As Old as Our Eyes, by New Jewish Filmmaking Project, 2004

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By Maxim D. Shrayer

Today, only about 500,000 Jews live in the republics of the former USSR. In the 1960s-1990s the great exodus of Soviet Jews delivered hundreds of thousands of repatriees, refugees, immigrants (and, recently, economic drifters) to new lives in Israel, North America, and Western Europe. The turbulent history of Russia’s Jews is ending, say the skeptical pundits, citing both the dwindling numbers and the provincialization of Jewish communal living in the former Soviet republics. Is the Jewish question disappearing in this part of the world, and if so, what’s to become of the Jewish-Russian cultural myths?

“Lekhaim, zai gezund, cheers,” viewers hear in three languages and read in the subtitles of Melting Siberia. “You’re Russian. Only Russians can cry and laugh,” says a daughter of a Jewish man and an ethnic Russian woman to her Israeli-born nephew Ido Haar, who created this film. “Jewish people too cry and laugh,” counters Haar’s Russian-Israeli mother; vodka and tears ease an unburdening of anger and guilt. On the ruins of Jewish-Russian history Haar constructs a moving story of finding a long-lost father—and grandfather. Melting Siberia originates in the spring of 1945 in Riga, where Haar’s grandmother Riva Goldman, the only one in her family to survive the Shoah, falls in love with Tuviy (Tevye) Berkovich, a young Jewish lieutenant in the Soviet Army. Haar is attuned to his mother’s contradictory non-memories of his Siberian grandfather: a “pig” who disavowed his child; a “high-ranking officer,” whom his grandmother loves, hopelessly, her whole life. At times it seems that Sholem Aleichem’s tearful Jewish laughter hovers over Haar’s picture, pushing him to challenge stereotypes. The Jewish-Russian immigrant in me is particularly grateful for those multilingual moments, hidden under the subtitles, as well as for the film’s haunting symmetries (Berkovich’s wife Maria and his daughter Marina; the monumental, grieving Russian Motherland in Novosibirsk and the frail, speechless Riva in Israel).

Transpositions of one’s grandparents’ Soviet past and one’s own American present also nourish the Jewish-Russian myths examined in As Old as Our Eyes. Klara and Yelena are the same age and both came from Ukraine, Klara at eleven, Yelena at five, yet how differently they relate to their families’ cultural heritage. “I can’t say that America is truly my home,” Klara confesses. Only among peers with a similar background she feels “comfortable being a Russian Jewish American.” Klara’s articulation of her immigrant’s identity strikes me as both analytical and elegiac, this in stark contrast to the clamor and armor of Yelena’s pronouncement (“I want to have all the privileges of America and I don’t want to have them through the eyes of an immigrant”). In the end, although Yelena prefers Hamlet’s “immortal soul” to Russian poetry, her grandfather says it best by teaching her the poem “Memory” by Nikolay Gumilyov. The camera lingers on Gumilyov’s lines of trochaic pentameter, penned in 1921, just a few months before the
poet’s execution by the Bolsheviks. I quote them in literal translation: “Only snakes shed their skins./ For the soul to age and grow./ But, alas, not akin to snakes./ We shed souls, not bodies.”

In melting Jewish-Russian myths, have the protagonists and makers of these films preserved them for the decades to come?

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