations: women's houses, parks, coffee shops, and in Bar-Ilan and Tel-Aviv Universities. All the interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and then transcribed in full. The questions related to the two different periods of their lives: before and after immigration to Israel. The first part of the interview included the women's personal background, the story of their marriage to a Jew, social attitudes towards Jews and mixed marriages, and the encounters with anti-Semitism in the FSU. The second part addressed the informants' current lives: occupation, social integration, children's situation, and general satisfaction with life in Israel. They were also asked for their opinion regarding *giur*, Judaism, Christianity, and Israeli traditions. The analysis of the transcripts drew on the Grounded Theory (Strauss, 1987) and was conducted by means of analytical categories that reflected dominant themes and topics appearing in the interviews.

## Findings

### Attitudes towards Jews in the FSU and the decision to leave

As elsewhere, marriage to non-Jews representing the dominant majority (Slavs in this case) has been the sign of on-going secularization and assimilation of the Jews under Soviet regime (see Introduction to the main report). Despite common antisemitic attitudes, the marriages between Jews and Non-Jews had been widespread and socially acceptable in the USSR/FSU since the 1920s, and continued to increase during the post-soviet period. In the younger cohorts of Russian/Soviet Jews, over 60% have non-Jewish spouses, with out-marriage being especially common among Jewish men (Remennick, 2007). Most women in this study spoke about the advantages of being married to a Jewish husband in Russia. In the context of high levels of divorce, often due to male violence and alcoholism, Jewish males were known, by contrast, as reliable partners, non-drinkers, and family men. For instance, Ludmila, a former nurse from Siberia in her 60s, said:

*Back when I was a schoolgirl, I had a few Jewish girlfriends, and we also had a couple of Jewish boys at school, who were clearly different from others. Most Russian boys would cluster in the back rows and idle during the classes, while the Jews sat at the front desks and took their studies seriously. Russian boys all smoked and Jews did not...Thus I realized early that it was my luck to meet and then marry Gregory. I have always been happy with him – feeling his attention and reliability in our life together.*

Q. Didn't your family oppose your marriage to a Jew?

*No they didn't. Moreover, my friends at work encouraged me to marry him, saying it would be a solid and prosperous marriage, because Jews were known for their commitment to the family. And this is exactly how it was with us.*

Q. Have you ever encountered hostility towards the Jews?

*Not that I remember. As a girl, I never heard any negative comments from my parents; they were simple folks but not antisemites... On the contrary, everybody knew that Jews were the best doctors in town – like our dentist was Jewish and she was the best in Cheliabinsk. My husband became a doctor too...*

Here is another typical example. Luda, 59, a former geologist from St.-Petersburg, said:

*Jews differed from other Soviet citizens only positively: they were better educated and more culturally refined. They were the best professionals, and others sought their advice and services.*

Q. Was marrying a Jew considered a right move?

*Tacitly, yes – although few people would admit this openly. Generally, back in these years, we were distant from the issues of nationality, they were ostensibly unimportant. For the ten years of my school life in Leningrad, I've never heard the word Jew, although now I realize that we had several Jewish students in my class. I never encountered open antisemitism. At some point, I overheard my father defending some Jew who had been insulted, because all the best doctors in his clinic were Jewish and he respected them. Jews were the best workers in every field; like, when the store manager was Jewish, everyone knew that this store was best organized and had more produce than others. The moment the Jew was removed from this position, the store fell apart. But nobody ever said these things openly.*

Q. So how did your parents respond when you married a Jew?

*Very positively, no problem at all.*

The comments by the two women attest to the social milieu where Jews were viewed in the favorable light (particularly as professionals), and construed as reliable family partners. In the atmosphere of alleged 'internationalism' (meaning equality of all ethnic groups and nations), these women's marriages to the Jews had been accepted by their families and friends. This seems to counter the known facts of soviet antisemitism and discrimination of the Jews, suggesting variability of the local context and individual differences in Jews-gentiles relations. Indeed, in many other cases, the families, coworkers, neighbors, and others did not view these marriages so favorably. Some Russian women, who chose to marry Jews, suffered because of the Jewish last names that they took from their husbands. The story of Nina, 51, former senior librarian from Minsk, illustrates this phenomenon:

*Our last name is Kogan – a typically Jewish name. So, when I applied for the post of library director, it came up strongly against me... the previous director was also Jewish, and they hated seeing Jewish names among the officials, especially in the center of Minsk, you know. So the boss, who had to decide on this appointment, barked, 'What - a Jew again?!' And they told him that it was only my husbands' name, that I was Russian, and he retorted – 'Same difference, they'll leave to Israel together.' And this is indeed what happened ...So, there I was considered Jewish by association, and here in Israel I became Russian again, despite my last name... I have always had many Jewish friends, my sisters have also married Jews, and our parents never said a word, despite being quite*

*religious Christians... Marrying out of our faith was not an issue in my family.*

The dislike of Jews was but one example of negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities, particularly those of different religion, language and/or appearance, shared by many ethnic Russians in the USSR/FSU. After 1991, the titular nations of the former Socialist Republics (Uzbeks, Tatars, Latvians, etc.) have squeezed away Russian expatriates who had settled there in the Soviet period, by way or retaliation for forced Russification and chauvinism. Some Russian women in this study lived in different republics and suffered from local nationalism, not only because they were married to Jews, but also as Russians in the Ukraine, Latvia or Uzbekistan. Despite official ideology of internationalism, the everyday discourse was full of ethnic references, and every republic and city had its own hierarchy of respected and detested ethnics. Sveta, 56, a former school teacher, who is half-Russian half Ukrainian, with blond hair and typical Slavic features, offered an example of negative attitude towards non-titular ethnics - Jews and Russians, in Latvia – and then towards Slavs in Israel:

*Latvia was known for hostile attitudes towards both Jews and Russians, who represented Soviet 'occupants' in the eyes of Latvians. In Riga it was relatively OK, but when you went to provincial towns or villages, it was simply dangerous to speak Russian. Most Russian-speakers felt uncomfortable, even threatened, and this caused our decision to move to Israel. I had agreed mainly for the sake of my husband, because I was doing relatively OK in Latvia, being of Slavic appearance and able to speak their language...*

