Facing East

Rotem Rozental looks at the work of artists Zoya Cherkassky, Yevgeniy Fiks, Katia Grokhovsky, and Jenny Yurshansky, raising questions about the existence of a Soviet-Jewish narrative and offering new insights into the culture that has shaped daily life in the Soviet Union, the Soviet-Jewish narrative, and the possibility of the existence of such a narrative.

Essay / Rotem Rozental December 2, 2021

Zoya Cherkassky leads a group of visitors through the Fort Gansevoort gallery, located on the outer limits of Hollywood, amongst large portraits and framed works on paper of various sizes that together create a complex mosaic of life in Soviet Russia before the ear-splitting collapse of the Iron Curtain. This is probably the last artist-led visit at the gallery before the coronavirus sent Los Angeles into lockdown in March 2020. For now, the group gives its full attention to Cherkassky and the walls, abundant with familiar visual attributes: *faux*-Adidas sweatsuits, wallpapers busy with colors and prints, fur hats, fluffy coats adorned with stripes, slippers, pots bubbling on the stove, lace head coverings on the hair of street vendors, women's track suits in neon colors. But these attributes go beyond what we are telling ourselves, what those looking in from outside tell themselves. Diving into them is inevitable and, intriguingly, not quite possible: the smells and sounds are absent, the sense that we have been there is missing. Cherkassky talks about the shopping center, the bus's route through the neighborhood, the women who had spent time in the kitchens slicing beets for borscht, the women athletes who had spent most of their time training, the playground outside the tall residential building, the anarchists, her fascination with Western Punk, daily routines in the living rooms, the seam lines between childhood memories and her intimate knowledge of the culture that defined her and the stories she was told. She immigrated to Israel at age 15, moments after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We move along with the painted figures between interior and exterior, between mundane experiences and intimate moments, between shopping and an afternoon by the river and a 1980s disco party. The paintings in "Soviet Childhood" create constant motion between a wide range of realities, between endless opportunities and the recognition and organization of the day-to-day. Above all, the paintings create a chance to define an identity that is complex and contradictory, exceeding the stereotypes cast upon it when it was severed from the time and place that had created it – when that same time and place had collapsed were obliged to start over.

Zoya Cherkassky, At The Yard, 2018, watercolor on paper, 31x47 cm.jpg



[1]Zoya Cherkassky, At the Yard, 2018, from the series Soviet Childhood, watercolor on paper, 31X47 cm
Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and the Rosenfeld gallery Tel Aviv

Even though Cherkassky notes that members of her generation identify themselves in the works, this is hardly documentation. Her motive is unlike that of the documentarist. If anything, it might be an exhumation. It is tempting to see her as the poster child of her generation, of artists who have left the Soviet Union during the 1990s, as teenagers, just after having experienced the most drastic change in their ways of living following Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the end of the Cold War, and spending a rather painful adolescence in Israel or the West, trying to arrest or erase the memories that had organized their early lives. But I seek to highlight a broader characteristic. Alex Moshkin has noted that nostalgia as strategy in the works of post-Soviet poets and visual artists in Israel, the Gen-1.5, indicates their sense of suffering, rejection, and the endless humiliation they have been forced to undergo[1]. I believe Moshkin has correctly identified the political and activist power of nostalgia as a tool for resistance. To that I would like to add a point of view that looks beyond Israel and see whether the return to content and aesthetics that had made up the Soviet world for these artists also points to an attempt to reclaim a Jewish identity. As opposed to the ways in which nostalgia for the Soviet past functions in Russia today, where it emerges as a commercial and aesthetic tool that marks a path back to a national identity, in the case of artists like Zoya Cherkassky, this return is also a return to a sphere that simultaneously rejects the individual and marks the unattainable possibility of collective belonging.[2]

Cherkassky, one of the most well-known and active painters in Israel, spent a lot of time in recent years collecting these moments into an impressively extensive body of work. The exhibition in Los Angeles continues the one presented in the New York branch of the gallery. The project originated from an artist book by the same title, *Soviet Childhood*, which complemented her solo show at Rosenfeld Gallery in 2018. The book includes approximately 100 paintings, and it had began to take

shape when Cherkassky was pregnant with her daughter in 2013. "Expecting a first child took me back to my past," she said then.3 Perhaps the driving force behind the early works has been the attempt to capture memories that would outline how she would teach the world to her child. In the book and at the gallery, the paintings project the emotional mechanisms of memory, expectation, the return to what had been and is no more. Cherkassky has experienced then what she calls a mixture "between the new and the Western and the good old Soviet," an extraordinary momentary connection brought about by *perestroika* and the permitted exposure to the West.4

