

# **Homes Lost and Gained: A Life Between Places and Languages**

Proposal for an M.A. Thesis in English Literature – Creative Writing

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בתים שאבדו והושגו: חיים בין מקומות ושפות  
הצעת מחקר לתואר שני בספרות אנגלית – מגמת כתיבה יוצרת  
המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

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שם המנחה: ד"ר אילנה בלומברג

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## Introduction

Before I was an English writer, I was the daughter of Russian-speaking immigrants, struggling to communicate in a New York public pre-school. Allowed only kosher food, I ate lunch separately from my classmates, increasing my sense of alienation. When I was transferred to a Jewish pre-school, I remained an outsider because of my broken English. From the start, I oriented myself in the world based on my status as an outsider, defined by my differences—particularly my Russian background. Two decades later, after being at the top of every English class in middle and high school and earning a Bachelor’s degree in Creative Writing with honors, I still defined myself based on this difference. And when I emigrated to Israel in 2019, I added a new aspect to my identity. I became a double outsider, transplanted from culture to culture, always struggling to find my place, always tripping over another language.

Home, in both the literal and figurative sense, is a subject that induced existential uncertainty about who I am and where I belong. In the grand scheme, where is my home? Is it in the cities of the former Soviet Union that my parents left behind and that I later obsessively researched and visited? Is it in New York, where I was born and spent my entire life until the age of 27? Or is it in Israel, the ancestral homeland that I chose to call my home in 2019? And on a smaller scale, in my own personal microcosm of the world, where is the space that within its four walls offers me the security and comfort of a bird in its nest? Was it the childhood house in Brooklyn that my parents sold when I was in college, whose loss triggered a series of family misfortunes? Was it the one-bedroom apartment in Washington Heights that I lived in alone for four years, shutting out the rest of the world? But these were homes I lost, homes no longer accessible to me. Twice, I felt I had lost *my home*. Will there, then, be a home that I will not lose, that will be *the one*? And who will I be in that home? Which identity will I present?

## **Aims and General Description**

My thesis will consist of a collection of interconnected personal essays exploring the themes of home, identity, immigration, language, and genealogy. The narrative will span four countries, three languages, two nationalities, and one young woman (me) trying to reconcile her multilingual, multicultural identity and her family history with the events of her life.

Through this collection of essays, I will explore what it means to navigate multiple interwoven identities, to move from language to language, and to work on reconciling one's past with one's present and future. The way we consciously shape our identities is as important as the way our life circumstances shape our identities, and I plan to address both of those factors using the narrative of my own journey from being a Russian Jew in America to being a Russian-American Jew in Israel. Both America and Israel are countries with highly mixed immigrant populations. Everyone at some point came from somewhere else, adjusting to a new home, a new culture, a new language, and a new life, whether of their own volition or not. The reasoning for this move, the move itself, and the aftereffects of the move and acclimating to a new home are all equally significant in my eyes and will be addressed in this series of essays.

Expanding the definition of home, I also seek to explore all the various meanings we attach to that word: home as a physical structure in which we reside, home as a country, home as a language, and the people who feel like home to us. This collection will address both what it means to be attached to these various forms of home and what it means to suffer their loss and attempt to rebuild while feeling unmoored and existentially lost.

## **Conceptual Background**

Memoir writing had fascinated me since I took a memoir class called Writing Women's Lives, taught by Dr. Joy Ladin, as part of my undergraduate degree in Creative Writing at Yeshiva University. It was a genre that immediately felt the most meaningful to me. As someone who kept a regular journal from the age of seven until the present, self-reflection was a process that felt both necessary and natural to me, and the course, which combined literary analysis and personal writing, allowed me to move past the limits of my comfort zone in sharing highly personal writing with a wider audience. When the time came to work on my undergraduate Senior Creative Writing Portfolio, it was a very easy decision to make: I would be working in the memoir genre, under the mentorship of Dr. Joy Ladin.

The topic came to me easily as well. The summer before my senior year, I went on a service mission trip to Ukraine that continued a process of self-understanding and my exploration of my Russian identity. As the first generation American child of parents from the former USSR, my life revolved around my Russian identity and the culture that my family had brought with them from the former Soviet Union. This was an identity I had spent my entire life grappling with, and the one-week trip allowed me to reflect on my family history and my own individual identity, as well as my ideas of home, both in the cultural and familial sense.

At first, I had difficulty pinpointing which aspect of my identity I wanted most to address in my memoir: was it the language, the culture, the physical location? I grappled with these different markers of identity, trying to understand how they fit together. Instead of waiting until I figured it out, I ploughed straight into the creative writing process. As I wrote, three distinct categories came to mind: my childhood relationship to my Russian identity, how my Russian identity affected my romantic relationships in college, and my trip to Ukraine, which allowed me

to reflect on my relationship to the former Soviet Union. Based on that, I separated my memoir project into three distinct but connected autobiographical essays. Although I spent over a year working on that project—thinking, writing, revising over and over—I knew that I could go further with the project, because the journey of exploration is a lifelong one. I recognized the limitations of the project at the time and knew I would continue working on it in the future since it was a subject that would always interest me.

In the years following the completion of that project, I continued writing on the themes of home, identity, and language. Over the years, many other events in my life yielded a lot of new material for the project, and it expanded accordingly. Now, six years after the completion of that original project, I am ready to return to it and consolidate the snippets of writing I have amassed since then, with the addition of the inspiration I have gained through my academic and literary pursuits.

