

Transnational lifestyles among Russian Israelis: a follow-up study

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***Abstract** Despite the expanding use of the transnational perspective, grounded qualitative research on everyday expressions of transnationalism has been scant. In this article, I explore the economic and social ties with former homelands among three categories of former Soviet immigrants of the 1990s in Israel, namely ethnically mixed families split by emigration; young professionals and entrepreneurs; and retirees who keep two homes – one in Israel and the other in Russia or Ukraine. To follow temporal changes in transnational lifestyles, I interviewed the same informants twice, in 2000 and 2010. The findings suggest that transnational activities reflect life-course changes and can evolve in several possible directions. These are (1) an attrition of ties with former homelands with increasing integration in the host country; (2) a steady or ascending pace of transnational activities eventually leading to return migration; and (3) permanent low-grade ties with former homelands and networking with co-ethnics in other countries of the post-Soviet diaspora. I conclude that relatively few migrants can sustain intense transnational lifestyle over many years; there are several critical life-course points when most transnational migrants have to decide where their home is.*

Keywords TRANSNATIONAL LIFESTYLES, LIFE COURSE, RUSSIAN IMMIGRANTS, ISRAEL, LONGITUDINAL STUDY

The transnational lifestyles of contemporary migrants are attracting increasing attention from social researchers, especially sociologists, anthropologists, demographers and human or cultural geographers. Most ‘classical’ studies (Faist 2000; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Guarnizo and Smith 1998) focused on theory development and examined the emerging migrant transnationalism on the aggregate level, as a global trend expressed not only as migrants with dual citizenship shuttling across borders, but also in terms of the economic and political activities of expatriates in their homelands. Guarnizo and Smith (1998) took a closer look at the everyday expressions of transnational lives of individual migrants and coined the useful term, *transnationalism from below*. The refocusing of the research lens from the macro to meso

and micro levels has been informed by the wish to define and document the emerging transnational social fields and learn more about their actors (Gold 2002; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Transnational ties are characteristically located in space (which is why distances between home and host countries and border crossing procedures are important), are sensitive to changes in the political climate, evolve over time and have a life-course dimension (Bailey 2009). Recent studies are increasingly being geared towards acquiring a contextualized, grounded understanding of the motives and implications of the transnational living arrangements of individual immigrants and immigrant families (Boyle 2002; Kivisto 2001; Kulu and Milewski 2007; Levitt 2001).

Temporality, though often overlooked, is an important dimension in transnational research. Most studies that focus on recent or established immigrants living in more than one country provide a snapshot view of their transnational practices. Researchers who ask their informants to reminisce about how their ties evolved over the course of years inevitably introduce a recall bias or *post hoc* rationalization (Halfacree and Boyle 1993; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Because they are expensive and logistically complex, there are few longitudinal studies of immigrant experiences and those that do exist are mostly quantitative, as exemplified by Portes and Rumbaut's (2005) Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, which looked at more than 5000 children of immigrants at three different periods. Waters's (2011) recent study of transnationalism among first-generation immigrants is a rare example of temporally based qualitative research. The study drew on the biographical narratives of Vancouver-based 'astronaut' wives whose husbands, after moving to Canada for political reasons, returned to Hong Kong or Taiwan to make a living (or shuttled between the two countries). Interviewed at two points in time (1999 and 2007), the women spoke about their trans-Pacific family lives and their evolving feelings towards Canada versus their homelands. The study shows that some families sustain a transnational lifestyle and prolonged separations from spouses and/or children for many years, but that this definitely takes its toll on the quality of their relationships (Waters 2011).

The latter study, along with a few others typically based on North American migration experiences (Boyle 2002; Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Levitt 2001), emphasizes that the social incorporation of immigrants and their families is not a linear, predictable process that follows a steady script eventually leading to assimilation. Rather, it is an uneven and bumpy road that every traveller walks in his or her own way, at variable speeds and with variable outcomes, some ending in return migration. Maintaining close social and economic ties with former homelands has emerged as a potent and ever-present factor in either facilitating or hampering trans-migrant integration (Levitt 2001; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). The Israeli émigrés in North America whom first Gold (2002) and more recently Rebhun and Lev Ari (2010) studied, provide another vivid testimony to the salience of both temporal and transnational perspectives in understanding immigrant identities.

These intersections – both theoretical and pragmatic – form my points of departure from the current research; research that indicated the need for qualitative, context-bound studies of migration in the era of transnationalism, particularly in non-American social and geographical contexts. The study described below, which has the

benefit of following the same informants over the course of a decade, draws on a narrative, life-course and actor-based perspective. By allowing more direct and immediate access to participants' accounts, the study design significantly attenuates the pitfalls of retrospective reflections and memory biases that are often corollary to biographical research. The goals of this study were (1) to map out the more common patterns of transnational practices and the actors involved; (2) to identify regular expressions of transnational lifestyles among different categories of transmigrants; and (3) to explore the familial and intergenerational aspects of transnational living, with a focus on the 1.5 generation of Russian Israelis. I start with a brief overview of the immigration of former Soviet Jews to Israel and the root causes of their transnational interests.

Ex-Soviet immigrants in Israel: inroads to transnationalism

In the wake of the decline and eventual demise of the former Soviet Union (FSU) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, close to one million Soviet Jews moved to Israel, while about 700,000 emigrated to the West (mostly to the USA, Canada and Germany). This seminal exodus had three major outcomes: it significantly fortified the Jewish communities of destination countries; it accelerated the demographic decline of the remaining Russian and Ukrainian Jewry; and it spearheaded the formation (or rather major expansion) of the global Russian-Jewish diaspora. While former Soviet immigrants comprised a small minority in the Western countries, their mass influx to Israel increased its Jewish population by almost 20 per cent (Remennick 2007).

