

CHAPTER 3

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## BETWEEN A HOME AND A HOMELAND

### *Experiences of Jewish Return Migrants in Ukraine*

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#### Introduction

Despite the increase in migration and transnational patterns of life we observe across the globe today, the idea of home, or homes and belonging, remains extremely important in the way people define themselves and relate to others. This is especially apparent in the context of return migration and diaspora literature, where questions of what is a home or a homeland, where one feels at home and how one engages in homemaking practices are paramount and stand at the centre of academic discourse. In her latest book, *Diasporic Homecomings*, Takeyuki Tsuda describes ‘the millions of Jews in the Diaspora who have migrated to Israel since World War II’ as the ‘most prominent example’ of the world’s major ethnic return migration, out of which ‘the largest group of Jewish ethnic return migrants has been from the former Soviet Union; more than 770,000 Russian [speaking] Jews entered Israel between 1990 and 1999’ (2009: 1). Although Jewish migration to Israel is often described as a return migration (including its problematic elements), Larissa Remennick, writing in the same volume, reminds us that ‘the ‘return’ in the Israeli case is purely symbolic, as one cannot return to the land that one’s ancestors left 2,000 years ago; yet the myth of *aliyah* (Hebrew, literally meaning ‘ascent’ or ‘pilgrimage’) as homecoming remains one of the chief pillars of Zionism (Remennick 2009: 209).

In this chapter, I attempt to grapple with return migration and transnational patterns among ex-Soviet Jewish emigrants and their family members

who have recently returned from Israel either to take advantage of new entrepreneurial, professional, educational and personal opportunities unattainable abroad or just to feel 'at home'. Going beyond the debated statistics and the stereotypes promoted by the media, I aim to present material about the everyday reality of returnees,<sup>1</sup> including the motives for their return and the various ways they adjust to their home environment following a prolonged period of absence. I analyse the ways in which returnees create and undo ties within their social environments in order to construct and negotiate their sense of belonging. I argue that most ex-Soviet Jewish returnees do not envision their returns as permanent. They entertain the option of an eventual return to their original emigration destination or relocation to yet another place. The freedom of choice guaranteed by a foreign passport allows returning Jews to approach 'home' as both a place of familiarity and a place of discovery.<sup>2</sup>

Placing my research within the larger context of diaspora studies and literature on the subject of home and return, I end this chapter with an analysis of the homeland–diaspora dichotomy, which I argue should be broadened to include the multiplicity of belonging we see among Russian-speaking Israelis and others who are defined simultaneously by a number of diasporic groups and homes. The notion of home vivid in this ethnography of Jewish return migration from Israel is located within a complex, multilayered and multidimensional space in which economic, religious and other personal factors are framed by the larger context of state agendas. I want to suggest that if we look outside of diaspora literature, where home is often embedded in ideological sentiments, it is easier to see the trajectory of Russian-speaking Israelis in a similar light to many other migrant groups for whom home refers, among other things, to the possibilities of creating a better livelihood and exploring new opportunities.

### **Debates on ex-Soviet Jewish Return Migration**

Jewish citizens of the USSR and its successor independent states were able to emigrate with great difficulty during some periods of Soviet rule, and more freely following its fragmentation. The breakup of the USSR saw massive efforts by Israeli officials, American Jews and others, including local activists, that paved the way for one of the largest waves of Jewish emigration that still flows today. Suddenly the possibility of leaving – to a myriad of destinations – became a reality for ex-Soviet Jews. However, far from everyone took up the opportunity to emigrate and, when they did, Israel was by no means always seen as the obvious place to go. The choice of the Jewish 'stay back' population to remain in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) baffled many of

the human rights crusaders who, ever since the tiny crack in Soviet borders opened in the 1970s, had seen themselves as freeing Jews from communist repression and anti-Semitism: 'Emigration from the "land of state-sponsored anti-Semitism" has been the dominant lens through which everyone has seen Jewish life in Russia' (Aviv and Shneer 2005: 29, 49). The fact that most emigrating Jews were choosing destinations other than Israel was also highly disappointing for Zionists. Emigration from the former Soviet states has slowed down greatly and we can now analyse a new dimension of the ex-Soviet Jewish migration pattern: their return.

The emigration of Israeli citizens from Israel to the United States and Europe has been described previously in academic literature.<sup>3</sup> Yet the out-migration of FSU-born Jews from Israel has only recently captured the attention of politicians, scholars of Russian-speaking Jewry and journalists across the globe. The fact that, for the first time in the history of Russian Jewish migration, 'more Jews are migrating *to* Russia from Israel than the other way around'<sup>4</sup> elicited concern in Israel.

Statistics related to Jewish migration from Israel back to the FSU vary greatly. According to research conducted in Israel in 2004, between 2001 and 2003 alone, nearly 50,000 ex-Soviet Jews returned from Israel to Russia and other independent countries (Ash 2004). According to a report released by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, while about 50,000 Jewish former emigrants to Israel have returned to Russia since 2001, only about 30,000 Russian Jews have left for Israel.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Yevgeny Satanovsky, President of the Russian Jewish Congress, noted that over the same period, 100,000 Russian Jews returned to their countries of origin or other industrial centres and capital cities in the FSU (Satanovsky 2009). The figure for Israeli returnees in Moscow alone is estimated at 50,000 (Friedgut 2007). As Mark Tolts (2009) notes: 'There are a lot of ungrounded statements concerning huge numbers of FSU out-migrants from Israel.' Relying on the official statistics of the Russian and Ukrainian governments, Tolts reports that there were 17,438 registered returnees to the Russian Federation and 14,955 returnees to Ukraine in 1997–2009. Because many returnees do not register with the local passport office and hold on to their Israeli passports, the number of registered returnees (and hence the number who show up in official statistics) is much smaller than the mass of returnees who typically opt to hold on to their foreign passports. Many of the returnees also frequently travel back and forth from Israel, and are therefore automatically excluded from the statistics of out-migrants calculated by the Israeli state.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Israeli officials have expressed concern about a possible Russian 'brain drain' and the general increase in Russian out-migration from the country. In a 2007 survey of 4,214 Russian-speaking Jewish respondents, most of whom (90 per cent) reside in Israel, 81 per cent said they had thought about