*My husband is happy here, living among his own people, but I feel very different, kind of a 'white crow'. Now I can really appreciate how my husband, and other Jews, felt in Latvia and generally, in the FSU. I often notice that Israeli men and women stare at me in the street or on a bus, as if they've seen something unusual. That's why I try not to be out in public too often; my husband does most of the shopping and we don't go out much for entertainment... I also refrain from wearing my cross on the open neck – not to provoke more bad feelings among the locals. I don't see this as betrayal of my religion, but rather as respect for the local sensibilities.*

Sveta draws a clear parallel between her feelings of estrangement in Israel and the experiences of the Jews in Russia and other Soviet republics – as physically different and disliked Others. Many informants stressed their disgust and objection to expressions of antisemitism in Russia. Some, like Marina (who converted to Orthodox Judaism in Israel), in her 40s, former journalist from Moscow and currently archive worker, sympathized with the Jews in Russia even before her marriage:

*Although I knew nothing about Judaism living in Russia, I had long noticed that the most talented and bright people around me often turned out to be Jewish. This discovery made me pay attention to the Jews and seek their friendship...I also realized that many people hated Jews, and I couldn't stand them saying nasty things about the Jews whom I liked and respected. So I often argued with local antisemites – who were shocked by my reaction, as a visibly non-Jewish person whom they expected to sympathize with their views...*

In many cases, Russian women were actually those insisting on immigration to Israel -instead of USA or Germany. Their worry for their family members and especially children encouraged them to opt for the Jewish state. Irina, 55, from St.-Petersburg, a high-tech worker both in Russia and in Israel, expressed this well:

*When we considered emigration to Israel, I had no idea what this country was like. We left not because of political dissidence, but simply ran away from poverty and instability. Many mixed families like ours left to the USA or Germany, but I insisted that we go to Israel. I believed that my husband and children would be better off in the Jewish country than elsewhere...I didn't know then that my children would be considered Russians here – because in Russia they were treated as Jews. So this twist came up as a surprise to me...*

Similar story appears in another interview. Vera, 36, former school teacher and currently seller in a jewelry shop:

*We came to Israel for several reasons. First, I married a Jewish guy and took his last name, after which I experienced many antisemitic episodes, including the hostile remarks of my students. I decided that I didn't want my two sons to live in this milieu, and that we should move to the place where nobody would attack them because of their Jewish last name.*

All these women had some degree of 'estrangement' and otherness in their motherland - FSU, each for different reasons - their marriage to the Jews, Jewish last names, or their Jewish children. Some informants combined their pro-Jewish attitudes with dissident political views and activities, and yet others suffered from ethnic prejudice because of their internal migrations in the FSU. As we will see below, they also are 'strangers' in today's Israel, because of their being Slavic in the Jewish state. By way of historic irony, popular attitudes towards non-Jews in Israel resemble the status of Jews in Russia as mistrusted Others (Remennick, 2007). In response, some of them distanced themselves from the Israeli officialdom and are often concerned about their children, who had been recognized as Jews in Russia, but became Russian in Israel.

## **Living as Russians in Israel**

### **Attitudes towards *Giur* (conversion to Judaism)**

In Orthodox Judaism, Jewishness of children is determined by mother, contrary to the Soviet tradition where the ethnicity of ethnically-mixed children usually follows the paternal line. Hence, sons and daughters of Jewish fathers (and gentile mothers) often tended to identify and behave as Jews, often suffering from anti-Semitism as a result (Remennick, 2007). Many of them were offended by the fact that in Israel they had to convert by the Orthodox rules in order to be officially recognized as Jews. Many Russian mothers of mixed children had not known that their children would not be recognized as Jews in Israel and were really shocked by this discovery upon arrival.

However, only a small minority of non-Jews from the FSU are actually converting to Judaism each year, most of them women (Sheleg, 2004; Goodman, 2008). Indeed, many Russian women in this study had considered the *giur* option, especially soon after their arrival to Israel. This was often in response to the comments made by various state agents, such as immigration officials or Ministry of the Interior, and other veteran Israelis - kibbutz members, neighbors, coworkers, etc., - to the effect

that non-Jews, especially the women, should convert to Judaism. These officials and laypersons, most of whom were probably secular themselves, served as gatekeepers and promoted the hegemonic view that Israel is the place for Jews only. But as time went by, these women realized that *giur* was not true necessity, and that normal life and work in Israel were possible without converting. However, both the women who decided to proceed with *giyur* and those who decided against it explained their decision by the interests of their children. As we have already seen, most of them immigrated to Israel to secure a better future for their children. As immigrants to the new society, these mothers were concerned about successful social integration of their children, and many of them saw *giur* as an entrance ticket to Israel society. Let us hear what they had to say about their deliberations.

Here is a typical story of Nina, 51, who came from Minsk 16 years ago and lives today in a small Northern town. After some hesitation, she finally decided not to convert:

*I came here with some apprehensions about my being Russian, maybe even facing discrimination as ethnic minority. When my sister saw me off at the airport, she gave me a small golden cross (just as a token of her love, we were not religious), and then a man on the same flight saw it on my neck and uttered, with some contempt, "Do you know where you're going? You better take this off." From this moment, I had these doubts and fears in my head... Then we started our life on the kibbutz, which was a secular place, and all its members were non-religious... but one of their bosses said to me that I should do my best to convert. So I decided that I would do it for the sake of my kids, not yet understanding what *giyur* really implied. Soon I met with a rabbi, who said to me that in order to start the process, I needed to learn Hebrew first, so I concentrated on my Ulpan studies. At the same time, I noticed that there were many mixed immigrant families like ours living in the small caravan site near the kibbutz. Some other Russian women I knew indeed studied for *giyur*, but only those who had small children – in order to make it easier for them to adjust in Israel. I was already 36 and my kids were past their 13 birthday, so I started thinking – maybe it was too late for me. I went to see this rabbi again, and he confirmed my doubts about our age. He said that my children were considered adults by religious law, so it would be up to them whether to convert or not. Also, I admitted to the rabbi that I had no motives of my own for *giyur* and was not really interested in Judaism. So he said – forget it and live your life as best you can... Since then, we left the kibbutz for the city, but I still work as their employee. Never in my life here did I feel any mistreatment or heard a nasty comment because of my being Russian.*

Nina's first experiences during and soon after her arrival to Israel were suggestions (almost demands) to change her appearance and identity – from a passerby's comment about her cross to kibbutz representative's suggestion to convert. The intolerance of Israeli society to the newcomers who are non-Jewish was expressed rather directly and appeared in many stories collected in this research. Nina has two children – the twins of different sex, and their story is also typical. The daughter fell in love with a native Israeli man from a traditional Mizrahi (Eastern) family, which opposed their relationship from the outset. Despite this, she eventually married him after undergoing the Orthodox *giur*, according to the wish of her fiancé. Nina supported her daughter

during this difficult process that "took much time and efforts". Yet, Nina's son is not circumcised and does not even think about *giur*. There are quite many daughters of Russian mothers who chose to convert for the sake of their Israeli partners and husbands. As time goes by, it seems that such partnerships between Sabra men and non-Jewish women will be even more common. In this study including only 16 cases, three daughters of Russian mothers have converted via Orthodox *giur* and married native Jewish men.

