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**Introducing New Jewish Immigrants:
Natasha and Other Stories by David Bezmozgis**

Brygida Gasztold

David Bezmozgis's debut collection of seven stories entitled *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004) describes the immigrant experience of a Jewish-Latvian family of Bermans who leave the Soviet Union of the 1980s on the wave of the glasnost policy introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev. Bezmozgis's semi-biographical narrative starts in Toronto, where the family struggle to build a new life against the odds of the unfamiliar surrounding, and follows the young narrator's path to adulthood. As the narrator is an adolescent boy, his story is also a coming-of-age tale, which is even more complicated because of his immigrant status. Bezmozgis's collection of loosely, in terms of time and space, connected episodes is linked by the voice of the narrator-protagonist whose experiences explore the topics significant both to immigrant and specifically Jewish themes. Thus, the narrative examines the anxieties of assimilation and investigates the concepts of memory, identity, and religion. The aim of this paper is to look at "Natasha and Other Stories" against the background of early twentieth century Jewish immigrant narratives in order to highlight similarities and differences between these two literary accounts. Through the dialogue with the past, my comparative analysis hopes to show the changes in the choice and presentation of the problems, which have withstood the passage of time and those, which have recently gained importance for contemporary authors of Jewish origin.

Although Bezmozgis's stories were written more than a century after the first immigrant accounts of such authors as Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska or Abraham Cahan had appeared, they concern issues which escaped the passage of time and are still relevant to the contemporary audience. Among these, the problems with the mastering of the English language seem to be of foremost importance as it is the first piece of information, which the author chooses to divulge. Like his friends and relatives, the Bermans, who come from Latvia with no knowledge of the English language, struggle hard to learn the rudiments of the English grammar. Parents take "obligatory classes in English" (3) at George Brown City College, whereas the children are sent to school: "near the end of the school year but only three weeks after our arrival in Toronto, I was enrolled in Charles H. Best elementary" (3). The evenings are also devoted to practice: "we assembled and compiled our linguistic bounty" (3). The less clever neighbors, the Nahumovskys, who "were alone, they were older, they were stupefied by the demands of language" (4) also take part in the evening practice.

Mark's mother is the brightest student and the rest of the company "came to rely on her detailed notes and her understanding of the curriculum" (4). Her progress is so good that only after a month's study can she act as the neighbor's interpreter and accompany them to collect their dog from the quarantine. Her diligence mirrors the quality of the second wave of the Jewish immigration to the United States who "flocked to the night schools and avidly studied English: no immigrant group made more use of the English language night schools than did Russian Jews in America" (Holli, 25).

When the repetitions of the lessons result in little comprehension and the somewhat advanced-in-age students become frustrated "my father put on the kettle, Rita painted my mother's nails, and Misha told Soviet *anekdotih*" (4). For immigrants, who want to do well, learning a new language is a priority as well as the cause of frustration, especially for the older generations. Yet, "the ability to communicate in English sets [them] out on a journey to explore America" (Gasztold, 70): it opens doors to a better living, helps to socialize, to get a professional education, a better-paid job and, finally, to establish themselves in a new homeland. It also means that they are no longer confined to the borders of the ethnic ghetto. Predictive immigrant parents realize that in the future their inability to understand English may be an obstacle in the relationship with their own children; a linguistic gap will only deepen the generation gap.