In my search for writers who have grappled with similar themes, I discovered a treasure trove of literature reflecting on the experiences of immigration, bilingualism, and multiculturalism, as well as the significance of subjects such as home, language, and post-Soviet identity. The first memoir in this category that provided inspiration for my own writing was Ruth Behar's *Traveling Heavy: A Memoir in Between Journeys*, in which the author reflects on her identity throughout the course of her research as a cultural anthropologist and her constant travels. Behar, a Sephardic-Polish Jew from Cuba whose parents left the country when she was a child, recounts her emotional journey as a self-described "neurotic nomad" trying to understand her heritage as she explores the countries where her family has roots. She travels back and forth between her current home in Michigan, where she works as a university professor, and her native home of Cuba, with trips to Spain, Mexico, and Poland thrown into the mix. Behar perfectly

captures the feeling of being foreign and different in her reflections on identity, writing at the beginning of her memoir:

Perhaps a child is incapable of mourning the loss of a homeland. I've been accused sometimes (though never by fellow Cubans) of having left too young to assert my right to claim a bond to Cuba. What I know for sure is that I found it painfully difficult to adjust to life in the United States. To this day, no matter where I go, I carry the memory of the girl who felt utterly foreign, helpless, speechless, a misfit, the girl who wanted to dissolve into the cracks in the wall. (6)

I strongly relate to this experience of feeling foreign, as if one doesn't belong, and this is what I want to capture in my own writing as well. Behar's account of her journeys to other countries was also illuminating for my own writing process, since in my search for my roots, I have also traveled back to Ukraine and Russia, the countries my family has roots in. Those trips played an important role in my reconstruction of my own heritage and identity.

However, Ruth Behar wasn't my first inspiration on the topic of searching for one's roots. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, a fictionalized account of an autobiographical story, was my primary inspiration on the topic of exploring the significance of the cities our predecessors left behind. Though I first read the book many years ago, it created an indelible impression on me, becoming a constant reminder of what I want to achieve in the memoir genre. The search for my family's past in the villages of Ukraine is a vital part of my narrative, and Safran Foer was the first author who demonstrated to me how to put that into writing. On the subject of genealogy and heritage research, Elisa New's memoir *Jacob's Cane* was also a useful resource, demonstrating how the details of this sort of research can be presented in a literary style. One of the primary issues with writing about family history and genealogy is that the subject can seem too narrow and of too little interest to an unrelated reader. Both Safran Foer and New proved that this material can capture the attention of a wider audience as well.

During the 2010s, there was also a proliferation of material published by Soviet-born Jewish immigrants in America. The rising popularity of the ex-Soviet voice coincided with the time I spent thinking about and working on my undergraduate creative writing project about identity, validating my choice of subject. It was the first time I received proof that the larger literary community saw something of value in the voices of modern Russian-speaking immigrants, such as Gary Shteyngart, Yelena Akhtiorskaya, Boris Fishman, Lev Golinkin, and many others writing in both the memoir and fiction genres. My goal was to become one of them. An article in *The Forward* dubbed 2014 “The Year of the Former Soviet Author,” which was coincidentally the same year that I submitted *Memoir of a Little Russian Girl*, my senior project. Although I had not been born in the former Soviet Union, unlike these authors, it played an important role in both my identity and my writing. It was the background for everything else I did. And so, I took lessons from these authors on how to translate cultural experiences and perspectives into writing for an audience of an entirely different culture, crafting a voice that contained hints of the ‘home’ language.

While I still want to become *one of them*, one of these authors writing on the Russian-Jewish experience, I now want to go a step further. My relocation to Israel added a new dimension to my exploration of the primary themes in this project, which I plan to incorporate. My goal now is to create a coherent whole out of my fractured explorations over the years, to weave a coherent narrative about the various forms of home in my life both past and present, and in the process, make sense of the multiple layers of my own identity.



## **Shape of the Project**

*Homes Lost and Gained: A Life Between Places and Languages* will be comprised of a series of personal essays that can both stand on their own but are particularly enriched within the context of the overall project. They will explore the various aspects of what it means to live a multilingual, transnational life, constantly finding oneself in between homes, languages, cultures, and identities.

The collection will open with a preface reflecting on all the stories I wish to tell, followed by an introduction titled “Restart,” which recounts my arrival in Israel as a new immigrant in September 2019, still unsure of myself and my decision to move across the world. The rest of the narrative will be built from that point, going backward and forward in time as I explore all the things that had led to my move, the places and homes that had shaped my identity, and my acclimation to my new country. The collection’s essays will be divided among four sections. Below are the section titles, along with a representative sample of essays for each section:

*Book I: Soviet Union:* Focusing on my family’s history in the Soviet Union and my own returns to Ukraine and Russia in search of our roots, this section will contain essays such as “Family Tree Meanderings,” about my genealogy research, and “Returning to the Soviet Union,” about my trips to Odessa, Kiev, and St. Petersburg in 2013 and 2014.

*Book II: New York, United States:* Geographically picking up where the previous section left off, this section will contain essays about the first 27 years of my life in New York and the places that I called home there. Essays include “House of Memories” and “Death of the Red Maple,” both about my childhood home in Brooklyn, and “Language and the Immigrant Experience, Part I,” a series of vignettes depicting what it meant to grow up bilingual.

*Book III: In Transition:* This section will cover the transformative period in my life when I made the decision to uproot myself from New York, the only place I had ever lived, and create a new life in Israel. Essays include “Israeli Enough,” “Number Five,” and “An Elegy in Jerusalem.”

*Book IV: Jerusalem, Israel:* Focusing on the realities of living in a new country and with a new language, this section will acknowledge my nostalgia for the past and the things I’ve left behind or lost. Essays include “My Favorite Food,” “A Place to Call Home,” and “Language and the Immigrant Experience, Part II,” which builds upon the first part of the essay, describing my multilingual experiences in Israel.

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