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**Russian-Jewish Immigration
and the Life Experiences of
Dr. Marina Balina: A Photo Essay**

Lauren Henry

Introduction

It is easy for many American-born citizens to forget that many people struggle to achieve the same status that they have by birthright. It is also easy to take for granted the fact that Americans have many freedoms and opportunities that people are deprived of in many other places all over the world. Being born in the United States myself, I am no exception to this. After hearing from Dr. Marina Balina about her life and journey to becoming a citizen, I have a new level of respect for immigrants like Dr. Balina and an appreciation for the circumstances that I have been privileged to grow up in.

Dr. Balina came to America from Russia with her family over twenty-five years ago, but before coming over here, she faced a great deal of discrimination. This was not only because she was born into a Jewish family, but also because she was half-German and grew up bilingual. She has overcome many things to end up who she is and where she is today—a very well-respected member of the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University and a citizen of the United States of America. Her story of immigration is comprised of many important aspects, including her background and life growing up in Russia, the motivations which finally pushed her and her family to leave, and the complex sense of identity she has as a result of her situation.

Assumptions and Early Hypothesis

My personal knowledge of Dr. Balina's immigration story was quite limited, though I did know a few pieces of her history from what she had mentioned in a class I took with her in the spring semester of 2012. What little I knew I found to be very intriguing, which led me to inquire into her story further for this project. I know very little about Russian immigration to the United States and even less about the emigration of Jews to America during the Soviet era (1917-1991). From what I did know, I was able to assume that many Jewish people left Russia to escape discrimination during this time, and though many went to Israel, a number came west to the United States. Almost everything else I knew previous to my interviews with Dr. Balina was learned through contemporary scholarly articles.

Many articles regarding the immigration of Russian Jews focus on those who chose to relocate to Israel, which was typical and often encouraged according to the article "Freedom of Choice: Israeli Efforts to Prevent Soviet Jewish Émigrés to resettle in the United States". Several sources that I read, including "Soviet Emigration Under Gorbachev" and "East Meets West: A cross-generational analysis of Jewish immigration from Russia to the United States," discussed the distinct periods of Russian Jewish emigration to the United States throughout history. The former

article focuses on the era most relevant to Dr. Balina's immigration story: the Gorbachev era. It was beginning in 1987 that the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* were introduced and consequently the strict Soviet emigration requirements were lessened, which caused a great increase in Jewish immigration to the United States and Israel, among other places. The latter article discusses the period of Jewish emigration from Russia to America from 1988 to 1993 as the fourth and last major exodus of this group to the United States. This article looks at the adjustment issues and patterns that existed in this period compared to those of Russian Jews who immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century, particularly regarding their sense of Jewish identity and religion.

This overlaps with the content of another article, "Russian-Jewish immigrants in the U.S: Social portrait, challenges, and AJC involvement," which is located on the American Jewish Community's website. This source discusses the relationship that many Russian immigrants had to Judaism due to their understanding of their religious identity as Jews to be more of a cultural heritage than a faith tradition that they practiced. "The Dynamic Nature of Being Jewish: Identity centrality and the acculturation of Russian Jews in the United States" is an article that illustrates this same issue in addition to the fact that these immigrants often used their Jewish identity to decrease the stratification between their Russian and American

identities. Many in the "last wave" of Russian-Jewish immigrants chose to actively practice Judaism as a religion once coming to the United States because, as the "East Meets West" article describes, "the majority of this group was forcibly removed from any type of religion or observance beginning at a young age. Many of them especially those in the older generation, try to "discover" religion for themselves," (Katz 104).

The scholarly sources that were found in my research all illustrate important points about Russian-Jewish immigration during the Soviet era. Some were studied prior to interviewing Dr. Balina as preliminary research, and others that were slightly more relevant were discovered after. In both cases, the sources presented information that was vital to understanding and appreciating the journey of the immigrants in this group.

Ethnographic Methods

In gathering information for this photo essay, interviews were my primary source of material along with methods of visual anthropology. In my interview conducted with Dr. Balina on February 18, 2013, she spent approximately an hour and a half retelling the story of her background, life in Russia, and journey to becoming an American citizen. This was the primary interview, though she elaborated on certain aspects of her story on February 23 and February 28, which were the times when we took the photographs seen in this essay. While

discussing growing up in Russia, Dr. Balina utilized her family photograph album (Figure 1). This method of visual anthropology stimulated conversation and encouraged the recollection of stories that might have otherwise been untold.