Another common marker of early immigrant years are financial problems, which seem to define immigrant existence regardless of the moment in time: "Our life was tough, we had it hard" (4), admits the narrator echoing the words of earlier newcomers such as the Smolinsky family: "we were wearing out our brains for only a bite in the mouth" (Yezierska, 6). Since the Bermans bring no capital to invest: "We had arrived in Canada with almost nothing, a few hundred dollars, but that had all but disappeared on furniture" (16), they have to rely on individual skills. Not being able to speak English, they find it hard to get a decent job. What is offered to them does not usually require communicative skills or any other skills at all, and is badly paid. Dusa, "a top professional [dentist] in Moscow" (47), who has not passed her Canadian tests yet, works as a cleaning lady for a Canadian dentist who also allows her to use his office to treat Russian immigrants without a valid dental insurance. Mark's father has to take a job, which is much beneath his qualifications: "a long day at a chocolate factory" (21) does not exactly specify what he does but it implies a boring and repetitive routine of an assembly line worker. As it is not enough to support his family, he "also worked at the Italian Community Center, where he massaged mobsters and manufacturers and trained seven amateur weightlifters" (21). That is why "for more than a year [he] tortured himself with medical texts and dictionaries" (21) in order to get a license and start his own business. When the massage business faces the danger of bankruptcy "father began to despair of ever being able to get out of the factory" (24). In the meantime, "[t]he Nahumovskys and my parents each took in less than five hundred dollars a month. . . . There were no savings" (16) and there is constant worry about money. They buy stools on the merit of being "cheap" (4), ordering a \$10-15 taxi is regarded an extravagance, and the Nahumovskys are devastated when their beloved dog's life is valued at \$1500 in medical bills.

Even the father-son relationship in the Bermans family is tainted by the father's employment problems: "as he was usually working or agonizing about not working" (25). Father's opinion about Mark's Hebrew education depends on the economic situation of the family: once "the subsidy is revoked" (69), as the Bermans move to a semi-detached house and are no longer legible for financial support, he is reluctant to pay a steep school fee: "[Mark] knows the language. He can read all the prayers. If he wants to leave maybe we should let him leave already?" (69). When Mark gets into trouble with one of his classmates, all his father worries is money: "What do you think happens if you get expelled? . . . We already paid for the entire year" (71). Even later,

when they settle down, their life is short of extravagant. When Sergei comes to visit from Latvia and is overwhelmed by the abundance of goods in shopping malls and supermarkets: "don't forget, you wake up in the morning, you get into your car, you go to a store, you can buy anything you want" (54), mother does not curb his enthusiasm. But she and Mark know well that "the only way [they] could afford fifty-dollar shirts was if Sergei paid for them" (54). Despite all the hardships, the Bermans are very ambitious and they never consider "reapplying for welfare. . . . It had taken [them] two years to get on [their] feet and my parents were not prepared to face the implications of regression" (24). They humbly struggle with everyday hardships not showing to the outside world what detrimental effects this effort has on their family.

Even though the Bermans' economic problems are not so drastic as presented, for example, in Anzia Yezierska's or Michael Gold's stories—"When the Smolinsky family emigrate to the U.S., they are on the verge of starvation" (Gasztold, 106), nor is there a real danger of food shortage, they still suffer exclusion. Since they no longer live in an ethnic ghetto where the poor living standards were shared by all neighbors, they measure their own standing against that of the Canadian society. A visit to Dr. Komblum, the second generation of the Holocaust survivors who managed to educate their children and attain a middle class status, is the signpost for the Bermans' social progress. The decision to emigrate means that they have to start a new life beneath what they already had in Latvia: in order to nostrify his diploma the father needs to re-sit the tests he had already taken, as if his Russian education was doubtful. A failure to do so would result in his ever getting blue collar jobs, just like the Nahumovskys, with no prospects of promotion. Therefore, the more ambitious, stronger and educated immigrants struggle with initial hardships, if not for their own then for their children's sake. A relative economic stability gives them confidence, which, in turn, reaffirms their decision to emigrate.

Immigrant parents try to cope with the complexities of the English language, a capitalist job market and also keep the family together, which involves a change of perspective to one, which would accommodate the demands of the new culture. Children, who are less burdened by the past, manage to assimilate easier and faster: Mark admits that "[t]here wasn't much [he] remembered from Riga—isolated episodes, little more than vignettes, mental artifacts" (45). That is why immigrant children often become their parents' guides and interpreters in the new world, which is common both in early and contemporary immigrant stories. Father "was approaching fifty, and the English language was more an enemy than an instrument" (21), whereas, Mark "sought every opportunity to apply [his] new knowledge" (9), which came from school, television, and the playground. No wonder that he soon becomes the spokesperson for his family: when the family gather around the table to compose an advertisement for father's practice it is the boy who is "given the pen and assigned the responsibility of translating and transcribing [his] parents' concept for the flier" (26).

