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## Jewish Russian-ness or Russian Jewish-ness: Dina Rubina and the Russian-speaking Alliyah Identity

The history of the Jewish people in the former Soviet Union is one that has only begun to be told fully in the last twenty years. Historically there were two major waves of immigration to Israel from the Soviet territories. The 1970s saw the beginning of the Russian-speaking Jew's struggle to escape Soviet anti-Semitism. But the most notable, and transformative wave began in the 1990s, directly before and following the fall of Communism. Ridiculed for their Jewish heritage in the Soviet Union, seen as simply Russians after immigrating to Israel, cultural identity is a pivotal struggle for an entire community of Russian-speakers in Israel today. *Alliyah*, the Hebrew word for 'ascension', is the term used to refer to any person with Jewish heritage who has immigrated to Israel<sup>1</sup>. This accounts for over a million people from the former Soviet Union since 1990. Another term that will appear in my following discussion is *oleh hadash*<sup>2</sup>, a person who has already completed their immigration and resides within Israel. According to the most recent census data, former Soviets comprise approximately one fifth of the current population of Israel. Accordingly these citizens are a significant influence on contemporary Israeli culture, bringing their own traditions, language, and values to the ever diversifying milieu. There are Russian language publications throughout Israel, Russian products on store shelves, Russian television stations, and even a political party with representatives at many levels of government.

The name Dina Rubina has become synonymous with the *oleh hadash* from the former Soviet Union. Her characters jump from the page into the reader's imagination, acting out narratives of cultural identity struggles. Born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1953, Rubina was a part of the early 1990s wave of Russian-speaking Jews to relocate to Israel. Dina Rubina is very much a current name in Russian-language literature. Although her career spans several decades prior to her

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*Alliyah*, it is only in the last twenty years that she has begun to emerge as a leader of a new literary genre, the immigration narrative. She routinely provides interviews with Russian-language newspapers and television programs both in Israel and Russia (as well as other countries of the Russian-speaking Diaspora), most of which are available on-line. As Maxim D. Shroyer points out in his *Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature*<sup>3</sup>, Rubina maintains an extremely vibrant public persona. However, as her work is modern, the published scholarly material available has not even begun to fully explore the complexities of her immigration narratives. Additionally, as she is also seen as a pop-cultural icon in fiction the available criticism is scant and mostly limited to public media releases. In one such interview, when asked about the relations of Russia and Israel and their subsequent effect on the former Soviet *oleh hadash* Rubina commented:

“Yes, theoretically it is possible now to have apartments both in Moscow and Jerusalem and to be a leading Russian writer with an Israeli passport in your pocket. But I still have no Russian citizenship and somehow do without an apartment in Moscow. I have one husband and one home. I am a person of serious intentions in general. If I leave some place, I leave it. But fiction is a different matter. This is the language that you were born with and that you will die with. And, what is more, I do love and I do value my Russian audience. These are the people who live in an authentic world, the world of Russian language. Everything connected to that language is ingrained in my heart, in my brain, in my memory and in my body — it just won't go away. No other language will play the same role in my life”<sup>4</sup>.

Questions of the individual's cultural identity become more pronounced as borders are crossed. The Russian-speaking Jewish immigrant is confronted with their Russian-ness, an identity that was for the most part denied to them. Identity ceases to be simply a personal ideal or presentation of self, but a societal notion of 'us' versus 'other'. Rubina deals with the fascinating question of how one's cultural identity develops when one is always seen as, 'other'. The same question has been applied to Rubina as an author as she walks the line between two cultures.

Caught up in the cross-currents of escape, return, and redefinition, Russian Jews have passed through multiple stages of identity. What happened in life happened also in literature — not only because literature distills and focuses the problems of real life, but also because in Russian tradition, it is the central place for any kind of spiritual exploration<sup>5</sup>.