This immigration had several demographic and social features that contributed to its transnational orientation. To begin with, the Law of Return (the legal basis for Jewish immigration to Israel, or *Aliyah*¹) is broadly inclusive of all Jews, their descendants and immediate family. There is no screening on grounds of age, health or socio-economic potential. *Aliyah* of the 1990s was a mass resettlement of extended families; as a result, the advanced age structure of Soviet Jewry has been 'transplanted' to Israel. About 40 per cent are over the age of 45 and 15 per cent are over 65, whereas 30 per cent and 11 per cent respectively are in those age brackets in the Israeli Jewish population (CBS 1998, 2004). Older immigrants are more prone to retain their ethnic and cultural characteristics and have a lower potential for occupational and social integration.

Second, as a result of intense assimilation and intermarriage among Soviet Jews, about one-third of the immigrants are either partly Jewish or non-Jewish, in other words they are the spouses or non-Jewish children of repatriates recognized by the state as Jews² (Cohen and Susser 2009). Migration split many of the ethnically mixed families in that the numerous parents, siblings and other relatives of non-Jewish spouses stayed at home. However, these immigrants tended to sustain close ties to their former homes and would visit their families and help them out financially. After seven decades of atheist indoctrination in the USSR, over 90 per cent of ex-Soviets are non-religious and their Jewish identity is mainly ethnic (Remennick 2007). Non-Jewish and assimilated immigrants are less likely to develop a strong Israeli identity

and may be less motivated to study Hebrew, serve in the army or generally integrate into Israeli culture. Because they are less rooted in Israel, they are more likely to stay in touch with their homelands. As post-soviet Jewish emigration was set in motion mainly by 'push factors' (economic and political turmoil, growing anti-Semitism), the émigrés' positive identification with Judaism, Zionism and other Israeli values was often rather weak (Remennick 2007).

Given the global dispersion of ex-Soviet migrants, many Russian Israelis have extensive networks of relatives and friends in North America and Europe, forming together a transnational social field. Once they had acquired an initial economic foothold in Israel, most of the immigrants began to rebuild their social ties with significant others living in the West. As more Russian Israelis could afford long-distance calls and periodic air trips to these destinations (let alone online ties), these networks became more sustainable. Thus, ex-Soviets have rapidly embraced the new freedoms of travel and human exchange with their homelands, which became possible after the end of the cold war. By stark contrast, the émigrés of the 1970s had no option but to sever all ties with the USSR. The recent cancellation of visas between Israel, Russia and the Ukraine (the Baltic States cancelled them after joining the EU) makes border crossings faster and cheaper for both Israelis and ex-Soviets.³

Although Russian Jews in Israel have fascinated social scientists for more than two decades, few studies address the transnational dimension of these people's lives. A large national survey of post-1989 immigrants formed the basis of the first such study (Remennick 2002) in which I examined a broad array of integration outcomes. My findings revealed significant cultural retention and alienation from the Hebrew mainstream among Russian Israelis, especially among the older and more downwardly mobile ones. Nonetheless, at least a third of these immigrants regularly participated in various transnational activities, including exchange visits; regular telephone and online contacts with significant others in the FSU; dual citizenship; and voting in Russian and Ukrainian elections. Their reliance on these networks, whether physical (like participating in the international Russian humour or song festivals) or virtual (surfing the Russian internet or watching Russian-language TV channels), attenuates the newcomers' dependency on the host society and allows them to preserve their old identity or reinvent themselves as 'Russian Israelis'. The Israeli-Russian version of transnationalism thus focuses mainly on identity and socio-cultural activities. The immigrants rarely engaged in political or civic events in the FSU via parties, lobbies or NGOs. Besides travel and remittances, the economic activities of these Russian Israelis include small business ventures, mainly in the import and export industry, but these involve relatively few people. In any event, the transnationalism of Russian Jews grows mainly 'from below', namely via individual initiatives without any strong institutional support (Remennick 2002).

The research project summarized above served as my starting point in two ways: first, it provided the background data on transnational practices among Israeli Russians in the early 2000s and, second, its respondents' database enabled me to recruit participants for the follow-up study in 2010. For the current analysis, I reassessed the unpublished results of the 'nested' qualitative research conducted in

2001, in conjunction with the described survey, and contacted most of its participants to interview again ten years down the road.

Current study: participants and methods

My secondary analysis of the findings of the national survey of Russian Israelis aged 18 or more (Remennick 2002) helped me map out the main kinds of transnational practices and identify the immigrant groups involved in them. Three categories emerged from this analytical procedure, which I conducted by means of factor and cluster analysis, among other statistical techniques (data not shown due to space limitations). *The first* and largest category comprised members of ethnically mixed families, usually non-Jewish women married to Jewish men, but also partially Jewish migrants who had siblings, parents and children from previous marriages living in the FSU. These immigrants maintained intense contacts at all levels with their relatives and friends at home; they spent long holidays with them in the FSU, sent them remittances and hosted their visits to Israel. The children of intermarried couples often spent their summer school breaks with their grandparents in Russia or Ukraine. *The second category*, which was less pronounced but still sizeable, comprised young adults belonging to the 1.5 immigrant generation (who moved to Israel as older children or adolescents); they had completed their education in Israel, which often included an academic degree, but could not find quality jobs in the local labour market. Some of these young adults left for the FSU in search of more lucrative employment, particularly in management and in the high-tech industries that thrived in the major Russian and Ukrainian cities during the late 1990s and early 2000s. *The third group* with transnational proclivities consisted of younger retired immigrants (between the ages of 55 and 70) who were unattached to workplaces and could move freely between Israel and the FSU. Most of them kept their old apartments in Moscow, St Petersburg or Kiev and returned there during the summer to escape the heat of Israel. Some of them spent most of the year in the FSU and returned to Israel only during the cooler winter months. These three categories of transnational migrants, who together comprised about 30 per cent of the survey respondents, formed the focus of the in-depth study.