Anzia Yezierska in *Bread Givers* (1925) describes how all the sisters had to find jobs to support the family, as their father was a Talmud scholar who devoted all his time to reading the holy books. Even though Mary Antin's protagonist from *The Promised Land* (1912) enjoys the educational opportunities which America offers, her social ascent is possible at the expense of her elder sister, who has to go to work in

order to help family finances. The economic value of children's work, especially for the newcomers, is no doubt important to the survival of the family and those young people realize its necessity. If they ever dream of a different life, like Mary Antin does: "Mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future" (Antin, XI, 250) or Sara Smolinsky: "I want to learn something. I want to do something. I want some day to make myself for a person and come among people" (Yeziarska, 66), they have to do it at their own expense, which means both work and school.

David Bezmozgis shows a protagonist who is lucky enough to be sent to school rather than to work, but whose childhood is similarly disturbed. In his stories, the oppression of hard, physical work is substituted with an emotional burden, which divests his adolescent protagonist of carefree happiness of childhood. The fact that the traditional family roles, according to which parents take care of children, are no longer viable is illustrated by Mark's involvement in all the domestic problems: "It seemed as though my parents had no secrets. I was nine, and there were many things I did not tell them, but there was nothing they would not openly discuss in front of me, often soliciting my opinion" (24). Although Mark is just a child, his parents treat him as equal and rely especially on his ability to speak English in order to communicate with the outside world: "They were strangers in the country, and they recognized that the place was less strange to me, even though I was only a boy" (24). By putting this responsibility on his young shoulders, they rob him of his childhood. Instead of worrying about how to pay the rent, Mark should be able to enjoy a blithe life of a child. With a withdrawn mother and a father "[w]ith no English, no money, no job, and only a murky conception of what the future held" (5), whether he wants it or not, the boy must assume adult roles and cope with the consequences.

The clash between old and new immigrants is a frequent topic for immigrant narratives, which explores the differences in social position, labor relations, the attitude towards Judaism, marriage and manners. Michael Gold in *Jews Without Money* (1930) and Abraham Cahan in *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) present Jewish *nouveau riches* who take advantage of inexperienced greenhorns. Sidney L. Nyburg in *The Chosen People* (1917) presents a conflict between unabashed idealism of a young Reformed rabbi and the establishment represented by a wealthy Baltimore congregation; by proxy, between older immigration of affluent German Jews and new Eastern European arrivals, between American capitalist garment manufacturers of Jewish origin and the working classes. "The antagonisms boiling within Baltimore Jewry—between the comfortable mansions of Eutaw Place and the East Baltimore ghetto—troubled Nyburg far more than gentile policies of anti-Jewish social exclusion" (Sarna, 6).

David Bezmozgis also describes a meeting between old and new immigrants, which is initiated by the promise of help. Dr. Kornblum invites the Bermans and another family to a Sabbath dinner out of curiosity, which has little to do with genuine compassion. Roman Berman, Mark's father, is a former Olympic weight-lifting coach who, after the perestroika, "made a living as a masseur in the sanatoriums along the Baltic coast" (21). In Canada, he decides to obtain an official license, which would enable him to secure a better job than the one he is doing in the chocolate bar factory. He manages to pass the exam, rents and furnishes an office and the only thing he lacks are clients. His older clients from the Italian Community Center give up his services,

not wanting to be troubled by the distant location; "inconvenience superseded loyalty, and my father found himself staring at the walls" (24). A telephone from a rich and influential Dr. Kornblum, who happens to come across one of the fliers, is a promise of change father had been waiting for: "If Dr. Kornblum referred even a small fraction of his patients, [Bermans's] troubles would be over" (29).