The next example of conversion for the children's sake was provided by Luda, 59, who lives in an Orthodox religious settlement with her family:

*I am Russian and went through full Orthodox giyur for the benefit of my children. My daughter has also converted independently when she was 16, and my son became Jewish automatically after my conversion, since he was only seven. We started the process soon upon arrival and I was intent on completing it in order to secure an equal start for my children in the new country. As we live in the Jewish state, the children should be Jewish. So I endured a long and difficult process of learning and changing every aspect of my lifestyle. I've had many hard moments, almost breakdowns, but still I have done it.*

Q. So how do you identify now?

*As a Jew with proper papers.*

Q. What it means for you to be Jewish?

*To feel at home in this country, unlike most other Russians, who after living in Israel for 20 years still stick together, self-isolate and stay with the same problems which they had hoped to leave behind in Russia... I want to be comfortable myself and see that my children and grandchildren are at home in Israel, and don't have to travel abroad to get married or worry about the sex of their future child.*

Luda's motivation for conversion was initially purely social and not religious, although she has persisted in her observance ever since. At the outset, she tried to achieve better social integration for herself and for her children by means of *giyur*. In her own words, she feels now "as a Jew with proper papers". It shows how important for her was (and still is) the official aspect of her conversion, which also underscores the bureaucratic nature of Israeli state and formal inquiries into citizens' ethnic/religious identity at every step. Vera, 36, offered another example of attitudes towards *giur*:

*I would like to identify as Jewish, but I can't as I was born of Russian parents...*

Q. Have you considered *giyur*?

*I have, mainly for the sake of not having to admit to my being Russian at every corner – in the Jewish country. Like when you have to fill in various official forms. I understand that this is largely a formality; in any case I am not religious. Just like I never was Russian Orthodox before emigration (despite being baptized), so I won't become pious or Jewishly observant after *giyur*, if I ever have it. I didn't go to church in Russia and won't go to synagogue in Israel.*

Vera also points to the bureaucratic aspect of *giur* and her wish to fit in the acceptable category of citizens by becoming Jewish, but on paper only. The wish for normalizing their relationship with the State is typical for most former Soviets, reflecting their past experience of differential treatment of various ethnicities and the ensuing importance of the ethnic designation in their Soviet documents. As a result, the attitude toward *giur* as a venue leading to both official normalization and social inclusion is common among Russian wives from the last wave of FSU immigrants.

Although the wish to convert for spiritual and religious reasons is rare, but it still exist. Marina, 44, mother of two little children, married to a Jewish man 20 years her older, converted soon after arrival to Israel, because she felt that Judaism is the true way for experiencing God. Today she and her family observe religious way of life:

*I didn't even know that one can become Jewish by choice, not by birth. So I embraced the conversion with great enthusiasm; I got my hands on the Jewish literature, and the more I read it the more I realized how relevant it is for me... One of the first books I read was "Rose of 13 petals" by rabbi Steinzalts – a thin brochure which was like balsam for my soul. If you allow yourself to open up spiritually, you'd realize that all this wisdom is so much in line with your own inner self and your true predestination in life. I was thrilled to discover all these riches...*

*Many women I know say that they decided to convert for purely pragmatic reasons, to help their children avoid future problems. How do you explain your decision?*

*I had no pragmatic reasons when I decided to convert, as I didn't have children then and didn't know if I ever would. So my attraction to Judaism was purely spiritual and hard to explain by rational factors...I joined Machanaim society, studied with them for one year and then passed all the conversion tests. I've heard many stories about how the rabbis make passing incredibly difficult and invent all kinds of reasons to stop you; but I experienced nothing of this, no barriers at all.*

An alternative view was provided by Irina, 55, a high-tech worker from St-Petersburg. Her objection to converting was very resolved:

*Soon upon arrival, I have learned that my children would be considered Russian in Israel. My husband's relatives are religious Jews, and when we first met with them, his cousin said to me, "Ira, you should think about giyur, because you children will suffer here." I said - no way! I was not going to convert to Judaism for administrative reasons, just to satisfy local officials. I believe in religious conversions out of spiritual need, not for the sake of clean documents...It will be up to my children, I said, to decide if they wish to convert... Maybe my attitude has influenced them too, and so none of us has converted till this day...My husband remained Jewish and I remained Russian, and this is a more natural state of things. I have always despised the Jews who changed their names and passports to pass as Russians, and then many of them became Jewish again to emigrate to Israel...all this game is false and humiliating. So I am not ready to feign interest in Tanah and observe kashrut just to 'earn' the new signature in my documents. This is dishonest. I could only go for it if my family was in grave danger, but thank G-d it is far from it.*

Irina resists the bureaucratic attitude to conversion and believes in essentiality of self-identity, which is a given regardless of state categorization. A similar view of ethnic identity as essential and unchangeable by any symbolic acts was conveyed by Olga, 50, mother of four sons, working as office cleaner:

*I am a Russian Israeli...It is only in Judaism that religion and ethnicity are one and the same. When I've realized it, I was scared. I find it hard to explain...When a person completes a giyur process, does she change her body, her skin, her brain? What will actually change? She will remain the same person, with the same ethnic identity; moreover, she'll still be treated by others as a Russian. Giyur will not bring me closer to Judaism, it will remain foreign to me, and I foreign to it. I respect all religions, but try to stay away from them. For the same reason, my sons did not get circumcised before their IDF service; they realized that a circumcised Russian is still a Russian.*

So, while for some women conversion was the one and only right way of joining Israeli society, others saw it as a betrayal of their true self-identity, even if the price of keeping it was being a stranger in strange land. A few women, who refused to convert, were advised by the natives to conceal her origins at least in social situations. Lena (34) said:

*Soon upon arrival I found myself at the university, among intelligent and refined people. They treated me kindly, but when they discovered my being Russian, some said to me, "Why do you have to advertise this fact? Keep it quiet, it'll make your life easier." I was rather hurt, because I was not ashamed of who I am and saw no need to hide it...Gradually I realized why it matters so much in the Israeli context, and this makes me very angry...I never considered giyur, because I treat religion seriously and was nor ready to fake observance in order to pass as Jewish. This is pure conformism, and I despise it.*

The motive of downplaying or hiding the informants' real identity from the locals could be traced in several story fragments presented above. One is about the necklace with the cross told by Nina and the other is by Sveta, who has not only removed her cross, but actually tried to remove herself from Israel's public sphere by avoiding going out alone even for shopping. Apparently, many of our informants have experienced moments of discomfort if not fear of showing their otherness and felt the need to hide their real identity of being Russian and/or Christian. A few women had been stopped by "Oz" (immigration police) for an ID check while walking in the street; the sister of one informant was taken for personal questioning in the airport about the purpose of her visit. Probably the check was based on these women's visibility due to their Slavic features and likeness to illegal workers (also of the sex industry) from Eastern Europe.

In response to this 'othering,' some women chose to convert, to circumcise their sons, and to try to downplay their strangeness, while others felt that this is pointless, unacceptable, and false. It is important to note that none of them told about actual episodes of discrimination experienced in the everyday life or on the labor market due to their non-Jewishness. Thus, the women's feelings of alienation were mostly based on the 'soft' social markers, such as hostile comments, jokes, hints and glances of state officials and other native Israelis around them. It is also possible that these women have developed certain 'chip on the shoulder' and perceived even 'innocent'

comments often addressed by Israelis to all Russian immigrants (Jewish or not) as specifically targeting their gentile origin.

According to Goodman (2008), *giur* in Israel of the 2000s is not only a religious matter, but a venue for ‘nationalization’ of non-Jewish immigrants from FSU and turning them into complete citizens. Indeed, part of these women perceive *giur* as the way of passing as local and dissolving among veteran Israelis – at least before the agents of the state. Because many Russian women have Slavic features, such as blond/fair hair and blue/grey eyes, it is hardly possible for them to ‘merge with the local crowd’ in visual terms. But *giur* enables them to become members of the Jewish collective at least in terms of social categorization, thus complying with the hegemonic discourse of Israeli society. However, the religious society will never accept them (or their children) as its equal and complete members, even after full Orthodox conversion.

The concept of ‘visibility in immigration’ developed by Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport (2010), refers to the process, by which an individual is perceived by their social surroundings; their image ‘in the eye of beholder.’ The visibility of the immigrants is linked to their recognition as outsiders, their classification as different and not belonging to the place. The host society may enforce mechanisms of control and supervision with the purpose of putting these strangers within acceptable borders. *Giur* in Israel is one of such practices. The tension between visibility and invisibility to the local gaze, being exposed or concealed appears in many stories by our participants, as they referred to their physicality, ethnic identity, and religious beliefs as reflected in their social or bureaucratic categorization.

### **Emotional aspects of integration: Israel as new homeland**

One of the interesting (and unexpected) findings of this study was the claim made by several Russian women about Israel being their new homeland. Despite all the difficulties and problems they have been experiencing in Israel, many of them emphasized their loyalty and patriotism towards Jewish state. Masha, 45, mother of two working in high-tech, said that she feels Israeli and is a great patriot of her adopted country:

*We’ve lived in Israel for 18 years now, and when I go back to Russia to see my parents, I no longer feel at home there. This is despite all the improvements that took place in my town; people live better these days than in the past – but I have no wish to return. We got used to Israel and it is now our home. The matters of Jewish observance and all these rules about marriage are far from us and they never mattered much. We are all Israeli patriots - more so than many natives, by the way; when we are in Russia, we always defend Israel from all the critics... My son served in the IDF, he was on the Lebanon border during the last war and he never asked for a free weekend, even when his grandpa in Russia died and we all went to the funeral. He said he couldn’t leave when the country needs him so badly. This is my son. My daughter dates a local guy, who is a traditional Moroccan – and he is not bothered by my daughter’s Russianness... Even my father in Russia is a patriot of Israel; he has placed the enlarged picture of his grandson in Israeli military uniform in his living room and even wanted to put out the Israeli flag...but we stopped him from doing it. Why provoke the locals?.. My husband often jokes that I and my Russian family are in fact more Jewish than he is.*

Masha's integration in Israeli society draws first and foremost on the experiences of her children - the military service of her son in a combat unit and her daughter's native (and traditional!) boyfriend. These two themes – children's military service and their ties (dating and marriage) with local partners, especially of Mizrahi origin, appear in some stories of Russian women, usually colored by feelings of pride. The military service, as the most tangible sign of her sons' integration and selfless giving to Israel, was also underscored by Olga, 50:

*My oldest son has already completed his military service, the other two are in IDF now; when they demobilize, the youngest son will be drafted.*

Q. What do you think of IDF?

*By and large, this is a positive force. Of course they have many formal and useless procedures, like every other official institution, but still they do a great job.*

Q. Do you think serving in IDF is dangerous?

*It often is, but these soldiers defend their homeland, their own families and loved ones. This is how the notion of motherland comes about.*

Q. Do you see this country as your homeland?

*I think that homeland is where the person and their family feel secure and good. This is what homeland means to me. I was born in the Ukraine and lived most of my life in Uzbekistan; do these countries need me? No. Do I need them? No. Maybe my sons and I can do some good to this country, and then it will finally become our home.*

Most Russian women regularly visit their parents and other family members who still live in Russia. In social contacts with other Russians during their visits, they function as 'ambassadors' and advocates of Israel. This is how Vera, 36, described it:

*I feel in Israel better than most Jews; I simply feel at home. I wasn't born here and Hebrew isn't my mother tongue, but still – I am more secure, free and confident in Israel than I ever was in Russia. I would like to be Jewish, but I am not. Maybe I'll decide to convert in the future. I went to Russia three times since my move to Israel; I miss my family a lot (my parents, sister with her family, and grandma are all there), and this is why I go there. But each time I return, when the jet hits the land in the Ben Gurion Airport, I feel tears on my eyes, it's so good to be home again. If my relatives could move to Israel – I would never go there again, I'd even forget that this country exists out there... For the first time, I went back there after three years spent in Israel, my kid was six years old. We landed in Sheremetjevo in Moscow and I stepped aside in the baggage lounge to dress the child more warmly before exiting into the street. Three customs officers – these typical chubby women with golden teeth – were passing by and one asked the other, 'Which flight has just landed?' And she answered, "Ah, these kikes again..." No more comment is needed, I guess.*