The Russian-language writers of the post-Soviet *Alliyah*, Rubina included, keep with their Russian upbringings just as Alice Stone Nakhimovsky suggests, capturing the immigrant experience in a unique and psychologically probing way. Dina Rubina's *Belaia golubka Kordovy*<sup>6</sup> (White Dove of Cordova) illustrates this point brilliantly. The narrative follows the life movements of Zakhar, who like Rubina, is a Russian-speaking Israeli *oleh hadash*. His story is driven by his search for self and cultural belonging. The themes Rubina deals with in this particular novel illustrate the major identity struggles of a vast community. She accomplishes this with both standard prose and allusions to internal cultural hybridism.

Zakhar is a forgerer born in Vinytsa, Ukraine. Before immigrating to Israel he lives in Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) working as a legitimate artist. After the death of his dear friend Andrusha (also an artist) he is rendered unable to paint with the exception of his forgeries. His forgeries are not forgeries of specific works, but forgeries of style and technique. For each counterfeit he must create a false history to represent the image as the work of a great renowned master. All of his works are marked by a white dove, a reoccurring motif.

His journeys take him on a reversed Exodus; crossing multiple physical borders. While in Spain he is confronted by reminders of his past, and omens of a tremulous future. He is plagued by the memory of a family heirloom he once pawned. He will eventually recover this heirloom, a silver *Kiddush*<sup>7</sup>, (or goblet) but not without questioning himself, his existence, and cultural identity. As a child he is told repeatedly that the *Kiddush*, the function of which Zakhar remains ignorant, is of significance to the family's past and future. Zakhar's pawning of the *Kiddush*, or goblet, is a symbolic rejection of his Jewish heritage. As if it were the Holy Grail itself, he is cursed to spend his life in search of it; essentially he must search for his identity. It is no accident that Rubina's protagonist is a forgerer. The reader may infer that Zakhar's forgeries of art are akin to him counterfeiting an identity. Once the goblet is recovered, restoring Zakhar's metaphorical past and future; there is no longer a need for the white dove.

This quest driven narrative speaks to the struggles of the Russian-speaking *oleh hadash* and their endeavors to assimilate into Israeli society. Rubina poses the idea that the representation, or attempt to represent cultural belonging is almost pageantry. The immigrant feels the need to conform and thus must perform their cultural identity to integrate into society. This abstraction can also be substantiated by the work of Larisa Fialkova and Maria Yelenevskaja of the University of Haifa<sup>8</sup>. They have worked to preserve the immigration stories of over one hundred Russian-speaking *oleh hadash*, almost all of whom describe experiences similar to the themes in Rubina's prose.

Rubina, fascinated with street scenes, captures a sort of chaotic liveliness when depicting Israel. Her marketplaces and street corners take on a theatrical carnival quality that has begun to characterize her work. Among the few academic articles published on Rubina is that of Anna P. Ronell<sup>9</sup>. Ronell goes so far as to say that "Rubina is known for her complex dialogic imagination — that is she incorporates and interweaves various voices to create an image of ongoing theatrical performance that represents an all-encompassing mode of existence in Israel"<sup>10</sup>. Rubina thus manipulates the dialogic to illustrate the specific Chronotope representing the Soviet Aliyah. "This confrontation manifests itself in dialogism and intertextuality which are the literary techniques that allow Rubina to draw the reader into her world of carnival and the street performance as well as into the world of cultural and linguistic transformation"<sup>11</sup>.

The article itself is extremely detailed, but Ronell's primary thesis can be boiled down quite concisely: Rubinian prose find their foundation in Bakhtinian theories, theatre (the

carnival), autobiography (experiential), and language (linguistic dialogism). The most developed of these in Ronell's article being Rubina's theatrical inspirations in Bakhtin and the carnival. Nevertheless, Ronell does weave all these components together in order to show how they mutually support and build upon one another. Perhaps this can be simplified even further: Rubina theatrically recreates the experiences of her peer group, the Russian-speaking *oleh hadash*. Thus disguising immigration testimonials as fictional narrative.