The invitation to the Kornblums's Sabbath dinner reveals the disparity, which exists between old and new Jewish immigrants. The Kornblums are Polish Jews who after the WW II emigrated to Canada, where they worked their way up the social ladder. Harvey Kornblum, the second generation, is a successful doctor who enjoys a life of privilege: a big, detached house with three washrooms, "the sweater [with] a little green alligator emblem on it" (31), and children who own an assortment of toys. Although he boasts about being "involved with trying to help the Russian Jews" (33), his economic security and a stable social position make him insensitive to the fate of newcomers. Together with their rich friends, the Kornblums invite new immigrants in order to listen to their horrifying tales of the Soviet persecution of the Jews: there were "other three people at the table, the people who were not smiling like Kornblum, Rhonda, and their friends. . . . Like us, they were overdressed" (32). Thus, the guests regale the hosts with their stories engaging in a sort of competition, in which one tries to outbid the other with the dramatic details: "Midway through the story, the part where they had been evicted from their apartment and have to share a room with three other families, Genady lifted up his shirt to show everyone the place where he had been stabbed by former coworkers" (33). The stories of Jewish suffering and the Soviet anti-Semitism become a commodity, which is traded for a nice dinner or a promise of help, for lack of anything else the poor immigrants might possess. It is the descriptions of Jewish misery and deprivation, which make people like the Kornblums interested in new immigrants, however, their callousness and lack of real empathy reveals how shallow the attention really is. A sense of individual dignity is lost in this spectacle of drama for sale. From the safety of their affluent Canadian life, the Kornblums can sample a taste of real-life suffering. This simulation of reality adds a thrill of excitement to their, otherwise, undisturbed existence. In a pervasive way, such stories remind them of the Jewish history of persecution, however, without the imminent threat that it may actually happen to them. Needless to say, none of their promises to help Roman Berman launch his business were ever kept.

Apart from similarities, there are also many differences between past and contemporary experiences of Jewish immigration to an American continent. The fundamental distinction is the choice that the Jews have: the turn-of-the-century immigrants escaped religious persecution and pogroms in Russia envisaging America as their Promised Land. Even though alternative immigrant routes such as England or France existed, at that time there was no other place that would welcome about 2.5 million Eastern European Jews.¹ The 1980s Jewish immigration from the Soviet Russia posed a crucial question about the immigrants' destination. In 1948 the State of Israel was established, providing the Jews with an officially recognized homeland and, thus, putting an end to their forced disper-

1 Nancy L. Green in "Immigrant Jews in Paris, London and New York: A Comparative approach" discusses other migration destinations than the United States.

sion. Bezmozgis highlights the complexity of the concept of the Jewish homeland by presenting a family who chooses Canada over, a seemingly intuitive choice of, Israel: "We were bound for somewhere else. Where exactly we didn't know—Australia, America, Canada—but someplace that was not Israel" (67). A choice of new home is largely conditioned by age, with the older generation, such as Mark's grandfather who was a "lifelong Zionist" (67), deciding to move to Israel. There, he will have "a roof over his head," (67) "he will never have to hear dirty Jew and, instead, he will hear dirty Russian" (68), and "he would have no trouble identifying the enemy" (67). The younger generation, such as Mark's parents, choose ethnically diversified democracies such as Canada. The issue that divides the two generations and makes family members go separate ways is Palestine: "150 million angry Arabs" (67). Thus, the 1980's immigration from the Soviet Russia reveals the need to redefine the notion of Jewishness, which is no longer bound to the historical Biblical location but, instead, is conditioned by the contemporary economic, social and political factors. What Bezmozgis' stories suggest is that being a Jew in a modern world involves an individual conviction rather than becoming a resident of Israel. Even when the Israeli agents try to induce a feeling of guilt: "Why were [you] separating the family? Why were [you] rejecting our Israeli visas? Why were we so ungrateful to the State of Israel, which had, after all, provided [you] with the means to escape the Soviet Union?" (67), especially the younger generations reject Israel due to its politics, even though they are likely to hear both a dirty Jew and a dirty Russian elsewhere.