Zoya Cherkassky, Near the Metro, 2016, oil on linen, 120x200 cm .jpg
[2]



[3]Zoya Cherkassky, Near the Metro, 2018, from the series Soviet Childhood, oil on canvas, 102X200 cm
Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and the Rosenfeld gallery, Tel Aviv

The immigration from Russia in the 1990s added about one million residents to Israel, about 12% of the population.5 Cherkassky touched upon the complexities of acclimatization in her early works. In "Pravda," her 2018 solo exhibition at the Israel Museum, she dealt directly with the collective experience of this vast emigration. The moment of disembarking from the airplane, life in the projects, the assessments of adherence to *kashrut* practices. Partial memories began to rise here, which went on to flood her work in "Soviet Childhood." "Pravda" included an earlier work, considered one of her most provocative: *Itzik*, from 2012, in which an alarmed falafel-stand worker attempts to push away the stand's owner – a large man with dark skin and hair, attired in flip-flops and a much-

too-tight sleeveless shirt exposing a large belly topped with a thick-linked gold chain. Cherkassky was playing on a stereotype within a stereotype, the way Israeli society foregrounds its rejected ones, presenting a ludicrous figure of a *Mizrahi* man facing a skinny blonde woman, whom he would forever perceive as available, attainable and within reach, since she is a "Russian" woman.

With the directness typical of her narratives, Cherkassky echoes again and again the rejection of the Russian immigrants in Israeli society, which grouped them all under the heading "Russians." The exclusion from the central discourse in Israel paradoxically enabled a connection to the excluded identity of life in the Soviet Union – the Jewish one. The Jewish identity has been taken from the new Immigrants twice: first by the Soviet regime and then by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, which doubted and refused to acknowledge the Jewishness of many immigrants. The experience of this dual rejection is prevalent in Cherkassky’s earlier exhibitions and in recent series of drawings created during the lockdown. These were displayed in an online exhibition organized by the Fort Gansevoort Gallery through April and May of 2020. It provided a peek into life in the shtetl, powered by a language of images, by the spirit of the moment, drawn from the symbolism of Passover.

Zoya Cherkassky, Itzik, 2012, oil on canvas, 150x200 cm.jpg **[4]**



[5]
Zoya Cherkassky, Itzik, 2018, from the series Pravda, oil on canvas, 150X200 cm
Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and the Rosenfeld gallery Tel Aviv

Far away from Israel, Yevgeniy Fiks also anchors his work in examining the Jewish-Soviet experience and looking anew at the culture that has shaped daily life in the Soviet Union. Fiks, born in 1972, arrived in 1994 in New York, where he lives today. In his installations and performances, he investigates the web of connections between the Soviet Union and the West, and, specifically the Jewish-soviet narrative and the possibility of its existence. For instance, in 2011, he organized an artist tour of New York's Lower East Side, titled "the Red *Kaddish*," offering participants a view of the neighborhood through the eyes of Emma Goldman, a Jewish-American anarchist active in the first half of the 20th century. Fiks led the participants on a walk among buildings with historical significance to radical Jewish political activism, at each site texts by Goldman and other anarchists such as Pyotr Kropotkin and Abraham Kahn.[6] He commented on the choice of title: "This project is a Kaddish (*Jewish prayer*) for the unrealized dream of a better world, universal social justice, and a common seeking of happiness."[7] In that same year, he created the collaborative project *Portrait of 19 Million*, during which he issued an open call, asking people to send him portraits of Communist Party members at the beginning of *perestroika*, when their total number was 19 million. Any attempt to assemble 19 million portraits would inevitably offer infinite viewpoints on an identity that cannot be homogenous, even if it aspires to be just that. The project was presented at the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, and some of the portraits are available for view on the blog created following the call.

This was not his first solo exhibition in Moscow. In 2008 he presented the exhibition "Yiddish Cosmos" – a futuristic and imagined meeting point between three seemingly unrelated narratives: the Eastern-European Jew, the study of the cosmos, and the Soviet space program. As he brought together historical figures and fictional plot moves, Fix identified flashes of Yiddish culture in the space program and inclinations for space exploration amongst icons of Yiddish culture.8 In Moscow, Fiks and curator Maria Veits focused on the struggle of Soviet Jewry for emigration by creating a time axis that shows in parallel milestones of the soviet space program and Jewish emigration in the years 1948-1991. "The audience in Moscow doesn't know or remember much about Yiddish or Jewish culture," he writes, "and perhaps only people 45 years old and older will recognize the name Sholom Aleichem. Moreover, Jewish identity is almost non-existent in the sphere of contemporary Russian art […]."9