The qualitative study reported below draws on the two phases of data collection mentioned earlier – a ‘nested’ study conducted in the wake of the survey in late 2000 and early 2001 and a follow-up study with the same participants in late 2010. With the help of a graduate assistant, I retrieved and reviewed those transcripts of interviews with 36 ex-Soviet immigrants that included material on their ties with the FSU and co-ethnics in the West. I drew these informants from the ranks of the survey respondents who had volunteered for a longer interview and sampled them in line with the relative weight of the above-mentioned categories most inclined to transnational practices. Meanwhile, my assistant tried to track down as many of these informants as possible; several had moved to other parts of the country; two older ones had died and some had left Israel. She managed to contact 30 of the first-wave informants, of which 27 consented to a second interview. The accounts of the 27

informants who participated in both stages of the data collection provide the basis for this analysis. All the interviews were in Russian (typically their language of choice); they took place in the informants' homes, or other places of choice and, on average, lasted for two hours. We tape-recorded and transcribed them in full for subsequent thematic coding and interpretative analysis. The resulting data file contained 54 interview transcripts running to hundreds of pages, field notes and analytical summaries. Below, I present the highlights of this analysis, emphasizing the changes that occurred in the informants' transnational lifestyles during the decade between the two studies. I have changed all names to aliases.

Selected findings

In Table 1, I present the personal profiles of the informants in the three categories included in this study, with average values for the respective groups. I now turn to the principal findings regarding transnational practices among members of these three groups of ex-Soviet immigrants.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the informants (N=27)

	Time 1 (2001)	Time 2 (2010)
<i>Category 1: Non-Jewish or partly-Jewish immigrants (N=13)</i>		
Mean age	34	44
Gender (number of women)	9	8
Tenure in Israel (years)	6.3	15.9
Years of education	12.6	13.5
Number married	10	9
Number of children		
In Israel	1.3	1.4
In the FSU	0.6	0.8
<i>Category 2: Young professionals and entrepreneurs (N=8)</i>		
Mean age	28	38
Gender (number of men)	7	7
Tenure in Israel (years)	8.2	18
Years of education	16.2	16.9
Number married	2	7
Number of children (all in Israel)	0.3	1.8
<i>Category 3: Retirees and older unemployed (N=6)</i>		
Mean age	63	73
Gender (% women)	60	60
Tenure in Israel (years)	7.3	17.2
Years of education	12.1	12.2
No. with income besides minimal social security	4	2
Number with residential property in FSU	5	1

Category 1: non-Jewish and partly-Jewish immigrants

As Table 1 shows, most informants in this category were women, typically of Russian, Ukrainian or other former Soviet ethnicity, who came to Israel with their Jewish husbands and the children they had in common.⁴ The Law of Return grants citizenship or permanent residency only to the immediate family of a Jewish applicant, thus excluding parents, adult children and other relatives descended from a non-Jewish spouse. The latter can visit Israel repeatedly but, except in rare humanitarian cases, are ineligible for permanent residence. All nine women in this category had one or both parents living in the FSU, seven had siblings and three of the women had older children from a previous marriage remaining in the FSU. Among the four male informants, two were half-Jewish and had close relatives in the FSU. All informants also reported having multiple friends, former colleagues and others in their ex-Soviet network (on average, about ten significant others with whom they wanted to stay in touch). For all of them, maintaining contact with and helping their relatives and friends were the most significant motives for their transnational practices. These typically included annual or biannual visits to their home cities and towns, as exemplified by Marina (36 at the time of the first study) from Kharkov in Ukraine:

I'd much rather spend my summer vacation travelling to Europe, the Far East or some other exotic places, but how can I do it with my mom waiting for my visit so eagerly? She is getting older and lonelier by the year, and I must give her some attention. ... I also try to visit her during New Year season at least for a few days. ... I wish we could bring her to Israel, but this is very difficult ... even if we win permanent residency for her as a lone elder, my husband and I would have to sponsor her completely, and we can't afford it. ... So I keep going back and forth, and my 12 year old son joins me almost every summer ... he rather likes going there – he's got some school friends since before our migration. ... Sometimes Gregory [Marina's husband] joins us, but for a shorter period and not every year; ... he'd rather not go there at all but he wants to support me.

Marina's story raises several issues. These include striving to help her ageing parent who had been left behind; the impossibility of reunification with her mother in Israel for both legal and economic reasons; and the way in which Marina's teenage son shuttles between Israel and Ukraine, which he apparently seems to enjoy, but more on that later. Marina's family in Israel is middle-class (she and her husband work as programmers) and they could, like their Israeli-born peers, afford to spend their annual holidays in Europe or elsewhere abroad. Yet, Marina's commitment to her mother and other close relatives in Kharkov means that the family invariably spends its summers there. Gregory's parents and other relatives are in Israel and Germany, so his ties with the Ukrainian city he left in 1993 are much weaker. He said during the same interview:

For a couple of summers now, Marina went to see her mother and older brother in Kharkov and I joined my parents who went to visit my younger sister and her family in Munich. Danny [their son] spent some ten days in the Ukraine and then took the flight from there to Germany to join my relatives and me. ... So we are this international bunch always crossing borders. I wish we could spend our vacations together as a family, but this is not in the cards so far.