leaving Israel.<sup>7</sup> Some Israeli sociologists including Elizar Feldman insist that many of the returnees are not ‘failed cases of *aliyah*’ (individuals who were unable to adapt to an Israeli way of life), but, rather, young, well-educated and capable individuals whose skills could not be accommodated in Israel’s limited employment market and had reached a ‘glass ceiling’.<sup>8</sup> Other specialists in Russian Jewish migration insist that, due to the nearly identical characteristics of emigrants *from* Russia to Israel and immigrants *to* Russia from Israel, the recent developments ‘do not cause a “brain drain” in either place’.<sup>9</sup> Together with other groups of Israelis who choose to live outside Israel, the outflow of Russian-speaking Jews can be perceived as undermining the ‘Zionist assertion that Israel is the best place for Jews to live’.<sup>10</sup> Evidently, the old narratives of Soviet repression still linger on. In response, Satanovsky has warned Western audiences not to read too much into this trend and to look beyond the Soviet days of repression: ‘There is no Iron Curtain anymore, and that’s what the phenomenon is . . . nobody is surprised when an American Jew goes to Nepal for a work contract and then returns to visit his aunt in New Jersey . . . All these are simply signs that Russia is a normal country now’ (cited in Osipovich 2009: 1). While the old narratives of Soviet repression and anti-Semitism are still very much in force in the media,<sup>11</sup> new stereotypes are also being propagated in which ‘returnees galvanize Jewish community life’<sup>12</sup> and ‘revive Jewish culture’.<sup>13</sup> Those who have experienced life in the Jewish ‘homeland’ are thus perceived as becoming active and knowledgeable Jews who have something to teach local ‘stay back’ Jews about Judaism and Jewish community.<sup>14</sup>

### Why Leave the Land of Milk and Honey?

Israeli returnees had different reasons for leaving Israel and for choosing to return to Odessa, whether on a permanent, undefined or temporary basis. These included family obligations, career development, the danger of living in the Middle East, and the improving economic and social prospects in the Ukraine. For the most part, the returnees I met were from Israel, with a smaller percentage from Germany and a few from Australia and the United States. This pattern may be explained by the fact that ‘migration to the USA and Germany usually entails inter-generational families, rather than individual Jewish youth and young couples, as is frequently the case with Israel’ (Golbert 2001: 347). Another explanation for the low frequency of returns from the United States and Australia is the distance and cost of travel. While visits from Germany were very common,<sup>15</sup> permanent returns are less frequent. European citizenship and highly praised social benefits were some of the main reasons presented by ‘Germans’ visiting Odessa to explain this pattern.

Among the returnees I met were people who had simply never managed to find their way in Israel and, facing economic, social or personal constraints, decided to return. Among such so-called 'failed cases of *aliyah*' were young Jews who had set off on their own and found it difficult to survive without the support of their family.<sup>16</sup> In other instances, elderly Odessans had found themselves too dependent on others for communication and everyday tasks, or middle-aged migrants struggled to make a living. There were also cases of well-to-do migrants lured back to Odessa by business opportunities. To this particular group of 'opportunity seekers', life in Israel presented no obstacles of acclimatization; the choice to leave was made because of better prospects elsewhere. These returns were often nonpermanent, with individuals frequently traveling back and forth. This group, whom I call 'transmigrants', divided their time between multiple destinations with split business and family commitments.

### Odessa as a Place of Return

Some Israelis in Odessa moved to the city to study or work for one of the local Jewish organizations.<sup>17</sup> The returnees, transmigrants and long-term visitors I met were not all originally from Odessa. In some circumstances, returnees were natives of other cities of the FSU, drawn to Odessa by a personal or professional connection. Although the majority of ex-Soviet Jewish returnees chose to move to major cities in Russia and Ukraine due to their level of economic growth, the Russian-speaking Israelis I met chose Odessa for a number of reasons. For some, it was the place they had left and longed to return to, while others were reliant on the support of their local families and friends, and in many cases ownership of property played a major role. In one instance, an elderly couple who sold their apartment with heavy hearts upon their departure bought it back upon their return because it was the place where they wanted to spend the rest of their days. Non-native returnees were often spouses of Odessan locals or on work or academic postings. Yulik, a young entrepreneur I will describe later, was attracted by the city's small-scale yet urban life and the opportunities he saw in the city's tourist and market potential. Even non-natives spoke of Odessa as a place where they felt 'at home' and were touched by the intimacy of the place. 'Zdes' yutno' ('It's cosy here'), one returnee explained. At times, they shared some of the sentiments of native Odessan returnees who spoke of the place as 'radnoye', which roughly translates as 'native', 'homely' and 'dear'. In some cases, returnees said Odessa reminded them of Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities kissed by the sea and sun. The port atmosphere of the place also gave some returnees a sense of being part of the world and connected to their

experience of travel. It was the small, cosy feel of the city as well as its airy openness and grandeur that returnees identified as unique. 'I love the fact that I am able to go see a different opera or theatre performance here, and at the same time I love the market where people talk to me like they know me', one returnee shared. Although pragmatic reasons such as property, kin, social networks and job opportunities most often dictated decisions to return, the decision to move to Odessa, rather than Kiev or Moscow for instance, was also infused with strong sentiments of 'home' and the city's 'homely' traits.

Natives and others described Odessa as a small, family-like place where you felt like you knew everyone and everything was within your reach. This is not to say that these sentiments were strong enough to keep returnees in Odessa or that they were not met with more negative feelings towards the place by some in the process of their prolonged stay, as I later point out. Many did move from Odessa to other locales and some ended up returning to Israel; yet others continuously engage in ongoing travel back and forth. Nonetheless, those 'rooted' returnees, like Nina described below, described their return as a reunion with their beloved city: changed, but nevertheless theirs.