It can also be argued that the journey of immigration takes a similar form to Vladimir Propp's magic tale<sup>12</sup>. This is further corroborated by Pamela J. Milne in her book *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in the Hebrew Biblical Narrative*<sup>13</sup>. Milne approaches the analysis of stories from the *Torah* via Propp's formula of the magic tale as their narrative structures, she believes, share commonalities. As I mentioned previously, the voyage of Zakhar resembles a reversed Exodus. Perhaps then, we as the readers, may regard the immigration narratives of the *oleh hadash* as written continuations in the ongoing story of the Jewish people, first begun in the *Bible*. Inherently Biblical narratives assume a quest format, much like immigration narrative, both lending themselves well to Propp's approach.

Propp outlines the intervention of a miraculous event in the magic tale. It is noteworthy, miraculous interventions, or fortunate turns of fate, are also common elements in the testimonials of the former Soviet *oleh hadash*, as is shown by Fialkova and Yelenevskaia. When using this approach to look at the journey of Zakhar in *Belaia golubka Kordovy* one must regard Zakhar not merely as an immigrant, but a representative of all immigrants of similar circumstance. Therefore the journey of discovery Zakhar undertakes is not simply his own, but the journey for belonging undertaken by a generation of former Soviet Israelis. Zakhar is the singular embodiment of the struggles, trials, tribulations, and discoveries experienced by a greater group. Although certainly the details of his particular narrative are not universal, it is the search for cultural and spiritual belonging that makes Zakhar's story the quintessential Russian-speaking-Israeli immigration narrative.

Stories detailing the struggle for belonging and battles with cultural hybridism, not to mention anti-Russian prejudices are the main topics of the interviews by Fialkova and Yelenevskaia. This memoir documentation project has preserved, within one volume, an archive of immigration testimonials that will no doubt continue to prove itself invaluable to scholars of the former Soviet *Alliyah*. The interviewees all came to Israel from the former Soviet Union, and as such shared a common language, as well as similar experiences and memories. It was these memoirs, and their similarities that unifies the interviewees: a collective experience of displacement and search for belonging. Despite their differences in upbringing, beliefs, and circumstance, all share elements of the immigration experience such as a miraculous intervention: a turn of circumstance aiding them in their immigration. Although this miraculous intervention is not what the researchers focused on per say, a great

number of those interviewed did describe such turns of fate in their personal memoirs of journeying to Israel.

The majority of the stories in the sample share the same deep structure. The phenomenon of immigration is viewed as a trying experience. Hardships and pain are seen as an unavoidable part of this experience. Success and accomplishment of goals is viewed not as a reward for faith and virtuous deeds but as a lucky coincidence, a twist of fate... Our interviewees do not treat coincidences humorously they see them as messages. But instead of interpreting these events as miracles caused by God, they see them as signs of fate<sup>14</sup>.

These fates, as the interviews show, take the form of intervening acts that propel them in their journey. "In our sample there are twenty-five stories about prophetic dreams, lucky coincidences, and miracles. Each deals with a single episode presented as miraculous or bizarre. All of them are set in a specific time and refer to real people and places"<sup>15</sup>.

Regardless of whether Rubina is familiar with Fialkova and Yelenevskaia's work, it is certain that as a part of this community she would have been exposed to similar narratives and personal testimonies. However, it should be pointed out that the connection between Rubina and these researchers has been made previously by E. F. Shafranskaia in *Mifopetika "inoetniketnokul'turnogo teksta" v Russkoi proze Diny Rubinoi*<sup>16</sup>. In this book Shafranskaia makes numerous comparison between memoirs of immigration and the themes of Rubina's prose, not to mention direct connections to Fialkova and Yelenevskaia.

I personally believe that the immigration narrative is a highly specific shared group culture. In the article, "*Zemliachestvo kak malaia sotsial'naia grupp: spetsifika fol'klora*"<sup>17</sup> also by Shafranskaia the author discusses *zemliachestvo*, a community based on past joint experience in a given time and space. For example, Shafranskaia notes that Tashkent as it appeared in Rubina's novel *Na solnechnoi storone ulitsy*<sup>18</sup> (On The Sunny Side of the Street) no longer exists as it once did. Street names have since changed, shops closed and reopened, and monuments torn down and rebuilt celebrating new figures and achievements. *Zemliachestvo* is the grouping of people who remember Tashkent in a certain way as it appeared in a precise time and space, thereby unifying them. Together such persons can recreate an intangible facsimile of their remembered past, preserving the culture of a specific time and place although it no longer exists outside their shared recollections. Rubina recreates a Tashkent of another generation in *Na solnechnoi storone ulitsy*.