Besides visiting their home cities, Marina and Gregory, as well as most other informants in this category, invite their next of kin and close friends for prolonged visits to their Israeli homes, usually with an intense tourist agenda (for example, tours of Christian Holy Places), and send them back loaded with gifts. In many cases, the Israeli hosts also help purchase the tickets, for many older ex-Soviets cannot afford international airfares. Some informants send regular remittances to their relatives in the FSU; others send generous gifts for birthdays and major holidays; yet others regularly send Israeli pharmaceuticals to their ailing parents. The stream of material support is mainly from Israel to the FSU. In between personal visits, all the informants keep in touch with their significant others in the FSU by telephone, as well as through postal and electronic means of communication.

Follow-up interviews with members of the same families after ten years revealed a number of changes in their lives generally and in their transnational activities specifically. Two of the nine women had divorced their husbands and left Israel for their home cities in the FSU. The rest had continued their regular visits while their parents or other close relatives were still alive, but drastically reduced them once the parent, or whoever had been the main reason for their visits in the past, had died. Michael (51) whose Russian father (long divorced from his Jewish mother) lived until recently in St Petersburg, said:

I used to go to Peter [St Petersburg in Russian vernacular] almost every summer to stay with my ageing dad in his summer cottage at the Baltic sea; when I couldn't go myself I sent our son for his summer vacations. ... We often went to Peter for the New Year too. ... I loved these visits, the opportunity to reconnect to the streets, museums and theatres I had frequented as a young student. ... My dad was happy to host me, and he also received a lot of help with home repairs and everyday errands ... but this is all in the past now that he is dead. I haven't been there since his funeral [in 2006]. On one hand, I still love the city and its cultural scene, but, on the other, there is nobody left there whom I miss – all of my friends have left Russia, and the city is increasingly empty for me.

Although Michael no longer visits St Petersburg, his son Mark, now in his early twenties and just demobilized from his army service, is considering going to his ancestral home city to study at the university there. Mark joined the conversation, saying:

I was born in Peter, then left for Israel as a small kid, but sometimes visited at my grandpa's in or near the city and got to love it – everything, including the gloomy weather most of the time [laughs]. I'd love to spend a few years there, so I am trying to get admitted to the university programme for foreign students. My Russian is not good enough for academic studies, but they seem to offer some courses in English. ... I'd love to go if I can afford the tuition. It's about time to rediscover my Russian side [laughs].

While Michael's ties with the city of his youth have weakened, his son seems to be taking over as a transnational traveller. If Mark's plans to study at the St Petersburg State University (which is one of the best in Russia) materialize, he may eventually stay there for a further degree or job, or he may marry a Russian woman and resettle there for good. Alternatively, he can return to Israel upon graduation or look for a job in any number of other countries – in the interconnected world of today any trajectory is possible. In any event, he will probably keep his personal ties with Israel too, thus adding to the growing tribe of transnational Israeli citizens trotting around the globe (Gold 2002; Rebhun and Lev Ari 2010).

Category 2: young professionals and entrepreneurs

The scenario I tentatively considered above for Mark became a reality for quite a lot of young and middle-aged Russian Israelis who were failing to realize their potential in the small and saturated labour market of their adopted country. Some of them moved to Israel as young professionals with a few years of work experience behind them; others completed their schooling and academic studies in Israel, but neither group was able to secure steady, well-paid jobs in line with their skills and expectations. After several years of fruitless searching and disappointment, these young adults (mostly men – see Table 1) went back to the large cities in the FSU, mostly to Moscow, St Petersburg and Kiev, hoping for better job opportunities there. Not all of them had been natives of these cities before emigration, but they all had relatives or friends there who could help them with their initial accommodation and orientation. A typical return migrant was a single man in his late twenties or early thirties with a degree in computing, management or other marketable skill in high demand in the booming Russian and Ukrainian economy. Evgeny (aged 37), interviewed in 2000 during a short visit to his parents in Israel, but who now works and lives in Canada with his wife and two sons, recalled his early career experiences in Israel and Russia:

I couldn't find a decent job for a whole year after graduation with a degree in graphic design – and got tired from juggling several part-time jobs. ... At one point, I heard from a school friend ... that graphic designers are in high demand in many high-tech and advertisement companies. I sent my résumé to several places and got three job interviews in a matter of days. ... So I moved to Moscow, was hired with a three-year contract, rented a nice apartment, and

had a great time starting the day at the office and finishing it in one of the city bars, clubs, shows, what not. ... By local standards, I was a very wealthy guy with my corporate salary, a nice car and a wad of cash to spare. ... Of course, I visited my parents in Israel whenever I could, and during one of these visits back home ... *wherever home is* [laughs] I met my sweetheart who is now my wife. She went to Moscow with me for a year, but she didn't like living there, and then our first son was born ... so we returned back to Israel as a family. You know, Russia is no good place to raise children – the city is polluted and messy, medical services extremely unreliable ... so Israel became home again.

Note the shifting notion of 'home' in Evgeny's story. Israel 'became home again' for only a few years because, in 2009, the multinational company for which he now worked relocated him in Canada. Yet, as both his and his wife's parents live in Israel, Evgeny and his family visit them there once or twice a year and consider it the main 'safe harbour' in their transnational lives. Their older son attends the Hebrew school in Toronto and Evgeny and his wife converse in a mixture of Russian, Hebrew and English. 'Once Israeli – always Israeli', uttered Evgeny at the end of our interview.