### Narratives of Returnees

Nina and her son Kostya were among the first returnees from Israel I met in the city. They were not acquainted with others who had returned.<sup>18</sup> Leaving Odessa in 1989, Nina had returned in 2000 and her son followed a year later. In our initial conversations, it had already become obvious that Nina's decision to emigrate to Israel had not been driven by any Zionist ideology of living in the Jewish homeland. She did not see her move to Israel as 'going home'. On the contrary, she described leaving Odessa as 'a difficult decision of leaving her native home'. At the same time, she told me, she was comforted by the idea that she was going to a place where no one would call her *zhidovka* ('yid') and, in that sense, to a place where she would be made to feel at home.

Nina reflected on her time in Israel with mixed emotions. She had struggled economically for all the eleven years she spent in Israel as she and her son changed jobs, apartments and cities in order to make ends meet. She also faced other social problems associated with an immigrant's life, including nostalgia and the unfamiliar local climate. At the same time, she spoke of Israel as a 'holy place' where she could feel history, see breathtaking landscape and take in the presence of God. In Israel, she started attending religious services, not at a synagogue but in a Russian Orthodox Church, which she described as being 'culturally close' to her. She recalled meeting a

number of other Jews during services who were *vykresty* (baptized Jews).<sup>19</sup> It was during her years in Israel that she claims to have become closer to Jesus Christ, a relationship she still maintained through regular prayer and conversations with evangelical missionaries who visited her home. Other than occasional visits to the Jewish Club for the Elderly, *Gmilus Hesed*, she did not take part in Jewish activities in the city or identify herself as Jewish through any of the new avenues available to Jews in Odessa. Another returnee, Oleg, had had a similar religious experience in Israel, where he realized the importance of having God in his life through his interaction with the Russian Orthodox Church. When he returned to Odessa, both he and, more recently, his children were baptized.

Though Nina had formed some attachment to Israel, in the end it was not enough to make her stay. She was one of the few returnees I met who, on coming home, opted to change her Israeli passport for a Ukrainian one, which she needed in order to receive a pension and acquire a *propiska* (certificate of residency). Most returnees held on tight to their Israeli passports for travel purposes, and also for the advantages of having an alternative country of residence.<sup>20</sup> 'I came back to a lot that was new', she explained, 'but I still came back home.' When I asked Nina how others in the city responded to her return, she had little to say. 'I don't tell many people about it', she explained, adding, 'I don't want to brag about living abroad'. Referring to a painful incident after her return when one of her neighbours called her a *zhidovka*, she said that ordinary Ukrainians (especially newly arrived migrants to the city) were envious of the opportunities available to Jews. Her son Kostya had never experienced any such negative reactions as a returnee. Rather, he said, 'the people I told about Israel were always curious to know more'.

Kostya was nearly eighteen when he followed his mother to Israel. This was the first time he and his mother had left the Soviet Union. Soon after his arrival, he was admitted to one of Tel Aviv's leading art institutes, which he attended for several months, but eventually left because he needed a job. Despite his efforts, he had never managed to gain a degree or master the Hebrew language fluently enough to use it at a professional level, which had greatly limited his employment opportunities. Nonetheless, he saw his time in Israel in a positive light as being extremely meaningful. His return to Odessa was dictated primarily by his inability to support himself financially in Israel after his mother's departure.

Four years after returning, Kostya still defined Israel as his *rodina* (homeland) and held on to his Israeli passport. The idea of eventually going 'home' (to Israel) was a recurrent theme in his conversation – to the great irritation of his mother each time he voiced such thoughts aloud. His long absence from Odessa meant that he felt little if any connection to the city, the place where he was born and partially raised.

During the year before I met him, Kostya had become more observant of Jewish religious laws, had started wearing a *kippah* and regularly attended the synagogue – none of which had been part of his life in Israel. Once back in Odessa, however, he found that he wanted to live an active Jewish life. While in some cases returnees had become religiously observant during their time in Israel, for Kostya and some others it took returning to Odessa, rather than moving to Israel, to develop a desire and a need to be in an organized Jewish community. Kostya felt a sense of connection within Odessa's religious organizations where he could practise his Hebrew and discuss Israeli life. He also hoped that participation in local Jewish organizations could provide for an opportunity to return to Israel. I was told that Kostya did return to Israel a couple of months after I left Odessa, although without any settled prospects there.

Other young returnees behaved similarly, although with a less religious pattern of affiliation. Marat, a young entrepreneur in his mid thirties, explained that in Israel he did not follow any religious traditions: 'You don't need to do anything in Israel to feel Jewish.' However, when he came back to Odessa, he started visiting the Chabad congregation where his friends go for the major holidays and occasional Shabbats. He illustrated his participation with the religious congregation with an old joke: 'Rabinovich goes to the synagogue to talk to God and I go to talk to Rabinovich.' He had initially immigrated to Israel in the early 1990s when he could not get a visa for the United States. Thus, Israel was not his primary choice for emigration; rather, he explained, it was a way to leave Odessa and its stagnant economic and political situation. He had first returned to the city in 2002 for an experimental year and, having then returned to Israel, he made the decision to move back to Odessa permanently in 2004. He still considered Israel his historical homeland, but felt that the life of an immigrant was difficult to cope with. Back in his native city, he has started a construction company with another Israeli returnee who moved back after fifteen years in Israel. He enjoyed working as a manager and using a pencil and paper rather than the manual labour he had done in Israel. Although he did not imagine himself returning to Israel, other destinations such as Canada or potentially the United States, where his father lived, were not out of the question if Odessa's economic situation became difficult in the future.