Q. Do you have to talk about Israel while visiting there?

*Of course, people ask these regular questions: how is the climate? How do you live side by side with hostile Arabs? They are influenced by*

*Russian TV coverage of Israel, which is very biased. So I have to defend my country, I really feel Israeli when I am abroad.*

The dualism of being a stranger while in Israel, especially in contacts with the natives, and being an Israeli while visiting FSU, was common among the interviewees. Tanya, 35, a high-tech worker and mother of two boys, who has spent 11 years in Israel, expressed this ironic twist in their position inside and outside the country:

*I understand that Israel is for the Jews; I will never feel fully local because I am not of this nationality – so I see myself as Russian living in diaspora. Yet, I raise my children to be Israeli patriots and accept everything here...In 2005 we visited our former homes in Russia – to meet with the parents and old friends. The kids did not feel good there and were really happy to be back. My husband and I also felt strange – many things we used to take for granted look nasty now, from our new standpoint. We won't be able to start a new life there again. Of course we have many problems in Israel too – but these are kind of normal problems, they are soluble...I must say that the last war with Lebanon was a great distress for me – everyone felt so helpless under rocket shells...Russians always take the Arab side in this conflict. Even my friends believe that Israelis are responsible for their troubles – because Jews oppress the Arabs and they have the right to resist. They would never understand us, how it feels to live under constant threats.*

Q. Did you try to defend Israeli politics there?

*I did, I had to – because I live here and take Israeli problems as my own. Although I am not Jewish, I am Israeli citizen and I have no doubt about who is right in this conflict.*

Tanya identifies with political views of Right and argues with her Russian friends to convince them that Jews are on the right side in the Israeli-Arab conflict. On the one hand, she sees herself as a local who has to defend Israel from external attacks. But on the other hand, she is a stranger among native Israelis. She mentions that she is an Israeli citizen although she is not a Jew. Her citizenship and loyalty to the State are important matters for her and other informants, as has already been shown regarding *giur* and will be shown below in reference to political views. The ambivalence that characterizes those women's experiences and feelings makes them 'strangers in the homeland.' Sveta said:

*Israel is slowly becoming my home, because my husband, children and grandchildren are all here, and they don't plan to leave. Homeland is where your loved ones are... Both my sons served in combat units in IDF and they are great patriots of this country. Of course I will always feel different, not only because I look different among dark-skinned Israelis, but because I don't really speak Hebrew. This makes me feel insecure in public places; I also don't have many friends and often feel lonely. But I am getting used to it...*

On the one hand, Sveta is highly visible as a Russian immigrant due to her looks (she is very blond and fair-skinned) and poor Hebrew, which she finds highly uncomfortable. On the other hand, as mother of two young men who love Israel, served in IDF, and started families of their own, she feels that Israel is her real home and more so – her homeland. Sveta's experiences of living in Israel, like those of

many other women in this study, are construed and reflected through the prism of motherhood. It is important to stress that all the women in this study saw their lives in Israel as an improvement over their pre-migration lives, mainly due to higher economic security and tangible signs of material well-being (such as living in an apartment they own, having a car, being able to travel, etc.). Many of them told about social, political and economic instability in Russia and Ukraine that had actually pushed them to leave and their lack of desire to return there.

### **Religious holidays and food**

In most societies, women's key social functions include childbearing and motherhood, cooking, cleaning, and caring for the family. While in Soviet times, almost all women worked full-time on par with men, they were still responsible for most household and childrearing tasks. Since many Russian immigrant women, including former professionals, experienced occupational downgrading in Israel, they often refocused their attention on traditional feminine roles as mothers and homemakers as the source of meaning and satisfaction. Moreover, these domestic and family-related roles often served them as a venue for integration into Israeli mainstream. Adopting local cuisine and learning to cook traditional Israeli dishes was a particular source of pride for many informants. Valentina, in her late 60s, atheist and a mother of four adult children, two of whom were living with her and her husband at the time of the interview, spent a lot of time cooking. She prided herself on familiarity with local dishes:

*My youngest son Vitaly studied in a religious boarding school and knows all about the Jewish household rules; he teaches the rest of us how to do things right...The students often spent weekends in religious families, and he learned from them which dishes are served for Shabbat and holidays... He also got me the Israeli cook book in Russian, making it so much easier! I've learned to cook khamin (a traditional meat, beans, and potatoes stew for Shabbat that is prepared slowly in the oven). Vitaly says it is getting better, but still isn't perfect. So I am trying harder... I collect cooking recipes from everyone I meet here – I mean veteran Israelis...My daughter knows how to cook gefilte-fish and she serves it for the Pesah meal we have every year...We celebrate all Jewish holidays; in Ulpan they taught us about Rosh ha-Shana, Sukkot, Purim – everything. And of course my kids love all Israeli everyday food – shwarma, pizza, cottage cheese...*

Q. What do you cook for Pesah? Do you eat bread?

*We have gefilte fish, and we cook many dishes from matzoth, even a traditional Russian cabbage cake based on matzoth. As for bread – I don't eat it at all (because of being overweight) and my husband can't live without bread, so we keep some in the freezer for him. But the kids do not touch bread for this week, they only eat matzoth.*

Valentina is the matriarch of a large (by Russian standards) extended family, which gets together for both the Jewish and Russian holidays. All those holidays are celebrated by eating what is regarded as traditional meals prepared by her and her daughter. Food shopping and meal preparation for everyday life and for feasts is a traditional women's function and Russian women never challenge this rule. They usually learn about new local food customs through their children (who learn Hebrew

faster, go to local schools and befriend native kids and their families), as well as local teachers, friends, and cook books. A special role of Vitaly, a religious school student, as Valentina's guide into Israeli house and kitchen world is very clear from her story. Thus, many immigrants develop the sense of home in the host society via adopting local cuisine and starting to cook and eat 'like proper Israelis.' With a trace of irony, we can call this 'a culinary giyur' – a conversion much more accessible and joyful for many than a purely religious one.