In the realm of the twentieth century there are cities that have given birth to their own text. Because of geopolitical reasons, cultural locus break apart, people leave them — but the cities continue to exist in a different manner, with a different city folk culture. But while the people themselves are still alive, those who bare witness to the folklore of the abandoned locus, the city text continues to exist: in memories, literary creation, online, in recognizing what is "their" or the culture of *zemliachestvo*<sup>19</sup>.

*Zemliachestvo* is indeed the best way to categorize the camaraderie of the Russian-speaking *oleh hadash*. Once in Israel they are unified simply by the fact that they are Russian-speaking and have immigrated to Israel; completely regardless of all other factors. This demographic is Dina Rubina's target audience.

In *Na solnechnoi storone ulitsy* the time and space being recreated in the memories of the characters is Soviet Tashkent, a single location with a clearly defined culture. In *Belaia golubka Kordovy* the protagonist's crossing of several borders, Vynytza (Ukraine), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Jerusalem (Israel), Cordova (Spain), leaves his identity definition in a state of perpetual transience. Shafranskaia looks at *zemliachestvo* as if it were a template; certain slang, certain jokes, certain mentalities all comprising the shared cultural memory. Zakhar essentially adopts and sheds his performed cultural identities in a constant search for *zemliachestvo*. Zakhar the forger attempts to imitate a style that was once used by another, but even with the inclusion of all minutia this moment in art will never exist again and can only be looked back on posthumously. This is the exact way a group with a shared *zemliachestvo* gathers together to recreate a feeling, setting, or mood from a past to which they can never return.

Acting as a sort of literary immigration story scholar Rubina explores the complex identity issues of her direct peer group. This has been studied from the perspective of Russian-Jewish immigrants to the US. In "The Russian Immigration Narrative as Metafiction"<sup>20</sup> by Adrian Wanner the author explores the fiction of three Russian-Jewish female writers in the United States: Lara Vapnyar, Ellen Litman, Irina Reyn. All three authors immigrated to the United States from Moscow, and deal with themes of identity in their prose. As Wanner discusses all three share similar themes and even common narratives. Wanner analyzes the three authors from the point of view of metafiction, which he defines as fiction that is self aware. To elaborate on this point one could say that metafiction is composed in a way that the narrator and reader are both constantly aware that they are communicating through prose. And as Wanner shows this is a particularly effective approach to the immigrant narrative.

A form of creative writing in which identity is actively constructed and performed allows for a sorting out of these issues, which can also include other distinguishing traits of identity such as Jewishness and femininity in addition to national origin. Metafiction presents a particularly apt vehicle for such an undertaking<sup>21</sup>.

The immigration narrative can be regarded as an ongoing development of cultural identity. According to Wanner all three authors approach their narrative through a first person narrator, and admittedly incorporate semi-autobiographical details. A major trope which unifies all three writers is using their Russian identity as something exotic to gain approval from their American counterparts. For Vapnyar and Reyn, who immigrated in their early twenties and late teens this is a more sexualized endeavor. Both protagonists discussed in this article take American lovers with the hope of becoming their muse, or gaining a specific identity. The semi-autobiographical

characters both appeal to their potential lovers through exoticism. Thus they use their Russian identities in order to appear mysterious, and even capitalize on this further by exaggerating their stories about the Soviet Union. Litman, who immigrated as a child, creates a protagonist who seeks belonging through joining a Russian Club at her university. She is the only native Russian-speaker and hopes to gain acceptance by offering her unique knowledge of slang, personal anecdotes of Russian culture, and help with homework. She never feels entirely accepted amongst her peers. These authors tackle similar themes as Dina Rubina, their characters undergoing relatable obstacles, and seeking cultural belonging amidst their hybrid identities.