Once the early 20th century Jewish immigrants reach America, the Old World is gone and they rarely come back to visit. In the case of Mary Antin, the severing of the ties is referred to as a "spiritual re-birth as an American citizen" (Gasztold, 66). The world of the *shtetl*, which they left behind, disappeared as political changes and wars altered political maps shifting the borders and dislocating masses of people. For immigrant Jews, the past existed in form of nostalgic memories, often linked to a carefree happiness of childhood, which gave them a moment of respite during everyday hardships. The gloomy recollections of the Old World's injustice and persecutions also served as antonyms of the American promise, which was embodied by a peaceful existence and infinite opportunities for everyone. The 1980's Jewish immigration from the Soviet Republics was unique because the country they left soon ceased to exist due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, they had nowhere to go back to even if they did not like the new home. It turns out, however, that the old world comes to visit them. The international weightlifting championships in Toronto are the occasion for Mr. Berman to meet old friends and be filled in "on the Dynamo gossip" (54), especially that he is invited to serve on the panel of judges. For Mark's father it is an occasion to "wear his old IWF blazer and be something other than a struggling massage therapist and schlepper of chocolate bars" (39). His former colleagues, who come as members of the Soviet delegation, are flabbergasted by the material opulence of the Canadian society where even the "beggars on the street [wear] Levi's jeans and Adidas running shoes" (60), and where "you can buy what you want. [As] in Riga people now line up just for the permission to line up" (5). This reaction is similar to David Levinsky's first glimpse of the New York streets: "The poorest-looking man wore a hat (instead of a cap), a stiff collar and a necktie, and the poorest woman wore a hat or a bonnet" (Cahan, 63). It appears that the initial impression of America has not changed

at all drawing attention to material manifestations of social affluence. One of the biggest allures to past and present immigrants is still connected with the financial gains.

Roman Berman's Soviet friends approve of his decision to emigrate: "Roman, you did the right thing. You got the hell out of that cemetery. Now you can look forward to a real life" (59). Even a short meeting with a deceptively friendly KGB agent is a gruesome reminder of the Soviet reality: "Don't ever forget," says father, "This is why we left. So you never have to know people like him" (52). At a farewell dinner, however, Roman Berman challenges his friends' embellished vision of immigration stressing that "[e]very day is a struggle" (60). While admitting that he "often think[s] of going back" (60), his gaze focuses on his wife and alludes to her depression; the price the family pays for the decision to leave Riga. Mr. Berman's low-spirited view is that of the insider who reaches beyond the material allure since he knows what toll it takes on the human psyche. With a constant threat of bankruptcy and a wife who is for months "stricken with paralyzing anxiety and a lethargy that made it impossible for her to undertake even the most basic household tasks" (40) Mr. Berman has little appreciation towards the Canadian Promised Land and, instead, wonders about its costs.

To Mark, the old world comes back in the person of his new cousin Natasha, whose mother is a mail-order bride from Russia. Zina and Natasha's arrival brings life in a new Russia into focus: one parent family, alcoholism, poverty, promiscuity, pornography, and uninhibited sexuality, which is seen as the only means for a woman to get by in life. With a nonexistent parental care and guidance, lacking in education and religious instruction, Natasha learns to make use of what she has available—her youthful body. Her world is devoid of moral dilemmas and ethical ruminations; what is left is sheer physicality. That is why her mother says that "[t]he life in Russia was like a disease to children. Natasha is a very sick girl" (103). Natasha's perverted stories become Mark's "connection to a larger darker world" (97), which is far away from the secure and cozy reality of his own life. He is drawn to the forbidden—the lost innocence which the girl epitomizes. As much as her instrumental treatment of sexuality appeals to an adolescent boy and helps him awaken his own sexuality, what Mark learns is that sex may be perfunctory. Such approach, however, will not help him form a meaningful relationship in his adult life, just like Zina has repeatedly failed at it. Both new Russian women stand out, in terms of manners, beliefs, and outer appearance, from the commonly approved social standards recognized by the Jewish-Canadian family. They symbolize the corrupt and immoral world of the Soviet Russia—the danger that the Berman's family escaped by emigrating.