Dr. Balina also provided more information about herself and her story through some of the things she wished to show in the pictures taken for this essay. Taking the pictures and choosing their content was a collaborative effort, as was the rest of this project. Dr. Balina was able to review this telling of her story and make corrections or adjustments in how she wished her story to be told.

Presentation of Data

Dr. Marina Balina's story begins with the situation of her family's background. For the most part, she came from a family of intellectuals, though many members of her father's family were craftsmen. Her father's father was the youngest and "weakest" (though he was far from that) of his eleven or so siblings, so he was the one in whom the family decided to invest an education. At this time, the family lived in a *shtetl* in Lithuania. Dr. Balina's grandfather got a Jewish education, making it all the way to the higher levels, both *heder* and *yeshiva*, but he eventually became an accountant. He was drafted into the army towards the end of WWI, during which time his entire family fled to America because of the *pogroms* (violent mob attacks against Jews), and they lost contact with him until after WWII. He joined the Red Army and

ended up in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, where he married and had three sons. He was not a communist, and



Figure 1. Dr. Balina tells stories of her life in Russia using her family photo album. It contains many photos from her childhood, including family members, her father's summer house, and some more recent pictures she has taken since revisiting her homeland.

he had to spend his life hiding his political beliefs and his Jewish identity.

A very different story is that of Dr. Balina's mother, who was from a very wealthy family from Southern Germany. Every member of that family had a career in the medical profession and had earned a Ph.D., if not two. They were a Jewish family, though they were quite liberal and much assimilated into the German culture, practicing their religion very little. They were liberals (social-democrats) who had a strong fascination for socialist Russia, and Dr. Balina's

grandfather, who had a Ph.D. in both engineering and medicine, was invited in 1922 by the Russian Ministry of Health to come inspect mineral spring resorts that had been destroyed during the Russian Civil War. He brought his wife and two children and later decided to stay in Russia, though he went back to Germany to also bring his younger siblings. The Nazi movement was already present in Southern Germany at this time, and they were fortunate to leave before it gained even more power in the country.

Dr. Balina's mother was born in Leningrad in 1928, though her father was constantly absent due to the fact that he was a personal physician to high-ranking Russian officials. He was accused of being a German spy and was arrested in 1937 at the very beginning of Stalin's Great Terror. He was then sent to a *gulag*, and remained there until 1953—one year after Dr. Balina's birth. By this time, his wife was dead and his two older children were killed during WWII since they both volunteered to fight at the front. He raised Dr. Balina until the age of

thirteen, during which time he taught her to speak German and was a close companion.

Dr. Balina's bilingualism was not always viewed upon favorably, particularly during her childhood. She rarely spoke in German because she was often teased because of it, but she eventually started school with an advanced language program and was able to speak German freely. It was then, at age seven, that she decided to be a teacher. Dr. Balina always had a love of languages and literature, but it was difficult to pursue further education after she graduated, however, due to the fact that there were governmental anti-Semitic policies that resulted in restrictions in place for the number of Jews that were able to attend universities. Dr. Balina was fortunately able to go to a Pedagogical University where she learned the methodology of teaching and was also sent by the university to study abroad in East Germany for a period of time. By the



Figure 2. Dr. Balina is the author of nine books on the topic of children's literature in Russia, which is her area of specialty. These are five of her published works in a display at Buck Memorial Library at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Figure 3. Here Dr. Balina holds a figure of Baba Yaga, a witch from Russian fairy tales. This character is often seen as individualistic and though she has an ugly appearance, she is not evil-spirited. Baba Yaga is Dr. Balina's favorite character and often found her to be relatable.

time she graduated from the university, she was already married and therefore did not go directly into the workforce as many other graduates did. Her son was born in 1976, and she eventually started work part-time as a lecturer and then full-time teaching German and Russian as a Second Language at the State Polytechnic University. It took quite a while for Dr. Balina to earn a Ph.D. because at this time one had to be sent by the university to work towards a doctorate, and she faced some discrimination in this area for being Jewish as well. She was eventually sent to a Ph.D. program, and in three years she earned her Ph.D. When Mikhail Gorbachev started becoming a prominent political figure, Dr. Balina and her associates believed that things were going to get better in Russia for a change. He introduced the idea of *glasnost*, or openness, regarding the Soviet government, but everything he did ended up being “one step forward and two steps back”, according to Dr. Balina. It was at this time that many of her Jewish friends began talking about immigrating, and when she and some fellow Jewish intellectuals joined to work towards reforming the Soviet-restricted education, she received an invitation to leave the country. She was informed that her application to leave for Israel had been accepted when she had never even applied in the first place. Dr. Balina and her family decided it was time to leave Russia for a number of reasons. After they made this decision, they were stripped of