Rubina, unlike the authors found in Wanner's analysis, is far more subtle about her depictions of hybridity. Often such details take the form of a linguistic turn of phrase. Ronell cites one such excellent example<sup>22</sup>. An Israeli police officer and a Russian-speaking *oleh hadash* student. In an unlikely coincidence a character named Lenskii is shot. The student, because of his hybrid cultural identity, is familiar with Pushkin as a literary staple. The student replies that Onegin shot Lenskii. Quickly the officer becomes intrigued believing he has a lead. Ronell's uses this example to illustrate theatrical elements. However, it very concisely demonstrates the cross cultural hybrid identity construction the *oleh hadash* readers would be able to relate to.

In her short-story "Tuman"<sup>23</sup> (Fog) Rubina's protagonist is Russian-speaking, but his dialog is peppered with subtle features that are not necessarily understandable to someone who has not been exposed to Israeli culture. These minutia are hardly crucial to the plot and can be easily overlooked. In one scene Arkadii, an Israeli police detective, stops to get a quick bite to eat. He is very insistent that the man, an Arab-Israeli, who is making his meal use plenty of *za'atar*. Rubina even describes how he watches to make sure an appropriate amount is given. Admittedly an inconsequential detail, but nevertheless, Arkadii's cross-cultural identity is illustrated even by something so simple as wanting extra spices.

On a larger scale, the work is the story of a honor killing that Arkadii must investigate. The guilty man is a Muslim police officer who circumvents the law to avoid prosecution, and Arkadii is haunted by his inability to bring the man to justice. The narrative itself is demonstrative of yet another Rubinian character searching for answers. Unlike Zakhar, Arkadii has a family, a social community: in short he has achieved *zemliachestvo*. His questions have to do with the Russian morals and ethics he was brought up with and contextualizing them within Israeli society with all its many cultural and religious communities. Essentially Arkadii has a Russian soul that he must continue to reconcile with his Israeli identity.

Finally, one must ask, are Dina Rubina's prose Russian-Jewish, or Jewish-Russian works. The only conclusion that can be made is that they are both, and neither. Russian-speakers have immigrated so prolifically that as Wanner demonstrates, Russian-language literature in Diaspora is flourishing. The representations of identity struggles, as I believe Rubina illustrates, are but a feature of the immigrant experience: a sort of right of passage. As former Soviets have begun

to settle in Israel they are being confronted with a whole new level to the Jewish identity that stigmatized them previously. As many, like Zakhar, knew little to nothing about Jewish traditions, as part of the immigration process they begin to balance their beliefs and customs with that of their new home. This merging of cultures has resulted in an infusion of Russian-ness. But even those who have returned to their country of origin, and there are many, have been instilled with the Jewish-ness they discovered in Israel maintaining the cultural identity mix.

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<sup>1</sup> The Law of Return (1950) defines a person of Jewish heritage as anyone with a minimum of one Jewish grandparent. Although this does not mean that they are considered Jewish under Rabbinical law, the State of Israel recognizes these individuals because they would have been exterminated for being Jewish under Nazi doctrine.

<sup>2</sup> This term, translated from Hebrew, essentially mean — one who has ascended.

<sup>3</sup> Shroyer M. D. *The Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature* (Armonk, 2007). Vol. 2. P. 1168–1176.

<sup>4</sup> Babich D. 'Dina Rubina, I Did Not "Choose" to Keep Writing I Simply Can't Do Anything Else', *Jewish Russian Telegraph* 1 March 2008, 5 November 2012 (<http://www.jrtelegraph.com/2008/03/dina-rubina-i-d.html>).

<sup>5</sup> Nakhimovsky A. *Russian Jewish Literature and Identity: Jabotinsky, Babel, Grossman, Galich, Roziner, Markish* (Maryland, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Rubina D. *Belaia golubka Kordovy* (Moscow, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The word Kiddush is Hebrew for a traditional goblet. The word used in the text is "kubok".

<sup>8</sup> Fialkove, L., Yelenevskaia M. *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narrative to Group Portrait* (Detroit, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Ronell A. P. 'Some Thoughts on Russian-Language Israeli Fiction: Introducing Dina Rubina', *Prooftexts*, Vol. 28, no. 2 (Spring 2008). P. 197–231.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* P. 198–199.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* P. 200.