The second example is provided by Nina, 51, who identifies as Christian. Nina works in Israeli kindergarten and is proud of her ability to prepare special meals for children during Israeli holidays, to tell them about these events, and even to sing festival songs to them:

Q. Please tell me what holidays you celebrate in your family.

*We celebrate New Year as a family, and for me Christmas and Easter are Holy Days too, but these are my private ones, I don't impose them on my husband or children (I go to a local church for the Mass and I donate to the church). At the same time, I respect all Israeli holidays; like, I would never cook on Yom Kippur, not to offend the neighbors by the smell of my cooking, and none of us would eat anything outside. We don't fast though... I respect every religion, both Judaism and Christianity, and I cook both kinds of meals – like I can bake ugat gvina (cheese cake) for Shavuot and kulichi (Russian pastry) for Easter... Since I've worked for many years in the Jewish kindergarten on the kibbutz, I've learned all about Israeli holiday customs. I can tell little kids about every holiday, its symbols, what to do on those days, and which foods to eat. I bake sufganiyot (doughnuts) for Chanukah, latkes and kneidalah for the soup, everybody loves my cooking, both children and adults on the kibbutz... However, I've never hidden my Christianity, and no one ever said a bad word to me about it. It's better to be honest in those matters; the people will respect you for who you are.*

Nina's interview highlights the complex combination between local Jewish holidays, customs and foods with observance of Christian faith and visits to the church. In Nina's story, the Jewish and Christian customs are positioned close to each other - without tangible contradiction. Similar example is that of Luba, 44, a former engineer and a divorced mother of two:

*When my daughter was studying for giyur, we lighted candles on Shabbat, she said the prayer and I just watched her in awe... Quite a few times we put on long skirts and went to a local Moroccan synagogue – because she needed to learn some Torah fragments and the ritual... so thanks to my daughter and giyur, I've also learned something.*

Q. What's your attitude towards Judaism as religion and tradition? Towards Christianity?

*Very positive to both, no problem at all. My family roots are Christian, naturally; my mom always celebrated Easter (also when it could be dangerous, in Soviet times); we baked kulichi and colored eggs, and slaughtered a hog for the Easter meal... But since we moved to Israel, we also started doing all the Jewish holidays. Thus, we have it all double, twice as good: first kulichi and eggs for Easter and then matzoth and all*

*that for Pesah [laughs]...Since my husband is from Baku, we sometimes also have a feast on Nairuz Bairam (a Moslem holiday, celebration of the spring)...So we celebrate all the three religions in our family...*

Q. Did you keep any Jewish traditions before moving to Israel?

*Not really. My husband respected my Christian leanings (we always celebrated Easter while living in the Ukraine), and that's why I respect his Jewish roots when we finally moved to Israel. When our son was born here, we had him circumcised, and our daughter had been baptized before we came here – so what?*

Q. Over time spent in Israel, have you adopted Jewish traditions as your own?

*To some extent, yes. Since you live here, you get used to the local customs and try to be respectful...I love Israel and see it as my adopted homeland; my children are half-Jewish and we are grateful for the chance for a new start that we received from Israel... So when everyone celebrates Pesah and eats only matzoth – so do we. We also fast on Yom Kippur, starting from our first year here. I take it easy, but my husband suffers terribly, but still persists. This is our way to show our belonging and loyalty to Israel.*

Q. Do you still keep Shabbat rules?

*Like I said, when my daughter was in the giyur process, we went to a synagogue and lighted candles, but now that she is already gera we stopped. She got the right papers and learned all she wanted to know about Judaism. Yet, I see sometimes that she reads from the sidur (prayer book); so it has made some imprint on her.*

The ease of combining Judaism and Christianity (in Luba's case, with the addition of some Moslem customs) appeared in the narratives of all informants who keep Christian traditions in Israel. They often construed celebrating holidays and keeping customs that belong to different religions as "having it twice as good," rather than betrayal of any of them. Like Luba, many of them felt that adopting Jewish practices around food and eating (without renouncing other traditions) expressed their gratitude and loyalty to Israel. Yet, one can see how shallow these habits still are: the moment Luba's daughter has passed *giyur* tests and got "the right papers," their visits to synagogue and other Shabbat practices were abandoned. Luba and her daughter clearly saw the *giyur* process as a chance to learn some basics of Judaism as a useful asset in Israel, but none of them really aspired to Judaic observance.

Russian women without clear religious identity or atheists showed even greater enthusiasm about Israeli Jewish holidays, always accompanied by family meals. For example Vera, 36, said about her respect for Jewish holidays:

*I am non-believer; I didn't go to church in Russia and didn't wear cross. Here we started to celebrate all important Jewish holidays – in our family and often with other friends. Maybe we do not do everything right according to religious rules, but we try our best. Last Pesah, we bought enough matzoth to last for a week and organized seder. Since we speak Hebrew but not read it well, our children were responsible for Agadah reading. We do not sing the songs because we don't know them all that well. We do have bread on Pesah, since this is one of our basic staples, we*

*can't do without it. On Yom Kippur we do not fast, but also never cook and eat less than usual. We use it for resting and taking walks together, as a family.*

Olga, 50, who works as a cleaner, spoke about her partial adoption of Jewish calendar and traditions:

Q. What do you do on Pesah?

*We do a very solid cleaning work in the office building, and also at home. My husband and my four sons all get together and we have a big meal that consists of familiar dishes that we like, but also matzoth. Since you cannot feed five grown men with just matzoth, we eat bread as well... We try to do some traditional things, every now and then, like we eat honey and apples on Rosh ha-Shana; when my boys were small they dressed in Purim costumes. Perhaps my children and grandchildren will do it better in their own families. For most Friday nights we get together and have a meal, which becomes essentially a Shabbat gathering; we don't light candles because we are uncertain about the ritual and won't like to do incorrectly. So the main thing for us is a get-together, because during the week we only speak on the phone...*

One can hear the notes of apprehension in Olga's story; she is a little weary of the Jewish rituals that seem mysterious to her, and she is afraid of making a mistake. The only territory where she feels more confident is traditional foods, and this is what she tries to do, also as an excuse for getting her large family together. Thus, for most Russian women in this study, the process of getting closer to the Israeli society and its traditions often occurred via embracing local culinary customs and specific holiday foods.