Some other informants in this group established joint business ventures between Israel and their former home cities in Russia or Ukraine. Usually these ventures were initiated by two kinds of immigrants (mostly men): those with prior business experience in the FSU or those who used to work there as salaried professionals but failed to find relevant positions in Israel. Most of these businesses were small-scale import-export ventures, typically importing goods for retailers in Israel, such as food staples for Russian grocers, or books, films and recorded music for Russian bookstores and libraries. Two quotes from middle-aged men are representative of this experience. Gennady (48 at the time of the second interview) reminisced about the period when he imported high-end food staples (such as caviar and expensive smoked fish) from Russia to Israel:

When 'Russians' in Israel regained their economic foothold in the mid-1990s, the demand for high-quality, familiar Russian foods soared. I am from a large city on the Volga River and was rather familiar with the fish trade in Russia. Although I'd never owned a business before, I grasped this chance rather quickly. Fishing regulations in the FSU were rather loose back then and you could procure semi-legal caviar and beluga quite cheaply. The main challenge was to organize freight in cool storage. ... I spent most of the year in Russian fishing areas, while my family lived here in Holon. ... For five to six years profits were real good, but then prices in Russia went up and I couldn't afford bribing the authorities and paying for the cargo anymore.

Robert (aged 52 at the second interview) had failed to find an engineering job in Israel, so he tried his luck in business:

I owned a small electronics store in the early 1990s in Russia, so I had some business experience ... but no start-up capital to speak of. I realized that my engineering diploma wouldn't help me make a living in Israel (as it didn't help in Russia after the end of socialism!). ... I've actually tried several kinds of goods – cheap electronics from Russia (made in China of course), then computer parts ... none of it worked too well because of competition with larger Israeli companies. So, I tried to carve a more specific niche where I would have fewer competitors – and ended up importing medical equipment and supplies for smaller private clinics. I spend three to four months a year surfing the Russian and Ukrainian markets for cheaper but quality supplies that can keep my firm afloat in Israel. ... My older son lives in Kiev and I usually stay at his place when I go to the FSU.

Between the mid and late 1990s, a few immigrant entrepreneurs attempted to open up the huge FSU market to Israeli products, such as Dead Sea cosmetics and Holy Land souvenirs, but competition with larger Israeli export companies, or threats from local racketeers, meant that most had to withdraw from that market rather quickly. As Dmitry (aged 32 at the first interview) recalled:

I saw no business opportunity in Israel, so I decided to import Israeli stuff to my native Ukraine. Back in 1995, folks in Dnepropetrovsk had never heard of the Dead Sea marvels, so I ostensibly had an open field to play. ... I started by simply carrying bags full of Dead Sea cosmetics and bath salts to the Ukraine (paying small bribes to the customs, naturally) and selling them from my old apartment ... then I opened a small store in the city centre, and it did rather well for a year or so. ... I even planned to bring my wife and son back from Israel ... until local bandits discovered me and demanded a regular protection fee. ... So I ran away for dear life and never tried to do business in the FSU again.

Transnational cultural exchanges provided another area of activity. Immigrants arranged for popular FSU actors, singers and stand-up comedians to make theatrical tours of Israel. They also organized medical exchanges, as well as regular tourism between Israel and the FSU. Virtually all these business activities came 'from below', in other words the individual immigrants personally bore the risks (though the Israeli Ministry of Industry and Commerce sometimes supported them with small loans). The only kinds of transnational engagements sponsored 'from above' (namely by the various Israeli authorities) were associated with working in the FSU for the Jewish community or Jewish religious institutions as teachers, principals of Jewish schools, Jewish Agency representatives, or rabbis at local synagogues. Two informants from this group spent a few years working in this capacity in the FSU, but had returned to Israel by the time of the follow-up study.

As most of the narratives quoted above indicate, the 'golden age' of small businesses in the FSU was rather short lived and, with changes in the business and political climate in Putin's Russia and in post-Orange Revolution Ukraine, was

virtually over by the mid-2000s. By the time of our follow-up interviews in 2010, most informants in this category had shrunk or withdrawn their operations from the FSU and had carved out a moderately successful niche market for themselves in Israel, though still catering for 'Russian' consumers. Most of them kept business links with the FSU but travelled there less frequently and hired local agents to act on their behalf. Many business-oriented immigrants bought property in the FSU in the hope that it would increase in value over time.

Category 3: retirees and older unemployed

Most informants in this group at the time of the first study were older women without regular employment; they were pensioners or approaching the retirement age of 60 and not looking for full-time jobs. Since immigrants who have never worked in Israel receive only a minimal social security benefit equal to about \$500 a month, many younger retirees find various part-time jobs to supplement their meagre incomes. These jobs are often in the informal sector and include time-flexible work like child minding, caring for the elderly, household help and cleaning (Table 1 shows that in 2000 most informants had such sources of additional income). Russian citizens who emigrated after 1992–93 may claim their Soviet pensions through the consular services, but these are very low (between \$50 and \$100 a month) so do not solve their cost of living problems. The high rental prices on the private housing market exacerbate the situation, for there is very little public housing available in Israel for elderly people on low incomes. Many immigrants of retirement age have to live with their adult children or share rented apartments with roommates. However, other advantages of life in Israel *vis-à-vis* the FSU somewhat offset these housing problems: for example, there is decent public health care, a wide variety of fresh foods, higher personal security and open venues for social participation (Remennick 2003).