### Homemaking and Organized Jewish Life

In relation to Odessa, the media image of returnees actively reviving local Jewish life or even participating in its affairs is a considerable oversimplification. The generational differences in affiliation to Jewish Odessa we saw be-

tween Nina and her son Kostia and Marat were not atypical. Older returnees tried to ease back into their old lives almost unnoticed and usually avoided official affiliation (except for the sake of social benefits such as pensions). Most younger returnees strove to practise Hebrew, took part in Jewish holiday celebrations and often found employment in Jewish organizations, although others chose to remain on the periphery of Jewish activities. The behaviour of middle-aged returnees was largely determined by the nature of their employment and family circumstances. Some, seeking career benefits, used Jewish organizations to network, especially for possible clients; others, seeing no advantages, did not include Jewish gatherings in their busy routines. For families whose children were enrolled in Jewish schools, occasional Jewish activity was the norm, which sometimes led to more extended involvement, while others felt too constrained by lack of time or simply lack of interest.

One of my informants, Dina, who had returned after nine years living in Tel Aviv, said that she could not relate to Jewish life in Odessa as it was 'too religious'.<sup>21</sup> A young woman in her late twenties, she had moved back in late 2006 mainly to live closer to her family who had decided against moving to Israel. Her first encounter with Israel had been on a study abroad programme and, there and then, she had decided to emigrate. At the age of fifteen, she had made *aliyah*, leaving her sister and parents behind in Odessa. Prior to her move, she was an active participant in numerous Jewish programmes in the city. However, during her years in Israel, she drifted away from Jewish practices and her passion for being an active Jew slowly faded. As she saw it: 'When you actually live in Zion you don't need to do anything else to feel Jewish.' Returning to Odessa, she had chosen not to revive her old relations with Odessa's Jewish circles. She looked down on the policy of the Jewish Agency (known in the former Soviet Union as Sokhnut) of, as she put it, 'feeding Jews fairytales' about their 'home'. Equally, nothing about the religious observance of her friends struck a chord with her present Jewish identification. The new outlook she had adopted abroad now made them seem 'narrow and old-fashioned in their understanding of Jewish identity'. As other examples indicate, some returnees feel superior towards those who stayed behind because of their experience abroad (Stefansson 2004: 179).

Even outside the city's Jewish circles, Dina struggled to find her way among old friends. Most of her peers who had stayed in Odessa had graduated from college and found employment. Many of her old girlfriends were also married and starting their own families. By contrast, Dina was single, had 'lost two years to the army' and, despite her sustained efforts to work and study at the same time, had not managed to complete her college education in Israel. In Odessa, where most education is still free of charge, continuing higher education appeared more feasible. Within a month of her return, she

had managed to register for several classes at the Engineering Institute of Odessa, which she attended with great interest. Despite her plans to remain in Odessa, after six years she returned to Israel, where she lives today. In our most recent correspondence, she explained that living in Ukraine, a place she described as a 'foolish country', proved more difficult than she imagined. In the end, she felt that she was, after all, more Israeli than Russian Jewish and therefore she belonged in Israel.

While some returnees intended their remigration to be permanent or at least long term, others did not. This group of transnational migrants, or 'transmigrants' as I call them, define their relationship with Odessa as one of partial belonging and residency. Genady, his wife Luba and their two children came to Odessa in the last two months of my fieldwork, having previously lived in Israel for ten years. They had decided to move to Odessa in order to grow their business of selling *Herbalife* health products, Israeli-made food supplements and skincare goods. They travelled regularly to and from Israel, as well as across Ukraine, in order to satisfy work and family obligations. They missed Israel for its food, music and natural beauty. Genady and Luba retained their Israeli citizenship, with Ukrainian resident visas securing permission to work. Although their primary identification was Israeli – a title they gave themselves and others used to describe them – Odessa, Genady's native city, served as a convenient business base in Ukraine. The fact that Genady's mother lived in Odessa and was available to mind their children made it easier for them to manage. As Genady put it:

It is easy for me to come back to the Ukraine as opposed to moving to Canada, which is where my wife and I originally wanted to go once we decided to expand our business. In Odessa I know everyone that I need for any given situation and I feel free. In Israel, starting your own business is difficult, especially as an immigrant.

Other entrepreneurs I met had had similar experiences of conducting business overseas. Vova, a returnee from Haifa, told me of the difficulties he had faced setting up a business in Israel. 'You can't trust anyone in Israel', he told me. 'I had a business with a Moroccan guy but he tried to cheat me out of all my money.' Describing his motivation in coming to Odessa and his plans for the future, he was clear: 'I am here to make money.' Two months into his stay, he was still following his passion for Israeli food, working hard to open a hummus restaurant in the city. For that reason, he had attended a number of Jewish functions in the city and openly approached the Chabad rabbi to ask him for help in his entrepreneurial efforts. According to Vova, the rabbi knew a good many local businessmen to whom he could possibly turn for funding. Similarly, he approached other Jewish organizations in the city where he hoped to meet other Israelis and potential sponsors for his business idea. Although there are no specific returnee organizations in Odessa, returnees from

Israel take part in Jewish organizations in the city where they are regarded first and foremost as Israelis. In Vova's case, accessing social networks served as a key element of trying to secure his livelihood (Stefansson 2004: 178) and the success of his business. In his particular case, he relied on the larger 'kin group', the local Jewish population, rather than his own family or friends.

Vova was originally from Saint Petersburg, while his wife, Nadya, was a native of Odessa. The deciding factor between the two cities was that in Odessa there was an apartment available for their use. I also sensed from our conversation that Vova's determination not to return to Saint Petersburg sprang from the fact that he had missed out on opportunities that his friends there had made use of during his absence. 'Those people [in Saint Petersburg] were really able to grow and make something of themselves. I have been watching clouds and picking my nose for the last ten years living in Israel.' Furthermore, Nadya, having visited Odessa many times during the time they had lived in Israel, had assured Vova that she would be able to get a job in one of the city's Jewish organizations, where her Hebrew language skills would be in demand, and that he too would find interesting entrepreneurial opportunities in the city. Like the returnees to Sarajevo described by Stefansson, Vova, his wife and other business-oriented returnees were more concerned with solving their livelihood situations than with the questions of their own identity that seemed to preoccupy Kostya and his mother.