### **Political outlook**

Peled (1993) argued that Israeli political culture emerges at the crossroads of three ideologies of legitimization: republicanism, liberalism, and ethno-nationalism. The republican ideology is predominant and centers on the idea of common good of the Israeli society, which is achievable through combat military service (Sasson-Levy, 2006). The ethno-national ideology is based on the membership in the Jewish collective. Orthodox *giur* is the only way of 'nationalization' for non-Jews in today's Israel. Finally, liberal ideology invokes the rights of individual citizens, centering on their private interests and freedoms, also at the expense of common good.

As we have shown, the issues of citizenship and loyalty to the Jewish state are resolved by Russian immigrant women in a variety of ways. Some women opt for ethno-national citizenship through religious conversion - *giyur*. Others prefer to become part of Israeli society through experiences connected to the military service of their children and grandchildren, which can be seen as republican citizenship. The adoption of political views of Israeli Right also comes as a venue for their 'nationalization' through republican citizenship. Indeed, most women in this research voted for the Right-wing political parties, such as Likud with Sharon or Netanyahu as its leaders, or "Our home Israel" (*Israel Beitenu*) and Lieberman (10 out of 16 interviewees voted for these parties). One woman was a political activist of the Left, and the rest were not interested in politics. These latter are satisfied with their status of citizenship based on the liberal principles, i.e. their basic rights and entitlements,

making the effort of *giyur* or any political activism redundant: "We have all the rights – why bother doing anything else?"

Below we offer several examples of our informants' political views that embrace the agenda and rhetoric of Israeli Right, with its negative attitudes towards Arabs:

*Tanya: Although I am not Jewish, but I am Israeli citizen and stand for my country. Maybe my position is more on the hard side, compared to local Leftist Israelis, who believe that Arabs are basically normal people and we can eventually become good neighbors. No we can't! It is either them or us. They say openly that they want to throw all the Jews into the sea! Most Russian Israelis think that peace with Arabs is impossible. And local Leftists are naïve and blind, believing in the possibility of a compromise. Arabs are enemies and I have no sympathy for them.*

*Luda: We voted for Likud because this is a large party. Those who vote for small parties simply waste their vote because they'll never build the government. I am on the Right flank and I share Likud's ideology, i.e. against territorial compromise, no Land for Peace for me. The so-called occupied territories are a large chunk of Israel's land populated by Israelis, mainly National Religious ones. All of Israel can be seen as occupied territory, so should we give it back? I think most Russians think it's insane to give back any land in such a small country. Maybe Israeli Left is even worse than the Arabs, they lead us to defeat. In brief, Arabs are the Enemy, and that's it for me.*

*Masha: I have Right-wing views, not like religious Israelis, but close to Lieberman's position. I can't help hating Arabs. Frankly, I think that most people from Russia are tainted by racism and ethnic intolerance, as they grew up in the ethnically homogeneous white society. In Central Russia, almost everybody was white and Slavic. Jews somehow thought of themselves as Russians too, not by blood but by culture. So when we came here, we were already prejudiced against Arabs, both as ethnic others and potentially dangerous. We had been raised that way – to divide others into friends and enemies, like – fascists are enemy, America is enemy, etc. It is rather black and white really.*

Interestingly, Masha switches from describing Russians as 'them' to speaking about 'us,' obviously being one of this public. She offers an 'objective' explanation to Russians' ethnic intolerance and almost comes to justify it as 'natural' or at least expected. Not all the women in the group had so blatant negative attitudes toward Arabs. Despite their Right political outlook, some informants criticized the discrimination of Arabs and were aware of the stereotypes that represent both Arabs and 'Russians' in the negative light:

*Luba: I voted for Lieberman in the last elections, and for Netanyahu in the previous ones...I think Jewish leadership has wrong assumptions about Arab minority, they underestimate Arabs' human potential. The same goes about the immigrants - like, Israelis believe that all prostitutes and alcoholics in Israel are Russians. Just like not all Russian women are loose, not all the Arabs are born killers or terrorists. At least some of them, maybe most, are normative people who want to have good lives. I think that Jews made a crucial mistake in 1948: if they wanted this state to*

*be purely Jewish, they should have deported all the Arabs back then. And since they have stayed here, the policy towards them should have been more inclusive, drawing them closer, more friendly, rather than antagonizing them more and more. Like, more effort to develop their villages, to send all their kids to schools, provide them with jobs. As of now, Arab children do go to school, but so many adults are uneducated, even illiterate – some of them cannot fill into a simple form in a bank or a post office! If Arabs had received better treatment from the Jewish state, they would be more-friendly to the Jews and less preoccupied with hostility and attacks. They would be exposed to the books, to knowledge, to spiritual ideas... I think the Arab policy should be altered, if it's not too late now...*

In Luba's comments, the stance towards Arabs is less sweeping and more 'humane,' but also clearly paternalistic, treating them not as adults who make their own choices but rather as minors in need of guidance and moral education. She draws an interesting parallel between negative stereotyping of Arabs and Russian immigrants by Israeli mainstream. A similar analogy came up in the comments by Olga, a cleaner who often met Arabs as co-workers in office cleaning teams.

*Olga: I voted for Lieberman... I have watched many times how Arabs are mistreated and humiliated, so no wonder they fight back. Sometimes I even felt sympathy to them... among all ethnics there are decent people, as well as idiots and criminals. Among 'Russians' in Israel, there are enough homeless men, and drug users, and alcoholics – but not all Russians are the same! Israelis judge all of us by these lowest examples...The same goes about Arabs...On the other hand, I may feel pity to this Arab, but the moment I turn away he would stick a knife into my back – they are raised to be ruthless to enemies! I imagine how they hate Israelis who hold them for hours at the checkpoints... but on the other hand, this is a necessary security measure...*

Apparently, Olga alternates her comments between reproach of sweeping generalizations about 'others' and making the same generalizations herself about 'Arabs who are all raised to be ruthless' and only wait for a good moment 'to stick a knife in her back.' At the same time, she at least shows understanding of the sources of their hostility to the Jews and the wish for striking back. Both Luba and Olga tap on the similarity in the ways by which veteran Israeli public construes their images as 'suspect minorities.' So this opinion is a bit more nuanced compared to the majority, who simply define the Arabs as a faceless, ultimate enemy of Israeli society. Anyway, the republican discourse of the Right enables these immigrants to present themselves as belonging to the heart of Israeli consensus by identification with the Jewish majority against the Arabs.