Our analysis shows that three major forces propel the transnational engagements of older immigrants. These are sentimental (nostalgia for the home where they had spent most of their lives), financial (difficulty surviving on either a Russian or Israeli pension) and physical (finding it a struggle to adjust to the hot Israeli climate). Elderly people without strong family attachments in Israel (spouses, children and grandchildren) and those from the major cities, especially Moscow and St Petersburg, are often disposed to keeping close ties with their homelands. Many older women who regularly travel to the FSU have kept their apartments and/or summer cottages; alternatively, they have close relatives or friends with whom to stay. Israeli social security regulations allow the recipients of old-age benefits to remain abroad for no longer than 72 days a year if they wish to preserve their payments intact. Most elderly people in this group leave Israel for the hot summer season, which lasts from June to October. However, those who are less dependent on their Israeli pension may even decide to stay in Moscow for most of the year, coming to Israel only for the pleasant winter months. Faina (who was aged 62 at the time of the first interview) gave a typical account:

After having spent two full years in Israel, I realized that I must go back to Moscow to cool down and reconnect with my old life. Living here all year round, in this tiny hot room without AC [air-conditioning], surrounded by strangers and the language I don't understand ... it wasn't an option if I wanted to stay sane. Thank God, I didn't sell my flat in Moscow, so I had a place to go back to. ... As soon as I got the Israeli passport and arranged for my social security benefit – I left Israel for the whole summer and fall. It was a very good decision, since I could get the best of both worlds: spend time with my old friends in Moscow, go to the theatres and concerts there ... and then return to Israel for the length of the nasty Russian winter. ... It's only in Israel that I go to doctors and buy medications – I don't trust Russian medicine anymore.

Faina's story reveals both the sentimental and pragmatic motives in her decision to live in two countries rather than take root in Israel. She misses her old friends and the habitual lifestyle she had left behind in Moscow. Being able to enjoy the cultural riches of Russia's largest cities is another important incentive for regular returns there – the Israeli cultural scene has little to offer by comparison, especially to monolingual Russians. On the other hand, Faina does not have to rely on Russian medical services, for she deals with all her health-care needs during the months she spends in Israel.

Many older immigrants rely on the Russian language media networks produced in Israel, the FSU and globally, thus practicing 'mental transnationalism', as exemplified by the international Russian TV channel, *RTVi*. With studios in New York, Berlin and Tel-Aviv, *RTVi* broadcasts to the main branches of the ex-Soviet diaspora; however, given its oppositional coverage, Putin's government has shut down the Moscow branch. Very few of the older immigrants have ever mastered Hebrew, so the world of the mainstream Israeli media is foreign to them. Nonetheless, given their ongoing contacts with their homelands, most take a lively interest in the current events and cultural programmes shown on Russian TV, which constitutes their main source of information about the world. Consequently, despite physically living in Israel, many Russian retirees know more about Russian and Ukrainian political and cultural events than they do about Israeli ones. In recent years, however, many have switched to the Russian-language channel produced in Israel, which has a mainly local Israeli content interspersed with imported Russian films and drama series.

In the decade between the two interviews, the retired informants got older, their health deteriorated and their physical mobility decreased. As Table 1 shows, many had to leave their part-time jobs, thus reducing their incomes and making it difficult to afford annual trips to the FSU. As their medical needs increased, they felt compelled to spend more time in Israel, so they cut short the length of their summer stays abroad. Then, making less use of their property in the FSU, many felt obliged to sell or bequest it to younger relatives – as Table 1 shows, property ownership in the FSU among this group shrank accordingly. Thus, most of the elderly transnationals faced the need to decide where they wanted to spend the rest of their lives and the majority chose Israel. Irena (aged 78 at the second interview) said:

I know several women who keep moving between our beloved Peter and Israel, but I cannot endure this lifestyle anymore. Living in two countries requires more energy and stamina – keeping an eye on your old flat (or hiring someone to do it for you), maintenance costs ... even arranging for your travel, the hassle of the airports, sharp changes of climate – I am getting too old for all this. I decided to concentrate my remaining energy on making my life better in Israel – finding a larger flat, closer to the friends [Irena has no children], getting my papers in order. At last, I became a full-time Israeli resident.

Thus, the transnational phase in the lives of elderly immigrants was temporary and, as they grew older, it eventually ended. However, their children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces, some of whom have inherited their properties in the FSU, may follow their example and adopt the transnational practices that run in these families.

Global networking with co-ethnics

Because of the global dispersion of Russian-Jewish émigrés over the last 25 years, most Russian Israelis have relatives and friends living in North America or Europe (and a minority elsewhere). Hand in hand with the transnational gradient directed towards their former homes, Russian Israelis have developed extensive social ties with co-ethnics in the West. Starting in the mid to late 1990s, these ties grew denser and more sustainable with the recent advent of online social networks and blogging sites such as MySpace, LiveJournal and, more recently, Facebook and Twitter. A search engine called *Odnoklassniki* (Classmates), designed to locate school or college friends scattered across the FSU and globally, best exemplifies such sites in the Russian-language-based internet world. Besides nourishing the emotional need to reconnect with one's past, re-establishing ties with former school friends, colleagues and neighbours may meet many of the immigrants' pragmatic needs for information about the living standards, job opportunities, quality of school education and housing in other countries. Information and help from peer networks abroad has become an important personal resource, particularly for young adults in search of quality education and occupational mobility. Diana (aged 29 at her first interview) illustrated this point:

I completed my BA majoring in economics and political science and for two years couldn't find any regular job in these fields. For a living, I worked in the customer service of a cell phone company, having little hope for promotion. ... By accident I came across my former high school friend who now lives in London (she actually found me via *Odnoklassniki*), and she told me that her husband works for an international analytical firm that is expanding and may be hiring new staff: I sent my résumé there and am waiting for their response. ... I may not land a job this time round, but it gave me an idea to find more of my former Russian peers online and try to ask them for any useful information about their adopted countries. The Israeli job market is too small for all of us living here; one has to look globally these days.