Like Nadya, Nina and Marat, many people who consider returning from Israel first make a number of preliminary visits to their potential destination. Yulik, originally from the Ukrainian town of Dnipropetrovs'k and currently living in Israel, was making such an exploratory visit to Odessa when I met him. Like Genady, Vova and Nadya, he was attracted to Ukraine for its business potential, in his case in the field of IT. Originally planning to relocate to Kiev, Yulik was now leaning towards a smaller city such as Dnipropetrovs'k or Odessa, where the IT industry was not nearly as saturated as it was in Ukraine's capital. His family in Ukraine had offered to help him get started if he was able to provide the finance. Unfortunately, when visiting his 'home town', he had found that Dnipropetrovs'k did not feel anything like home. Having spent most of his life in Israel, he felt like a foreigner. He spoke Russian with a Hebrew accent and knew no Ukrainian. His diet, dress and mannerisms were all marked by his experience abroad. Nonetheless, he felt a sense of curiosity in seeing a life that he was both close to and distant from.

### **Homecomings and Other Projects of Return**

The same tone inflected the stories of many other returnees. Those coming back to Odessa described it as a place simultaneously known and unknown.

‘In the course of [their] protracted absence’, their home had almost inevitably undergone significant change, while they too had formed new habits and ways of thinking in the context of different resources and realities. For some, this made living in Odessa interesting, while for others, it was difficult to cope with. ‘[H]omecoming often contains elements of rupture, surprise, and perhaps disillusionment, besides the variety of practical problems that returnees usually confront’ (Stefansson 2004: 4). In *Coming Home*, Long and Oxfeld similarly point out that ‘as the act of returning unfolds, the specific experiences often contrast with the returnee’s original dreams’ (2004: 10). In the same book, George Gmelch describes how Barbadian returnees ‘feel that their own interests are more cosmopolitan and transcend [those of] the local community . . . the place now appears as “narrow”’ (Gmelch 2004: 213).

Returnees approached organized Jewish life in the city from different points of view. Some, like Nadya, looked to Jewish organizations for employment, others, like Vova approached Jewish gatherings as a way to facilitate their entrepreneurial efforts, and others, like Kostya and Marat, had become active participants in Jewish life (albeit for different reasons). The stories of Dina and Nina, even though they were from different generations, exemplify how some chose to remain on the periphery.

The experiences of those returnees active in the Jewish life of the city differed. Neither Genady nor his wife placed any importance on their own or their family’s religious observance, but their children attended one of the city’s Jewish Orthodox schools. Genady explained that Odessa has changed greatly since his departure and that most of the ordinary city schools were now taught in Ukrainian, a language that neither he nor his children ever learned. Deciding on schools upon arrival, they decided on a Jewish school where their children could learn in Russian and still practise their Hebrew. Even so, Genady saw little overlap between the ways he and his wife opted to raise their children as Jewish, and the other, more religious approaches that he found in Odessa on his return. As he explained:

One of the teachers complained to me that my children were not paying attention to her lectures on Jewish traditions. I explained to her that, for Israelis, this is natural. In Israel, most of the Russians are not religious and we don’t mix with them [religious Jews]. It is not a world I want them to be in.

Although his children had grown up in Israel knowing the Jewish calendar as a state-initiated agenda, he did not accept that Judaism had to be a crucial part of their identity, even if he did opt to enrol them in a religious Jewish school.<sup>22</sup>

This research demonstrates that returning to Odessa was complex and entailed much ambivalence. On the one hand, returning from Israel to Odessa often signalled that Odessa ultimately counted as home. On the other hand,

some Ukrainian and other FSU returnees, both Odessans and non-Odessans, moved in order to follow their families or enhance their chances of prosperity without necessarily thinking of themselves as coming home. In general, when I would ask someone when they came back from Israel, many would respond by stating that they had not necessarily 'come back'; in other words, much was yet to be decided. In fact, many returning Jews continued to define themselves as Israelis, both legally and socially.<sup>23</sup> Still other ex-FSU Israelis considered other destinations, such as Canada or the United States.<sup>24</sup> The actual experiences of returnees displayed a mosaic of different orientations, attachments and associations constructed by returnees about their past and present locations and homes.

For older returnees, the decision to move back was typically a response to obstacles in Israel that were not encountered by younger or middle-aged immigrants. Their return was usually envisaged as permanent and experienced as more rooted; it felt like homecoming. Younger returnees still felt strong ties to Israel, where (despite being born in Odessa or the FSU) many had been raised, educated and/or served in the army, and thus felt acculturated to their Israeli way of life. For these returnees, Israel remained a place that partially defined them, even in Odessa. The orientations of middle-aged returnees were also mixed and largely depended on their familial and professional needs. However, in nearly all cases, returnees approached Odessa primarily geared towards 'creating better, more satisfying future lives' and were thus more likely to be engaged in 'feasible projects of homecoming' than those who were 'aiming at resurrecting a golden, but lost past' (Stefansson 2004: 4).

Now back in Odessa, many of my informants expressed their sense of connection with their multiple places of belonging through different modes of 'being Jewish'. For example, Kostya saw religious observance of Jewish laws as a way of maintaining a link between his Israeli past and his present, despite his entirely secular life in Israel. Others, similarly but in less extreme measure, simply opted to take part in Jewish holidays or educate their children in Jewish schools so as to maintain their Hebrew language and Israeli secular culture or simply to connect with friends. For a few disoriented or disenchanting returnees, it was difficult to tell how, if at all, they would bridge their multiple experiences locally.