Figure 4. *This potato masher, which had belonged to Dr. Balina's grandmother, is one of the few items that made it through security to be brought to the United States. It was a humorous moment for her when the Soviet security guards, who were searching through every piece of luggage and destroying or confiscating many people's belongings, came across this item and could not determine what it was used for. They spent a great deal of time trying to pull it apart and examined it through an x-ray machine, while Dr. Balina had a good laugh at their expense during this dark time in her journey.*

their citizenship and she, her husband, and her son all lived separate from each other because they did not have any official papers so in case of emergency (robbery or any other form of insult or crime) they were not eligible for any form of state protection. They left the country on June 5, 1988, which also coincidentally was the last day of President Reagan's visit to Russia. There was a great deal of discrimination and harsh treatment of Jewish people by Soviet airport security, including luggage searches that completely destroyed their belongings and confiscation of anything over a certain value. Dr. Balina herself was subjected to a degrading strip search that remains today one of her darkest moments. Of all of her belongings at this time, she is currently in possession of only very few of these things, including a wooden potato masher that belonged to her grandmother (Figure 4) and her



Figure 5. *This wedding ring, which belonged to both Dr. Balina's mother and grandmother before her, was nearly lost to her in the process of coming to America. It was considered to be too valuable to be taken with her and would have been confiscated if she had not thrown it to a friend who was seeing her off. She was able to meet up with her friend later and reclaim the ring, and it is now one of her very few original possessions from her life in Russia.*

wedding ring (Figure 5). Dr. Balina did not have any family in Israel, so her family aimed to immigrate to America, where she had an uncle already in Boston. After a number of delays and the feeling that they would never be able to leave Russia, Dr. Balina and her family made it to refugee camps in Austria and Italy before coming to Boston with the help of her uncle.

They remained in Boston for a year before she was hired by Illinois Wesleyan University, and now she has been at IWU for twenty-four years. In this time she has become a well-respected



Figure 6. *Dr. Balina has been presented with a number of awards, including the Isaac Funk Endowed Professorship and membership in the International Studies honor society. The medals pictured here are for these honors. She also received the Excellency in Teaching award several years ago. These distinctions are very meaningful to Dr. Balina and show her great dedication to her profession.*

professor of Russian language and literature. She also teaches courses within the International Studies program that she has directed for the past three years. For her scholarship, teaching, and university service, she was awarded the Isaac Funk Professorship in 2007, which is a great honor. In 2008 she also received an Excellency in Teaching award.

The discrimination that Jewish people faced in Russia was not the only motivation that Dr. Balina and her family had for emigrating. They were in a good place economically, but the greatest push for her leaving was for the sake of her son. If they stayed in Russia, he

would grow up facing the same things that she had to deal with her entire life, such as the stigma of being seen as a second class citizen because of their nationality. Her son would also be required to go into the army due to the fact that the draft was mandatory in Russia at this time. She and her son both feel very strong against any forms of involvement with guns, so the armed service would not have been an option for her son. If he would have resisted the draft, he could have gone to jail. Dr. Balina spoke of her motivations being “ideology, political pressure, inability to live to your own standards, and the constant pressure to conform to something you don’t believe in.” Because of her child, she was determined not to let this pattern repeat for his life as well.

One year after their arrival in America, Dr. Balina and her family were able to get their green cards. Five years after living in this country, they gained their citizenship in the Springfield, Illinois courthouse after

Figure 7. *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy is Dr. Balina's favorite novel. She read it first in Russian at age twelve, though she did not understand it so well then. She teaches it occasionally, but even when she does not, she makes sure to read it each year for pleasure. It has something that has been a constant throughout her life, both in Russia and in the United States. Here she is holding the English translation, but she also owns copies in both German and Russian.



passing the citizenship exam. Once arriving here, they began actively practicing Judaism and became members of a synagogue, though Dr. Balina claims her personal Judaism to be more spiritual than religious.