Comparing early twentieth century immigrant narratives and Bezmozgis's stories one notices a new topic, which relates to the modern history—the Holocaust. The incident, which happens during the school's celebration of the week of Holocaust Remembrance, helps to awaken the protagonist's awareness of his Jewish identity. The readers are informed about the detailed preparations, which include exhibiting photographs, documents and personal belongings of the Holocaust survivors. When Mark engages in a fight with his school adversary during a solemn moment of remembrance, which is led by the principal Rabbi, the boy does not fully understand the gravity of the situation. The desecration of the Holocaust commemoration results in Mark's disturbing conversation with the Rabbi who breaks the boy's pride and hardness by making him shout out loud that he is a Jew. The use of force: "when Gurvich gripped me I

understood that mine was a boy's shoulder and that his was a man's hand" (76-77) makes this incident especially significant for it illuminates the complicated relationship between the Holocaust survivors and the subsequent generations of Jews. Rabbi Gurvich is a son of the Holocaust survivor and, as the Hebrew school principal, he puts a lot of effort in preserving the memory of the Holocaust among his pupils:

Holocaust day was different [from other school celebrations]. Preparations were made days in advance. The long basement hallway, from the gymnasium to the pool, was converted into a Holocaust museum. . . . There were photocopies of Jewish passports, there were archival photos of Jews in cattle cars, starving Jews in ghettos, naked Ukrainian Jews waiting at the edge of the open trench, Jews with their hands on barbed wire waiting to be liberated, ovens, schematic drawings of the gas chambers, pictures of empty cans of Zyklon B (72).

A detailed description of the school exhibition and the accompanying events shows how much effort is put in its organization and, consequently, how important it is to pass this memory on to the next generations. This need is especially vital for the Holocaust survivors who decide to share their stories with others: "Gurvitch's father . . . had, that year, published his memoirs" (72). Not without a dose of sarcasm does Mark remark that the pupils "were all encouraged to buy the book" (72) and when they do "the old man . . . smiled benignly as he inked each copy with the double imperative: Yizkor; al tishkach! Remember; don't forget!" (73).

The first and second generation of the Holocaust survivors stand in contrast to the Jewish youth represented by Mark. As the first do everything to commemorate and preserve the memory of the Nazi extermination of the Jews, the younger generation seems more distanced from the past and mentally detached from the tragedy of the Shoah, hence, the school's didactic mission. When Mark engages in a boy's fight in a place that is permeated by the tragedy and horror his own people suffered, he reveals how little it really means to him. But the violence, by means of which Gurvich tries to make the boy understand the importance of the situation, mirrors somewhat equally brutal and ruthless ways in which the Jews were treated by the Nazis. Narrated by an adolescent protagonist, this episode refers to an important phase of his life in which his Jewish and Canadian identities are being forged. This incident poses a question whether the preservation of the Holocaust memory justifies the use of force, and, whether this tragic memory should be forcefully imposed on the generations to come, for fear of being lost in the din of the contemporary world.