## Conclusion

The experiences of Israeli Russian-speaking Jewish returnees in Odessa are important to consider in the theoretical analysis of home and diaspora. Their patterns of migration and practices of homebuilding reorient the traditional

model of Jews as a diaspora population connected to Israel as their 'homeland' and a cradle of Jewish identity, and offer more nuanced ways of approaching the question of belonging. Diaspora, a term defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel' and in its more contemporary context the 'dispersion of any people from their traditional homeland', ultimately assumes a link between people and their 'proper place' (Voutira 2006: 380, emphasis in original). Within diaspora studies, Jews have been identified as an 'ideal type' (Safran 1991: 84), a 'classic "old diaspora"' (Levy and Weingrod 2005: 4) whose dispersal from Babylon exemplifies them as a prototypical case of a diaspora population. Recent scholarship has challenged the negative connotation of diaspora as exile by offering a way to view diaspora in a 'positive light' (Tye 2001: 3; Gruen 2002; Wettstein 2002: 2). Some, including Boyarin and Boyarin, have even proposed 'a privileging of Diaspora', a structure of 'dissociation of ethnicities and political hegemonies', which they regard as the 'most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world' (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 723). In the midst of its popularity, the term 'diaspora' has nonetheless been questioned and interrogated for becoming a 'catch-all phrase' that 'presumes that there is a single center of a given community' (Aviv and Shneer 2005: 22) defined by a 'natural bond' that people are said to have with their native home (Voutira 2006: 380). As a critique, many works on diaspora populations have highlighted the notion of multiple homelands that exist for and ultimately define any one group of people (Clifford 1994, 1997; Markowitz and Stefansson 2004; Levy and Weingrod 2005), while other scholarly work has pointed to the fact that people were no longer defined by places and 'identities have become deterritorialized' (Cohen 2008: 2; see also Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). Within Jewish studies, this shift in analysis has challenged the perception of Jews as a 'classic' diaspora model.<sup>25</sup> In many accounts of Jewish life outside of Israel, we can see how the supposed diaspora countries and various cities within those countries are perceived and experienced as homelands, and how Israel is regarded as a place of spiritual, religious and communal importance, but not necessarily a 'home' or a 'homeland'. The importance of the State of Israel and its claim to be *the* Jewish homeland has been questioned by a number of scholars and in some cases politically criticized.<sup>26</sup>

Research on 'Russian' Jews and other minority populations who have faced difficulty adapting within Israeli society or have been reluctant to let go of their cultural capital brought from overseas has also been instrumental in transforming the idea of Israel as a Jewish home.<sup>27</sup> The experiences of Israelis who choose to live outside of Israel exhibits another level of ambivalence between Jews and Israel apparent in the literature on *yerida* (emigration from Israel).<sup>28</sup>

The material in this chapter allows us to move further beyond the traditional assumptions of Jewish loyalties, attachments and orientations, and offers a more nuanced and multifaceted way of understanding the concepts of 'home' and 'diaspora' in today's global environment. On the one hand, returnees who choose to leave Israel and come back to Odessa might be seen as challenging the supposedly fundamental connection between Jews and their ancient homeland, returning to the supposed place of diaspora both as an old place of familiarity and roots and as a new centre of professional activity and personal growth. On the other hand, many of the returnees express strong ties to Israeli culture and define themselves as being Israeli through self-identification as well as citizenship, language, dress, music, food, world-view and even the idea of an eventual return. Many transmigrants continue to travel back to Israel and build their businesses, some utilizing Israeli products and services. Israel is undoubtedly regarded as an important place on the Russian-speaking Jewish map, even for those who choose to leave it behind. It now has the largest Russian-speaking population outside of the FSU and a growing network of economic, social and political links with the global Russian-speaking population.

For many of the returnees, the question of belonging remains tied to the economic and social situation at both home and abroad. The future for most returnees will be dictated to a large extent by the type of personal and professional opportunities that arise, and the economic and sociopolitical situation in the countries where they may settle. Now part of the global post-Soviet Jewish population spread over many continents and countries, the returnees described in this chapter are as much part of the Russian-speaking diaspora as they are part of the Israeli and Jewish diasporas whose 'cultural, [we can even add religious] geographic, and national boundaries are blurred and in flux' (Gershenson and Shneer 2011: 141). The overlapping worlds which define ex-Soviet Jewish returnees and transmigrants through the process of migration and remigration account for multiple understandings of homes, and ultimately transcend the common distinction of 'old' and 'new' diasporas in traditional diaspora discourse. Returnees, in effect, take up a role of being both transnational and Jewish, albeit in different ways.

It is understood that multilocal life and work patterns in the context of globalized and neoliberal economies challenge the empirical reality of home as a single location. This chapter illustrates that attitudes of Odessa's returning Jewish population towards 'homeland' and 'diaspora' were far from fixed. Like the other groups of migrant populations, their identity as a 'diasporic imagined community' is 'constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life' (Brah 1996: 183). Contingent, negotiated and reflecting the socioeconomic and political circumstances of home and abroad, where one