Yevgeniy Fiks, Red Kaddish, 2011.jpg **[6]**



[7]Yevgeniy Fiks, Red Kaddish, 2011
Courtesy of Yevgeniy Fiks

Yevgeniy Fiks ,Himl un Erd (Yiddish Cosmos), 2018.jpg **[8]**



[9]Yevgeniy Fiks, Himl un Erd (Yiddish Cosmos), 2018
Courtesy of Yevgeniy Fiks

Yevgeniy Fiks, Portrait of 19 Million, 2011.jpg **[10]**



[11]Yevgeniy Fiks, Portrait of 19 Million, 2011
Courtesy of Yevgeniy Fiks

It seems that the very distance between current-day Russia and the former Soviet Union provides more and more contemporary Jewish artists with the opportunity to contend with historical narratives of expulsion and immigration and allow some space for a complex identity experience based on constant movement and digging deeper into personal family stories. For example, Katya Grokhovsky, Founder of the Immigrant Artists Biennial, has documented her grandmother, a veteran of World War II and a Holocaust survivor, for two years. Grokhovsky documented her during family visits to Melbourne, Australia, where they have been residing since leaving Ukraine in 1992. Her grandmother survived the inferno by working for the Soviet army as a cook and a singer in Russia and the Ukraine. The recordings have become *The Future Is Bright*, which includes an installation referring to the family's house, a dual-channel video of a performance, and documentation of her and her grandmother talking, preparing meals, and singing the songs the grandmother used to sing to wounded soldiers when she was 16. According to Grokhovsky, this was the first time family folklore filled up with details, allowing her to deconstruct, layer after layer, her family history. Addressing the past, particularly the massacre in which her grandmother's parents were killed, has changed the way she understands her existence and her regard for history and heritage.[10]

1.The Future is Bright detail.jpg **[12]**



[13]
Katya Grokhovsky, The Future is Bright, 2019
Photography: Walter Wlodarczyk
Courtesy of Katya Grokhovsky

2.The Future is Bright.jpg **[14]**



[15]
Katya Grokhovsky, The Future is Bright, 2019
Photography: Walter Wlodarczyk
Courtesy of Katya Grokhovsky

3.The Future is Bright video still.jpg **[16]**



[17]
Katya Grokhovsky, The Future is Bright, 2019. Still from a video
Photography: Walter Wlodarczyk
Courtesy of Katya Grokhovsky

Dealing with the place that has rejected Jewish existence and identity is evident in the work of other artists whose families have left the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Jenny Yurshansky was born stateless in Rome while her parents escaped as refugees from Moldova to the United States. Yurshansky, who lives in Los Angeles, looks at the place that had rejected her and her family and examines what has been left behind. In the project *Legacy of Loss*, she took her mother back to Moldova for the first time since leaving. An unexpected encounter, deep in the forest, with the tombstone of her mother's grandfather resulted in an installation they had created together: they embroidered pieces of muslin, which had residue from rubbings they made in the forest when they returned to the tombstone.11 During my work with Jenny as a curator, we reflected on these unforeseen relics, found in a place unfamiliar to her and that must be forgotten for her mother. This year she made a series of needlepoint works that take apart propaganda mechanisms and study how narratives of oppression blend into folklore. The world of images she relies on comes mostly from textbooks and embroidery samples from Soviet Union Moldova. For her family, who were not recognized as Moldovan because of their Jewish origins, it would have been culturally taboo to wear these patterns. Yurshansky claims them in this way and reveals the difficulties embedded in them and the culture that preserves them.12

Yurshansky_Jenny_07.jpg **[18]**



[19]Jenny Yurshansky, The Border Will Not Hold (Family Separation), 2020, organza silk, pearl cotton embroidery thread, polyester, ink, willow wood
Courtesy of Jenny Yurshansky

Yurshansky_Jenny_02.jpg **[20]**



[21]Jenny Yurshansky, A Legacy of Loss (Shroud), 2019, muslin, pearl cotton embroidery thread, wax for rubbing tombstones, steel, enamel, 106.68X76.20X356 cm
Courtesy of Jenny Yurshansky

Artists such as Fiks, Grokhovsky, or Yurshansky try to express the possibility of the Jewish identity, which is deeply tied or bound to the post-Soviet culture. Moreover, this possibility also holds a radical potential of an autonomous demand for liberation. In a move that may seem detached from the way secular culture in Israel views its Jewishness, both Chekassky and Fix deconstruct the potential of Jewish identity (going back to the rejected *shtetl* and the lost Yiddish culture, or to the memories of being rebuffed by the religious authorities) to discover an empowering space for liberation. In Cherkassky's case, the return to the Jewish culture may be a way to push back against Israeli culture. For Fiks, it is a way to compose a future in which parallel axes of identity that exist in impossible tension meet each other.