Bezmozgis's stories present a contemporary representation of the concept of Jewishness, which is no longer attributed to the Lower East Side context. The Jews of the ghetto shared outer manifestations of Jewishness: traditional clothes, wigs and side locks, a kosher kitchen, employment in garment industry, a synagogue and religious ceremonies, the Yiddish language and culture. These attributes were not only well discernible but also provided a social bond, which was so important for the newcomers. When the Bermans come to Toronto, they are ready to pay extra twenty dollars in rent to live in an apartment house "one respectable block away from the Russian swarm" (3). They do not have to change their names to more English sounding as Roman, Bella and Mark are good enough for English ears. There is no need for them to change their wardrobe since the clothes they bring are similar to those the Canadians wear. Neither do they rush to have their photos taken since little has changed about their ap-

pearance. Bella Berman does not keep a kosher kitchen and they do not know Hebrew, only Mark is sent to a Hebrew school. The Bermans do not attend the synagogue and the only time Mr. Berman goes to see the rabbi is because he hopes to find a remedy to his financial problems, not to seek a religious guidance. Russian Jewish students are thought not to be observant since they do not respect the school's dietary laws and "arrive at school with smoked Hungarian salami, Polish bologna, roast turkey. Our mothers [Mark explains] couldn't comprehend why anyone would choose to eat peanuts in a country that didn't know what it meant to have a shortage of smoked meat" (70).

Mark's family is not Orthodox and that is why the boy has a problem with admitting to the fact that he is a Jew. There is actually little apparent, which may connect him to his ancestral heritage and that is why he expresses his doubts: "I was supposed to have a Jewish soul" (74). It is the Holocaust incident during which his sense of Jewishness is forcefully demanded of him since the boy is not offered a time and place to figure it out himself. Bezmozgi's narrative assigns little significance to outer manifestations of Jewishness and promotes the concept of memory as crucial to a Jewish identity. What the Holocaust Remembrance Day teaches Mark is that the most important is to remember, to bear witness for those who had been murdered and gassed. Mark learns that being a Jew means taking responsibility for the education of the next generations of Jews about the Holocaust so that the truth is never forgotten. Bezmozgis's narrative asserts that a contemporary definition of Jewishness cannot exclude the Shoah, whose legacy has become a vital part of the Jewish identity.

The last story in the collection entitled "Minyan" highlights the importance of Judaism in the contemporary world, yet its realization is different from the earlier ones. Early twentieth century immigrant stories, such as Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, promote the concept of total and successful assimilation, or present its costs, like in the case of *The Rise of David Levinsky*. In both kinds of narratives, though, there is no place for Judaism, which is seen as hindrance to the protagonist's smooth assimilation. Instead of pursuing Judaism, the immigrants concentrate on their material status, the possibility of getting education and improving their social standing. The rabbis are often mocked, as for example in Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*, and the relevance of religion is belittled in an American context, so as not to discourage the main stream audience.

Although there is little reference to Judaism in Bezmozgis's stories, the last one draws attention to its relevance in contemporary world. "Minyan" refers to a quorum of ten male, Jewish adults required for certain religious ceremonies. When the problem arises to gather the exact number of Jewish men in a B'nai Brith subsidized building for retired Jews, as "[s]ome were sick, some were atheists and more than half of the residents were women" (132), Zalman—the synagogue's *gabbai*, must consider a difficult choice to include one who is rumored to be homosexual. His final decision is based on the synagogue attendance: "Homosexuals, murderers, liars, and thieves—I take them all. Without them we would never have a minyan" (147). The minyan, which is a symbolic representation of the contemporary society, is inclusive rather than exclusive, promoting heterogeneity and diversity, even if it requires a redefinition of one's moral standpoint. It is no longer a standardized, especially in early immigrant narratives, image of the Jewish ghetto but a culturally and religiously varied community where Jews have found their place, the Orthodox and Reform alike. Thus, the con-

cept of the modern world is connected to a version of Judaism, which overlooks human faults in the name of humanness; Zalman needs ten Jewish men, not "ten Jewish saints" (147). Bezmozgis's protagonist must also accommodate the concept of Judaism, which appears at the nexus of his coming-of-age story. In other words, as an adolescent boy on the verge of adulthood he must decide whether to retain his Jewishness or accept Canadian prescriptive and normative imperatives, which will make him blend into a multicultural crowd. The fact that Mark volunteers to participate in the religious ceremonies asserts his awareness of its validity in the lives of, not only the aged, Jews. By placing the "Minyan" story at the end of the collection, the author endorses its importance in shaping and maintaining the protagonist's identity.