A few years ago, Dr. Balina and her family were offered to reinstate their Russian citizenship that had been denied to them before they left, but they turned it down. Dr. Balina feels that she is no longer a part of that country. Emotionally, she greatly enjoys the feeling of being an American much more than the feeling of being a Russian. She still speaks the language at home, and when she reads for pleasure she chooses to read in Russian or German. English is only the “language of work,” as she calls it. Though she has the influences of both America and Russia in her life, Dr. Balina says that she does not have dual loyalties to these two countries. She does feel, however, that she has a dual identity because of this.

Though many people who have immigrated to the United States are part of a community of fellow immigrants, Dr. Balina is part of no such group. She says that there is a larger population of Russian Jewish

immigrants in Boston, which was where she and her family first came to in America. She came to Bloomington and Illinois Wesleyan University only a year after she arrived in Boston. There are some Russian immigrants in this area, but none with whom she is directly connected. She is a member of a synagogue here in Bloomington and is a member of the Jewish community, however.



Figure 8. *One of the things Dr. Balina misses most about Russia is having the ability to visit her mother's gravesite. Each time she visits Russia, she always makes a trip to pay her respects.*

Dr. Balina spoke of how it can be good to live outside of the Russian community due to the fact that they tend to hold on to some rather intolerant and perhaps sexist viewpoints that are a result of Russia's masculine culture and lack of equal acceptance for all people. Continuing to be part of this community in America does not always bring out the best in people, so Dr. Balina is satisfied living outside of it and having different opinions than many other Russian immigrants.

Data Analysis

It is typical in many immigration stories for the process of becoming a citizen there to be the most challenging part of the whole process. However, in Dr. Balina's case, there were very few issues once she arrived in America, and it was the leaving part that was a great challenge. Her family's background and the discrimination she had to face growing up during a very tumultuous time in Russia's history impacted both the life she led and her eventual decision to leave.

Once arriving in the United States, her experiences seemed to be somewhat typical of Russian-Jewish immigrants during this era, according to the literature on the subject. Dr. Balina, along with the majority of the other Russian-Jewish immigrants in the study for "The Dynamic Nature of Being Jewish" article, feels that her Jewishness is more her ethnicity than

anything, and it is something that has been defined in her documents her entire life. According to the study featured in this article, “70% of Russian Jewish immigrant respondents report that being Jewish means belonging to the Jewish people, whereas only 7% reported that believing in the religion is an important part of the Jewish identity,” (Rosner, Gardner & Hong 1343). This is a point that Dr. Balina heavily emphasized, and clearly this issue is viewed similarly for many others as well.

Another interesting aspect that was in concordance with the preliminary research was her relationship with Judaism. Dr. Balina was defined as Jewish her whole life, but it was only when she came to America that she chose to begin practicing it as her religion. The quote featured earlier from the “East Meets West” article by Katz and Katz regarding this issue explains the eagerness of immigrants such as Dr. Balina to learn more about this religion and adopt some of its traditions. Of the sources that I gathered, there were none that directly opposed any of the aspects of Dr. Balina’s experiences. She is not an entirely typical Russian-Jewish immigrant, but the literature that was found relating to this topic strongly resonated with what Dr. Balina told of her story.

Conclusions

Learning about Dr. Balina’s journey has been an enlightening project for me. It has been valuable to hear a story of immigration that is quite

different from the ones typically heard in America, which are often regarding situations a little closer to home. Hearing about the experiences of Jewish people during the Soviet era in Russia has greatly heightened my awareness of the benefits of being American, and I take my freedoms much less for granted after hearing Dr. Balina’s first-hand account of the oppression that exists elsewhere. I did not have a bias coming into the project as an ethnographer, but my research was affected by my notion that the most interesting and important parts of this immigration story would be the ones that took place after coming to the United States. In this situation, however, the aspects that deserve the most attention and thought are the motivations for emigrating and the situation in Russia before Dr. Balina and other Russian Jews decided to leave.

Something that might be worthy of further research is the motivations for other Russian-Jewish immigrants during this time, because though one would assume that they would be similar to Dr. Balina’s, there could have been other factors that did not come out in this research. It is a very interesting topic to study, and my knowledge of Russian-Jewish immigration has increased tremendously through this project. I would like to thank Dr. Balina sincerely for sharing her story and bringing light to the issues presented in this essay.

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