Diana and other young professionals rely on peer networks to glean useful information that may be relevant for their career development in the West. Older Russian immigrants, however, who do not plan to study or work abroad, are simply grateful to stay in touch with their relatives and friends, periodically spend holidays in North America or Europe, and invite them to visit Israel. Growing up in the USSR, separated from the external world by the infamous Iron Curtain, these immigrants cannot have enough of their newly obtained freedom of movement and human exchange across national borders. The luxury of travel abroad and reconnecting with the people they once knew and loved is still exciting for many of them. As Anna (aged 63 at the second interview) commented:

Native Israelis cannot really appreciate this freedom of movement that they take for granted. By contrast, we in the Soviet Union had to conceal any contacts with relatives or friends living in the West to be on the safe side. When my older sister's family left for the US in the late 1970s, we could not call them or even write letters without risking our work and livelihood; we were sure not to see them ever again. And look at us now – we are together again as a family! We have visited three times in their Los Angeles house, and my niece with her kids stayed with us in Israel a few times over the last decade. ... This global world that you can travel with an Israeli passport is so much friendlier than the one we grew up in!

Anna's story emphasizes the benefits that members of globally scattered families can derive from the new transnational opportunities; her younger American relatives were as pleased to visit her in Israel as Anna was to visit them in California. The main barrier to sustaining these networks is financial, for many Russian Israelis live on tight budgets and can only afford international travel occasionally. Yet, many of them are willing to cut back on other expenses in order to be able to visit their significant others in America or Europe.

Intergenerational transfer of transnational outlook

There was scattered evidence throughout the interview transcripts of parents transferring their engagements with their former homelands (and with co-ethnics living elsewhere) to their children and/or grandchildren. Young adults who had spent their childhoods in the FSU but came of age in Israel (the 1.5 generation) are well equipped to maintain transnational ties because most of them have good oral and reading proficiency in Russian and sustain an ongoing interest in Russian popular culture and its internet world (Elias 2011; Niznik 2011). Many young immigrants cherish their 'otherness' in Israel and see their Russian heritage as a resource rather than a liability; some even plan to go back to the FSU to study or work (see section on the children of mixed marriages). For many of them, regular summer visits to the cities they had left behind as children or adolescents fortify this kind of mind-set; and rekindling contacts with their Russian peers makes some of them contemplate an eventual return. Their

parents were the ones who decided to emigrate to Israel, while they had no say in the matter and had to comply. Young people who find it difficult to adjust to their Israeli school or peers often adopt a nostalgic, romantic view of their FSU childhoods and detest their lives in Israel. Igor (aged 20, half-Russian and serving in the military at the time of the first interview) provided a typical example:

I was miserable for most of the school year in the north Israeli town where we landed and eagerly waited for summer vacations when I'd go to stay with my grandparents near Moscow. I left behind a good life there – many friends, great nature hikes, a vibrant music scene – anything a guy could wish for, and my only hope was to return to Russia when I reach 18 (in case I can escape the draft – in both countries [laughs]). ... But, I was drafted in Israel, and I'd much rather do the army here than in Russia, thank you very much. I think the moment I demobilize – I'll go back to Moscow and try to continue my life where I had started it. My parents may be unhappy about this, but this is my life after all.

Like Igor, several young informants in this study had to make a choice between Israel and Russia after spending several years shuttling between the two countries. They had to make the decision at a critical point in their lives, usually after mandatory military service when most demobilized soldiers plan to proceed to college. For those who gained exemption from military service (which is easier for girls than boys), the critical point was reached either after high school or after completion of a bachelor's degree. As many as 11 of the 18 young immigrants in families participating in this study considered returning to the FSU at one of these critical points, although only six actually did so. Oleg (aged 29 at the time of the second interview) was one of them; he migrated with his parents when he was 14, completed his army service, graduated from college with a BA in management and for two years could not find a stable job. In 2009, he went back to his native Dnepropetrovsk in the Ukraine, where he found work as a mid-level manager in a trade firm. As he recounted:

It wasn't easy for me to study management sciences in Hebrew and in English, especially because I also had to work part time to pay my tuition and bills. So getting to the point of graduation was a major victory. ... I couldn't afford continuing to graduate studies, I needed a full time job – but couldn't find one. If there are ten candidates for an opening, the employers always prefer a native who shares their everyday culture, looks and sounds like them. ... After a while I realized that I had slim chances to make it in Israel, so I turned back to my pals in the Ukraine. They helped me find a well-paying job and I'll stay there as long as it holds [Oleg's interview took place while he was visiting his parents in Israel].

Oleg's story highlights the issue, which several other informants mentioned, of a perceived discrimination against Russian-speaking youths on the Israeli labour market, thereby introducing an additional barrier to entering a highly competitive and

already saturated market for most white-collar occupations. Some young professionals believe that, with the added benefit of an Israeli degree and two languages besides their native Russian, they may have better prospects in their homelands.

Concluding thoughts

Drawing on two sets of interviews with former Soviet immigrants (in 2001 and 2010), the aim of this study was to zoom in on transnational practices ‘from below’ to witness their evolution over the period of a decade. The research contributes to the literature in three ways: it explores a temporal dimension of transnational living; it examines the role of family ties across borders; and it taps into the intergenerational transfer of transnational interests between parents, children and grandchildren. While most diasporic studies focus on the immigrant group’s ties with the homeland (Gold 2002; Kivisto 2001; Levitt 2001), our findings extend that perspective to shed light on how and why transmigrants interact with co-ethnics living in other parts of the post-Soviet diaspora. Moreover, our interviews highlight both the practices of transnational migrants and the interpretations they give to their choices and decisions (for example, the excitement that older ex-Soviets who had lived behind the ‘Iron Curtain’ felt about their newfound freedom of movement and ability to maintain cross-border family ties). The intensity of the transmigrants’ physical and social ties with the homeland changed over time for all three groups in the study, which reflected the migrants’ evolving economic needs, the extent of their social integration in Israel, as well as changes in the political and business climate in the FSU. In some cases, the schedule of frequent visits to the FSU continued, while in others it decreased, often because of family events, such as parental deaths or, more rarely, family reunification.