However there was also a woman, who challenged this dominant political view of Russian immigrants and raised her voice against the discrimination of the Arab minority. Lena is a political activist affiliated with Israeli left and participates in various actions aimed at supporting the Arab population. Her criticism is based on liberal citizenship and juxtaposes anti-Semitism in Russia with discrimination of non-Jews and Arabs in Israel:

*Lena: There are people of the Right whose hatred of the Arabs is inherent and organic; this is pure racism and it's hard to counter it. They are*

*similar to rabid antisemites in Russia who would convince you that all Jews are mean and miserly, while you live among these Jews and know that they are as different as Russians are. I am personally familiar with some two hundred Arabs and know that all of them are different. There is no such thing as a unified Arab... In Russia, I lived between the extremes of antisemitism and judofilia. The moment you start defending the Jews before antisemites – you get the label of a judofile. The same in Israel: when you try to reason with the Jews and explain the Arabs' point of view in the conflict, you are immediately defined as an antisemite... I think that Jewish nationalism relates to all non-Jews, Russians and Arabs alike, in a similar hostile way, which is inscribed in the collective memory of the Jews for ages persecuted by the gentiles. But Israeli state endorses this hostility to others and frames it in institutional forms in order to preserve Jewish control... I was against my son's military service; he was rather dubious about it, but in the end was recruited - the state propaganda and peer pressure took over ... But he only served a short term and was soon demobilized (I guess because of his pro-Arab views)... When I take part in protest actions, I often encounter our Israeli soldiers, and it pains me to see how these boys have to serve as policemen and mistreat Arabs at the checkpoints. This is terrible and demoralizes both sides in this conflict.*

Lena's criticism of Israeli army and discrimination of Arabs by the State stands out in comparison to other women in this study (and in the Russian community generally), who identify with the military service of their sons and with sweeping political anti-Arabism.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the experiences of the Russian women – wives of Jewish husbands who came to Israel in the recent wave of immigration from the FSU. One of the basic assumptions in our analysis was the double alienation experienced by these women as immigrants in the new society and as Slavic, non-Jewish minority in the state of Jews. To attenuate this double jeopardy and gain the sense of belonging, the women construed their relations to Israeli society first and foremost via motherhood and responsibility for their families. In this sense, Russian immigrant women have adopted the Israeli ethno-nationalist discourse of motherhood and familism as a national mission (Berkowitz, 1992). Concern for their children's future in Israel lies at the heart of their deliberations about possible conversion: the main reason for some of them to comply with the rigorous demands of Orthodox *giur* was to improve the children's integration in the new society. The perception of Israel as the new homeland was also mediated by motherhood, since most women were proud to be mothers/grandmothers of combat soldiers, as well as of the daughters who entered relationships with native Jewish men. Thus, many mothers projected the perceived success of their children and their feeling at home in Israel on themselves, feeling that Israel was gradually becoming their homeland too.

Another tangible gender-related aspect of these women's integration in the local society was their ability to adopt and cook some local dishes, especially those symbolically entangled with Jewish Holy Days, such as Shabbat, Rosh-Hashana, and Pesah. Thus, many Russian women discovered and adopted Israeliness via Jewish cuisine and domestic customs (such as deep cleaning of the house before Pesah), undergoing a kind of a 'culinary conversion' to Judaism. On the other hand, this

adaptation is inevitably partial and selective, whereby only some traditions are adopted, while others are avoided (e.g., the house cleaning does not target *khametz*, and bread is widely present in the homes during *Pesah*). The style of celebrating Jewish holidays by the immigrant families is apparently hybrid, mixing the elements of Russian, Christian, and Jewish/Israeli customs. Yet, most women emphasized in their narratives the utmost effort they were making to align their family lives with the Jewish calendar and Israeli traditions – as one of the key markers of their successful social integration in the new homeland.

The ideological basis for citizenship came out as an important issue for the interviewed women. Despite certain differences of opinion, the republican model seems to outweigh the liberal one, coming to the fore as hawkish, anti-Arab political views and valorization of the army service of their children. Ethno-national citizenship, broached through ‘patriotic motherhood,’ could be further reinforced for the non-Jewish women through *giyur*, but only a minority of our informants actually chose to follow this path. The women, who decided against *giyur*, explained it by both moral and pragmatic reasons. Most informants considered the personal costs of conversion to be incompatible with the practical gains in their own status, given that they already had most political and economic rights as Israeli citizens. The issues of marriage and burial for non-Jews, where they would face limitations, were seen by them as secondary (compared for example to the rights for work and health care) and soluble by various available by-passes and compromises. Since most children of these women were past bar/bat-mitzvah age, it was up to the children themselves to decide if they needed *giyur* in order to marry in rabbinical courts like most Israelis. On the moral side, several women expressed their discomfort about state-sponsored *giyur* as pure formality not accompanied by the true spiritual change and the intention to observe mitzvot. Yet others saw the very attempt to change their religion or ethnic identity as impossible and false, as they saw these qualities as in-born and immutable.

While enjoying most civil rights themselves as an ethnic minority adjoined with the Jewish sector of Israeli society (Cohen and Susser, 2009), few women raised liberal concerns about damaged rights and discrimination of other minorities, such as Arabs and foreign laborers. Russian wives in this sample did not challenge the ethno-national regime of Israel and did not construe their own position in terms of discrimination. On the contrary, they justified Israeli Jewish nationalism as a necessary means of survival in the hostile Middle Eastern milieu. Despite feelings of otherness and alienation, they did not have a claim on broader civil and religious rights and believed that it was up to them to adjust to the ‘rules of the game’ in the Jewish state. Similar attitudes were described in the study by Kenigshtein (2007), whose informants often opined that all bearers of Russian identity and accent are treated (or mistreated) by the veteran Israelis as a single social category of *rusim*, without distinction as to their Jewishness. In this respect, the findings by Rajzman and Pinsky (2011) stand somewhat apart; their informants often protested Israeli ‘ethno-national regime of incorporation’ that discriminates against non-Jewish minorities, including Russian Christians. Their political views were less hawkish and they perceived Christian Arabs as more socially close to themselves (because of common religion and mutual aid) than both Israeli Jews and Jewish immigrants from the FSU. Our discordant findings point to the multiplicity of individual voices and narratives co-existing in the “Russian Street” of Israel, which is inevitable among such a large and diverse wave of newcomers.

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