feels 'at home' or 'away from home', was a function of individual experiences. 'After all', as Stefansson points out, 'feelings of belonging do not rest on objective factors but are situated in the subjective realm' (2004: 186). Some emigrants had initially approached Israel as a place of belonging and their 'historical homeland',<sup>29</sup> but, suffering hardships in their new life, began to experience Israel differently, and themselves as living in the Russian-speaking diaspora. On the other hand, returnees coming back to a supposedly familiar place could also gradually come to see their city as more foreign, whether due to being treated as foreigners or through unmet dreams of the place once left behind. Ruth Mandel, writing about Turkish migrants in Germany who return to Turkey on a permanent or temporary basis, highlights that many 'returnees suffer from disorientation', unable to 'merge back into the Turkish mainstream' because they are judged by others, and by themselves, as 'Alamancilar' (i.e. German-like) (Mandel 1990: 160).<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in some instances the notion of 'home' or 'homeland' may be applied to more than one destination or, in the process of disorientation, may even cease to exist. This is particularly true for returnees who, having shared the experience of living as a Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel, on their return possibly viewed themselves, or were viewed by others, as 'Israelis' and in effect part of an Israeli diaspora in Odessa. As Clifford notes, 'at different times in their history, societies may wax and wane in diasporism, depending on changing possibilities – obstacles, openings, antagonisms and connections – in their host countries and transnationally' (Clifford 1997: 249). Thus, 'home' and 'diaspora' were not ideologically driven constants associated with centre (life in Israel) and periphery (life outside of Israel). Rather, they should be conceptualized as variable locations infused with memories and attachments that social actors inhabit and relate to through everyday experiences and life circumstances, which in turn shape their imagined reality and senses of attachment. If home, as Stephan Feuchtwang defined it, is 'a reference to a territory of belonging' (2004: 7), then ex-Soviet Jewish returnees have multiple and interconnecting homes that encompass their 'cultural norms and individual fantasies' (Rapport and Overing 1998: 8) and bring together their diverse experiences as locals, migrants, repatriates and returnees.

It is impossible to write about Ukraine today without acknowledging the political upheaval that took place in the region and its implications for Odessa specifically. I have been to Odessa on a number of short visits since my initial fieldwork, most recently in March 2014, on the brink of the tragic Odessa fire, when I saw some of the returnees and many of my local friends. A few of the people described in this chapter had already left Odessa before the outbreak of the conflict. Vova for instance, moved to China to pursue a new business idea; Genady returned to Israel, as did Dina and Kostya. Those who still remained in Odessa felt deeply affected by the tragic events in their

city. 'I can't believe this is happening in my home town', one woman shared with me. 'The city is already crumbling and these hooligans, without any thought, vandalized and broke everything.' In her view, there were no 'real' Odessans involved in the fighting because no 'real' Odessans would vandalize their city in the way that the protesters and the police did. However, real Odessans (returnees included) were undoubtedly part of the pro- and anti-Russian camps involved in the chaotic attacks (see Richardson (2014) and Dima Khavin's film *Quiet in Odessa* for the accounts of local people). David, a young man in his thirties raised in a Russian-speaking Jewish intelligentsia family, returned to Odessa on a few shorter trips and finally settled in the city. He was a religiously observant man when we first met on one of his initial visits and I was surprised to learn that he had since enrolled in the self-defence league and was heavily involved in local operations. 'I am not a patriot', he told me when we met, 'but if some filth wants to enter my city, I will fight till the end.' He had previously served in the Israeli armed forces and he said he never thought that this training would be used in his everyday life in Odessa. According to him, there were over one hundred ex-Israeli soldiers volunteering with Odessa's self-defence league. In David's case, Odessa was now a home that needed to be 'protected' and 'defended' from an intruder – the Russian army, or 'the little green men' as he called them. Although David was among the minority of the people I knew who took an active part in physically defending his city, some locals and returnees volunteered to help the wounded, the refugees (who arrived in Odessa in great numbers from other affected areas of the country) and families of those who suffered. For some, the battle took place on Facebook and other social media networks, where people voiced their ideas, unfriended friends and formed new alliances. Neutrality was difficult to observe. Among the people I knew, most identified themselves, to one degree or another, as pro-Ukrainian (even if they were still critical of the corruption and politics of their nation) or anti-Putin. As a Russian national and a Russian speaker, I was worried that these tensions could, potentially, create a chasm in my friendships. However, I am happy to report that I did not witness any sort of negativity or aggression towards me, presumably because I supported their political views (although not the violence behind it). We continued to speak to one another in Russian, which was still the language on the streets and in most homes.

The upheaval in Odessa undoubtedly played a role in the way in which my friends now saw their city as part of Ukraine. While David found meaning in staying in Odessa and protecting his native home, other returnees took the opportunity to leave and were able to do so with their foreign passports. Ukraine's declining economy and political unrest have also stirred a new wave of emigration to Israel and a number of my Jewish friends have since applied for Israeli citizenship as a way to secure another option, another

home. However, in their case, no one actually moved to Israel or spent a significant amount of time outside of the necessary length of stay required for receiving the Israeli ‘papers’.

It is obvious that the local political and economic situation will continue to influence the way in which returnees and Odessan locals make decisions about their future. The recent appointment of Mikheil Saakashvili, some locals believe, may aid Odessa’s economic and political recovery in a major way. While others await changes, returnees have the privilege of having an alternate passport, a status other local Jews (especially the younger generation) are drifting towards without diving straight into migration. Today, when ex-Soviet Jews in Odessa and elsewhere can judge the outcome of their migration or return based on the stories, pictures and anecdotes of others, knowing that Israel is always an option, they feel less pressure to make a choice between their home and their ‘homeland’.

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#### NOTES

1. I use the word ‘returnee’ or ‘returnees’ as a descriptor rather than a literal category of people as some of the returns I describe are not permanent, as the label ‘returnee’ suggests.
2. Data for this chapter were collected during fieldwork in Odessa, Ukraine in 2005–7 and include in-depth interviews and participant observation with short-term and long-term returnees engaged in both provisional and permanent returns, as well as ‘transmigrants’ who regularly move between Odessa and Israel and other destinations. Thirty-two returnees were interviewed for this research. For the most part, I met returnees through other Jewish locals in the city who knew of my interest in return migration. I also met returnees in more organized settings of the local Jewish cultural centre Migdal, the two Orthodox Synagogues, the Jewish Agency (Sokhnut), Beitar Camp, the Medical Institute, the Israeli Cultural Center and communal Shabbats organized by religious families in the city. While I draw mainly on the experiences of returning migrants in Odessa in my analysis, I have also included interviews with returnees I met in Kiev. The overall goal of my research was to analyse change and continuity in the Jewish ways of life in contemporary Odessa where continuous residents (‘stay back’) and return migrants engage in many different pro-

cesses of identity formation and community building, negotiating Jewish traditions, values, practices and orientations from a number of competing cultural models of Jewish life.