- 1. Alex Moshkin, “Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Israel? Historical Revisionism and Artists of the 1.5 Generation,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 49 (3), 2019: 179-199.
- 2. For further reading on nostalgy for the Soviet past in Russia see: Ekatrina Kalinina, “Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia,” Dissertation, Södertörns högskola (Elanders: Stockholm, 2014).
- 3. “’Soviet Childhood | Children’s Paintings’ – two new solo exhibition for Zoya Checkaski,” Archjob, ibid.
- 4. *ibid*.
- 5. Shlomit Lan, “Thirty years passed since the great wave of immigration from Russia: how Israel has changed unrecognizably,” *Globes magazine*, January 24, 2020. (In Hebrew) https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001315925 [22]
- 6. See further: http://www.thelodownny.com/leslog/2011/05/red-kaddish-walking-tour-the-russian-revolution-on-the-les.html [23]
- 7. *Ibid*.
- 8. The project has been shown in Israel as part of the exhibition “Off to Space: Counternarrating the Cosmos,” curated by Maria Weitz, at the Israeli Center for Digital art, Holon
- 9. Fiks, “Yiddish Cosmos,” *Ibid*.
- 10. Katya Grokhovsky, ”The Future Is Bright,” *Asylum Arts*, February 4, 2019.
- 11. See further: http://www.jennyyurshansky.com/Jenny_Yurshansky/A_Legacy_of_Loss_Shroud.html [24]
- 12. The thought about immigration and its consequences translate in more ways in Yurshansky’s work. In the last decade she has been investigating immigrant plants, labeled as “invasive” in California and added to a “blacklist.” Yurshansky catalogues these plants and makes up narratives for them. This year, following a lockdown that prevented us from opening her planned solo exhibition at the American Jewish University, we posted on the program’s web site the audioguide *Blacklisted: A Planted Allegory*, which brings together narratives of plants she has found on campus. The guide also contains stories created by participants in a workshop she has led as a part of the project. Listen here: https://arts.aju.edu/exhibitions/current/jenny-yurshansky [25]/

Source URL: https://tohumagazine.com/article/facing-east

Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Zoya%20Cherkassky%2C%20At%20The%20Yard%2C%202018%2C%20watercolor%20on%20paper%2C%2031x47%20cm_0.jpg
[2] https://tohumagazine.com/file/zoya-cherkassky-near-metro-2016-oil-linen-120x200-cm-jpg
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Zoya%20Cherkassky%2C%20Near%20the%20Metro

%2C%202016%2C%20oil%20on%20linen%2C%20120x200%20cm%20.jpg
[4] https://tohumagazine.com/file/zoya-cherkassky-itzik-2012-oil-canvas-150x200-cmjpg
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Zoya%20Cherkassky%2C%20Itzik%2C%202012%2C%20oil%20on%20canvas%2C%20150x200%20cm.jpg
[6] https://tohumagazine.com/file/yevgeniy-fiks-red-kaddish-2011jpg
[7] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Yevgeniy%20Fiks%2C%20Red%20Kaddish%2C%202011.jpg
[8] https://tohumagazine.com/file/yevgeniy-fiks-himl-un-erd-yiddish-cosmos-2018jpg
[9] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Yevgeniy%20Fiks%20%2CHiml%20un%20Erd%20%28Yiddish%20Cosmos%29%2C%202018.jpg
[10] https://tohumagazine.com/file/yevgeniy-fiks-portrait-19-million-2011jpg
[11] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Yevgeniy%20Fiks%2C%20Portrait%20of%2019%20Million%2C%202011.jpg
[12] https://tohumagazine.com/file/1the-future-bright-detailjpg
[13] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/1.The%20Future%20is%20Bright%20detail.jpg
[14] https://tohumagazine.com/file/2the-future-brightjpg
[15] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/2.The%20Future%20is%20Bright.jpg
[16] https://tohumagazine.com/file/3the-future-bright-video-stilljpg
[17]
https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/3.The%20Future%20is%20Bright%20video%20still.jpg
[18] https://tohumagazine.com/file/yurshanskyjenny07jpg
[19] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Yurshansky_Jenny_07.jpg
[20] https://tohumagazine.com/file/yurshanskyjenny02jpg-0
[21] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Yurshansky_Jenny_02_0.jpg
[22] https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001315925
[23] http://www.thelodownny.com/leslog/2011/05/red-kaddish-walking-tour-the-russian-revolution-on-the-les.html
[24] http://www.jennyyurshansky.com/Jenny_Yurshansky/A_Legacy_of_Loss_Shroud.html
[25] https://arts.aju.edu/exhibitions/current/jenny-yurshansky