Although in 1977 Irving Howe stated that because Jewish American literature "draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of sources, a thinning-out of materials and memories" (16), Bezmozgis's collection and other new authors such as Laura Vapnyar and Gary Shteyngard refute this claim. By means of autobiographical genre Bezmozgis tells urban, immigrant stories, which provide a glimpse into a life of the contemporary Jewish Diaspora. As long as poverty, racial issues and anti-Semitism are no longer significant characteristics of this experience, the stories signal emotional costs as most damaging. "Natasha and Other Stories" describes a subtle family drama in which the decision to immigrate entails mother's depression, father's constant worry for the stability of his family, and the son's emotional alienation from his parents. Amidst the damage, Bezmozgis's protagonists continue their daily struggle to survive, in which they manage to retain human dignity. Even though none of them will ever become a paragon of immigrant success story, in the way Mary Antin or David Levinsky were, they acclaim the merits of a simple and ordinary existence that of the common man—a figure which is "at the heart of contemporary American-Jewish literature" (Lyons, 64).

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The Yiddish Policemen's Union: Alaska Made in Poland

Izabela Filipiak

This country of the Weinreichs is in the nature of a wistful fantasyland, a toy theater with miniature sets and furnishings to arrange and rearrange, painted backdrops on which the gleaming lineaments of a snowy Jewish Onhava can be glimpsed, all its grief concealed behind the scrim, hidden in the machinery of the loft, sealed up beneath trap doors in the floorboards. But grief haunts every mile of that other destination to which the Weinreichs beckon, unwittingly perhaps but in all the awful detail that Dover's "Say It" series requires. Grief hand-colors all the postcards, stamps the passports, sours the cooking, fills the luggage. It keeps all night in the pipes of old hotels. The Weinreichs are taking us home, to the "old country." To Europe.

Michael Chabon, "A Yiddish Pale Fire"

For years I've thought of the Holocaust as a slaughter carried out against those born in the nineteenth century, an enormous mass of people shaped in that century, living by the imagination and ideas they absorbed in that era. A slaughter of those for whom the idea of murder by industrial methods was beyond comprehension for the simple reason that it transcended the boundaries of their technological imagination. Sometimes I ask myself when the nineteenth century ended for Jews, and I think it was not at the moment it did for others, when the First World War began, but rather at the moment when the crematoria in Treblinka, Auschwitz, and other such places designated for genocide were set in motion.

Michał Głowiński, *The Black Seasons*

Yiddish was not honored in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. In the Negev it was worthless. In the God-given State of Israel they had no use for the language of the bad little interval between Canaan and now. Yiddish was inhabited by the past, the new Jews did not want it. Mireleh liked to hear these anecdotes of how rotten it was in Israel for Yiddish and Yiddishists. In Israel the case was even lamer than in New York, thank God!

Cynthia Ozick writing from the point of view of the impoverished Yiddish writer barely surviving in New York in "Envy; or Yiddish in America."

What remains outside this proliferating discourse on the unsayable is not (only) what cannot be spoken but what cannot be spoken *in French*. And this is not the "silence of the dead" but rather the scandal of the living, the scandal of Jewish rage and unwillingness to embody suffering and victimization.

Naomi Seidman in *Faithful Renderings* about how Eli Wiesel's *Night* differs from Wiesel's memoir in Yiddish. (224)

The Yiddish Policemen's Union is a crime novel, with the body of a crime victim, "a yid who was calling himself Emanuel Lasker" (1), a loner with "needle tracks" on his left arm (22), introduced in the first paragraph. This Jewish body of "the occupant of 208" (1), "not a scumbag, not quite a lost soul" (5), destabilizes the stifling homeostasis in the life of Meyer Landsman, the hardboiled detective down on his luck. As it will be revealed in time, the victim and the detective have more in common than seedy Hotel Zamenhof as the place of their transient domicile. They also share the same