3. See, among others, Rosenthal and Auerbach 1992; Goldscheider 1996; Cohen and Haberfeld 1997; Cohen 1999; Gold 2004.
4. Osipovich 2004; see also Finkel 2004: 329.
5. Osipovich 2004. I am not aware of a similar report produced in Ukraine.
6. According to Israeli authorities, the term 'out-migrants refers to Israelis who have left Israel and who have stayed abroad for a year or more (Tolts 2009: 9).
7. Retrieved 8 April 2018 from <http://www.newsru.co.il/info/bigpoll/yerida2007.html>. A smaller survey of over 100 Russian Israelis (currently residing in Israel as well as abroad) conducted by Evgenyi Finkel on *LiveJournal* indicated that 20 per cent of his respondents have left Israel – 27 per cent returned to their countries of origin; 24 per cent left for the United States; 14 per cent for Canada; 23 per cent for Europe and 7 per cent for Australia. Another 25 per cent of Finkel's respondents who have not left Israel have entertained the idea of leaving Israel (Finkel 2004: 327).
8. Personal notes from the conference 'Russian-Speaking Jewry in the Global Perspective: Power, Politics and Community' Bar Ilan University, Israel, 17–19 October. See also Finkel 2004: 324–28.
9. Tolts 2009: 15.
10. Gold 2004: 445.
11. See, for example, article titles such as 'Return of the Jews: For Decades the Story of Russia's Jews Has Been One of Fear and Flight to Israel. Now Many are Coming Home' (*Newsweek International*, 9 August 2004) and 'Once Desperate to Leave, Now Jews are Returning to Russia, Land of Opportunity' (*The Times*, 28 April 2005).
12. *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, 26 August 2004.
13. *Los Angeles Times*, 3 February 2005.
14. Perhaps this stereotype is linked to the diaspora discourse discussed by Aviv and Shneer, which 'envision[s] the Jewish world hierarchically with Israel on top: "the diaspora" on the bottom' (2005: 19–20).
15. Belensky and Skolnik document that 92 per cent of ex-Soviet Jews in Germany have travelled back to their home towns, compared with 9 per cent in the United States and 19 per cent in Israel. They provide no data on permanent returns from Germany to the FSU. See Belensky and Skolnik 1998: 37.
16. A number of younger returnees I met had initially moved to Israel on their own initiative, often following their involvement with the Jewish Agency (Sokhnut), Betar or other Zionist organizations in the city. In many cases they had taken part in a three-year study abroad program, Na'ale, which invited Jewish youth to experience life in Israel with the ultimate goal of *aliyah* (see Fran Markowitz, 'Cultural Change, Border Crossings and Identity Shopping: Jewish Teenagers from the CIS Access their Future in Israel', in Noah Lewin-Epstein, Paul Ritterband and Yaacov Ro'i, eds., *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Resettlement* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997), pp. 344–363.)
17. Odessa was home to a number of Russian-speaking Israelis who had come to the city to study medicine and other professions. A small number of returnees are affiliated with one of the two Orthodox movements in the city and the local branch of Sokhnut (the Jewish Agency, an Israeli organization that operates in the FSU to educate Jews about Israel and assist them in making *aliyah*). These individuals and families

- usually stay in the city for a limited duration defined by their contract or the length of their course.
18. Returning Israeli Odessans did not form any sort of an organized network or community as they did in Moscow or in Kiev. However, Israeli students in Odessa's Medical Institute (including some former FSU residents) did organize events with each other on a regular basis.
  19. For more on Russian-speaking Jews who have converted to Christianity or are attracted to Christian faith, see Deutch Kornblatt (2003); Gitelman, Glants and Marshall (2003: 201–2); Nosenko-Stein (2010).
  20. Citizens of Ukraine need a visa for most destinations outside the FSU, which can be time-consuming and costly. Israeli citizenship facilitates less-restricted travel and an easier visa application process.
  21. Chabad and a group affiliated with Ohr Sameach, organizations that encourage Jews to be more religious, are highly visible in the city.
  22. When I recently enquired about Genady's and Vova's families, I was told by our friends in common that Genady has recently gone back to Israel and that Vova and his family now live in China, where they are following a new business idea.
  23. All of the returnees I met, except Nina, who had reverted to a Ukrainian passport, could easily have opted to go back to Israel on their retained citizenship and legal documents.
  24. In the survey published by <http://www.newsru.co.il> (<http://www.newsru.co.il/info/bigpoll/yerida2007.html>), 43.9 per cent of the respondents said that if they left Israel, they would like to live in Canada; 39.7 per cent said the United States; 25.1 per cent said Australia; 13.3 per cent said the United Kingdom; 12.2 per cent said Russia; 10.4 per cent said Germany; and only 5.8 per cent said Ukraine.
  25. See, among others, Silberstein 2000; Tye 2001; Wettstein 2002; Aviv and Shneer 2005; Levy and Weingrod 2005.
  26. See, among others, Boyarin and Boyarin 1993; Aviv and Shneer 2005.
  27. Specifically for the Russian case, see Siegel 1998; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007.
  28. *Yerida* is translated from Hebrew as descent and is a term referring to the 'stigmatized path of Israelis who descend from the promise land into the Diaspora' (Gold 2004: 445). Emigrants from Israel are thus referred to as *yordim*.
  29. For a number of returnees, the notion of Israel as a homeland was absorbed into settings of Jewish and Zionist education and through the teachings of Sokhnut.
  30. Referring to the same material in a later book, Mandel describes 'a subtle reversal in the reference' of 'homeland' and 'host land', where, in the case of her informants, 'homeland [Turkey] assumes the status of a foreign, vacation destination', whereas Germany is considered their natal land (Mandel 2008: 18).

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