Cross-border small businesses operating between Israel and the FSU peaked between the mid and late 1990s, but have been diminishing since then because of legal and economic changes in both countries. The numbers of young immigrants who go back to the FSU for higher education also seem to be declining, although temporary returns to take advantage of the more lucrative white-collar positions available in the FSU still occur. This labour migration reflects the ‘natural advantage’ that the huge and less regulated economies of Russia and Ukraine can offer over the small and highly competitive labour market of Israel, where some young ‘Russians’, with their different accent and demeanour, feel unwanted. Over time, some immigrants redirected their transnational interests towards ex-Soviets living in the West, who could be instrumental in expanding their occupational and educational opportunities. Elderly immigrants comprised one category that gradually withdrew from a transnational lifestyle, for their growing dependence on the quality medical care and social security they could not get in the FSU rooted them more firmly in Israel.

Our findings thus suggest a clear temporal dimension to transnational practices, which are a function of an immigrant’s personal and family circumstances. Reaffirming a few other studies on East Asian immigrants in North America (Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Waters 2011), our research shows that transnational migration is often cyclical, shaped by economic conditions in both the home

and host countries and by the various phases in an individual's life – with education, employment and retirement being the main ones. In the case of the Russian Israelis, we see that changing needs drive the transnational practices, which occur at all three stages of the adult's life. Typical activities include prolonged visits for recreation and entertainment, to care for a family member such as an ageing parent, for education (for example completing high school or a college degree) or to take advantage of fixed-term job contracts.

In an earlier study of Russian Israelis (Remennick 2002), I noted a possible dual effect of transnational practices on recent immigrants. While on the one hand they create a social safety net to augment migrants' personal resources during the period of economic adjustment, on the other hand a reliance on co-ethnics in the host country and abroad may discourage social integration, thus leading to a sense of alienation and of living in a state of limbo. Other comparative multi-country research projects (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Remennick 2007) reached similar conclusions about the twofold effect of transnational practices on the integration of former Soviet Jews into the host country. This article offers re-examination of the influence of transnational living on the migrants' integration into the host country while drawing on a longer timeline. By and large, the findings suggest that the individuals most prone to a transnational lifestyle exhibit a higher number of personal ties and commitments to the people and activities taking place in the FSU, with the ensuing lower attachments to Israel. Yet, this asymmetry extends only to the years of active transnational exchange, when migrants live in their former home cities for long stretches of time and especially when they have active economic or social affairs (for example business or romantic) going on there. When the latter cease or diminish, the migrants tend to relocate mentally and socially in Israel and put a lot of effort into improving their quality of life in the host country, which they increasingly construe as home. The concept of home emerges as a moving target in the lives of these migrants, although many of them (especially those who are ethnically Jewish) construe Israel as their safe harbour or ideal home; it is where their loved ones live and where they keep returning from their long sojourns elsewhere.

My study largely substantiates the evidence that, because of the logistic and mental challenges it involves, relatively few migrants are capable of sustaining an intensely transnational lifestyle for years on end (Bailey 2009; Boyle 2002; Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Waters 2011). In fact, most transmigrants reach a critical point in their lives when they have to decide which country will become their economic and social centre of gravity. This conclusion also applies to the young adults of the 1.5 generation, who at a certain stage in life may display serious engagements with their homeland and even consider the option of return. Other members of this group leave Israel for better employment options in North America or elsewhere and, in the process, they often procure information and help from their co-ethnics in the West.⁵ Thus, segments of the 1.5 generation of Russian Israelis may soon join the extensive Israeli diaspora in North America and Europe, which is known for its ambivalent transnationalism (Gold 2002; Rebhun and Lev Ari 2010). Future studies will show if the Israeli-born children of Russian immigrants, namely the second generation of ex-Soviets, will also display transnational tendencies.

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Notes

1. Aliyah, literally meaning ‘ascent’, is a Hebrew word for the repatriation of Jews to Israel. The Hebrew word for repatriates, *Olim*, means ‘ascending’. These ideologically loaded terms, which still appear in official and everyday Israeli discourse, were coined in the nineteenth century to signify Zionist aspirations.
2. According to Jewish common law (*Halacha*), only a child of a Jewish mother is a Jew, regardless of the father’s descent. Children of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother do not qualify as Jews. Yet, by the Law of Return, all children and grandchildren of Jews, and their immediate families, have a right to Israeli citizenship or permanent residence. This gap between religious and civic definitions of Jewishness creates many conflicts, particularly over matters of marriage, divorce and family reunification (Cohen and Susser 2009).
3. Two-thirds of the ex-Soviet immigrants of the 1990s came to Israel from Russia and the Ukraine, and most of the transnational ties are with these large post-Soviet states. Most other former Soviet republics do not allow their émigrés to hold double citizenship and they offer few business or educational opportunities.
4. Most interviews within this category were with more than one family member: since the interviews took place in the informant’s home, husbands, wives and children often contributed to the conversation with the main informant.
5. In the 20 years since the beginning of the ‘Great Russian Aliyah’, about 10 per cent of the FSU migrants have left Israel – either to return to the FSU or to emigrate to the West. The percentage leaving Israel is higher among younger immigrants of working age, in fact more than 17 per cent in the age group 25–40 (CBS official, personal communication).

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