<sup>12</sup> Propp V. *Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> Milne P. J. *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in Hebrew Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Fialkove L., Yelenevskaia M. *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narrative to Group Portrait* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007). P. 234.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* P. 212.

<sup>16</sup> Shafranskaia E. F. *Mifopetika "inoetniketnokul'turnogo teksta" v Russkoi proze Diny Rubinoi* (Moscow, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Shafranskaia E. F. 'Zemliachestvo kak malaia sotsial'naia grupp: spetsifika fol'klora' in *Fol'klor malykh sotsual'nykh grupp: Traditsii i sovremennost': Sbornik nauchnykh statei* (Moscow, 2008). P. 136–296.

<sup>18</sup> Rubina D. *Na solnechnoi storone ulitsy* (Moscow, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Shafranskaia E. F. 'Zemliachestvo kak malaia cotsial'naia grupp: spetsifika fol'klora'. P. 135. Translated from the Russian by Regan Treewater-Lipes.

<sup>20</sup> Wanner A. 'The Russian Immigrant Narrative as Metafiction', *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 55. no. 1 (Spring 2011). P. 58–74.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* P. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ronell A. P. 'Some Thoughts on Russian-Language Israeli Fiction: Introducing Dina Rubina'. P. 204.

<sup>23</sup> Rubina D. *"Fog" Life Stories: Original Works by Russian Writers*, trans. Michael Katz and Dennis Kamarov (Vermont, 2009).

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**АННОТАЦИЯ:** С момента принятия 5 июля 1950 г. закона о возвращении, евреи со всех уголков земного шара устремляются в Израиль. В начале 1990-х гг., с распадом коммунистической системы, набирает темпы эмиграция в Израиль русскоязычного населения. Однако, подвергавшиеся определенному остракизму за их еврейское происхождение в Советском Союзе, эти люди в равной мере подверглись дискриминации и в Израиле из-за русского языка. Этот парадокс культурной идентичности проливает свет на многие вопросы культурной гибридизации. Необходимо принимать во внимание не только упомянутую дилемму еврейства как религии или этничности, но и противоречия между «русским еврейством и еврейской русскостью». Именно такой тип противоречий можно наблюдать сейчас в сообществах евреев бывшего Советского Союза, а также в среде русскоговорящих, эмигрировавших в Израиль. Эта статья посвящена специфически новому образу «русского еврея», или «еврейского русского» в современной литературе. В центре внимания — короткие рассказы и романы Дины Рубиной и тот способ, каким она иллюстрирует эту культурную гибридность. Сейчас уже прошло время существования «еврейского стереотипа» в русской литературе. Рубина пишет исключительно на русском языке, создавая новый, преображенный образ русскоговорящего еврея.

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА:** Дина Рубина, «русское еврейство» и «еврейская русскость», культурная идентичность.

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**ABSTRACT:** Since the Law of Return was instated on 5 July 1950, Jews from all corners of the globe have immigrated to Israel. In the early 1990s, with the collapse of Communism, the emigration of Russian-speakers to Israel multiplied rapidly. However, just as these individuals were ostracized for their Jewish lineage in the Soviet Union, they would be met with equal discrimination in Israel for being Russian. This cultural identity paradox brings to light many issues of cultural hybridity. Thus one must take into account the ongoing dilemma of Jewish-ness as religion or ethnicity, but also that of Russian-Jewish-ness versus Jewish-Russian-ness. This is precisely the sort of hybridism that we can observe in Jewish communities of the FSU and the Russian-speaking émigrés to Israel. My work deals specifically with the new face of the Russian-Jew, or Jewish-Russian within contemporary literature. I focus on the short-stories and novels of Dina Rubina and how she illustrates cultural hybridity in her narratives. Gone now are the days of the Jewish stereotype in Russian literature. Rubina writes exclusively in Russian, giving a new and transformed image of the Russian-speaking Jew.

**KEYWORDS:** Dina Rubina, Russian Jewish-ness, Jewish Russian-ness, cultural identity.

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