

David Bezmozgis's "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/david-bezmozgiss-roman-berman-massage-therapist>.

Introduction

David Bezmozgis, an award-winning writer and filmmaker, was born in Riga, Latvia—then a republic of the Soviet Union—in 1973. He immigrated with his family to Toronto, Canada, when he was six years old. He is the author of two short story collections, *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004) and *Immigrant City* (2019), and two novels, *The Free World* (2011) and *The Betrayers* (2014).

His work has primarily focused on stories of emigration from the Soviet Union to Canada; his first short story collection, *Natasha*, focuses on the experience of a child enmeshed in the process of acculturation after his family makes this move. The stories are set in the early 1980s at the height of the Soviet Jewry movement, an international movement advocating for Jews who wanted to leave the USSR. "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist" focuses in particular on the complex relationship between Soviet Jews and the North American Jewish communities that advocated for and hosted them.

Part of an expanding literature by English-language Jewish writers who emigrated from the Soviet Union as children or young adults, Bezmozgis's "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist" is, arguably, one of the most thought-provoking and rich texts dealing with this experience.

Cover image: "Remember Soviet Jews" stamp. From the personal collection of Sasha Senderovich; belonged to Norman (z") and Minna Halperin of Springfield, Massachusetts.

Subjects

Childhood, Fiction, Immigration, Soviet Union

Reading and Background:

- David Bezmozgis's "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist" was published in the collection *Natasha and Other Stories* in 2004. The story first appeared a year earlier in the May 2003 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.
- Other notable contemporary authors who emigrated from the Soviet Union include Gary Shteyngart, Anya Ulinich, Boris Fishman, Lara Vapnyar, Irina Reyn, Yelena Akhtyorskaya, and Ellen Litman. For a survey of their work and impact, read the scholar, poet, and translator Val Vinokur's 2005 article "New Jews from the Old Country" together with his 2014 follow-up "The Russians Came!"
- In addition to novels, short story collections, and memoirs, Soviet-born Jewish authors have also explored their experiences through non-fiction essays. Consider, for example, the essay "As a Russian Jewish Immigrant, I was a Stranger at a Passover Seder" by Masha Kisel, where she discusses her family's first Passover as guests of an American Jewish family after arriving from Soviet Ukraine to Chicago.
- For scholarly articles, short reviews, and interviews with Bezmozgis's peers, consider "The New Wave of Russian Jewish American Culture," a special issue of the scholarly journal *East European Jewish Affairs*, published in 2016 and guest edited by Anna Katsnelson. Consider as well Sasha Senderovich's article "Scenes of Encounter: The 'Soviet Jew' in Fiction by Russian Jewish Writers in America" published in 2016 in *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*.
- Sociologist and author Shaul Kelner has also published scholarly work on the Soviet Jewry Movement's role in shaping American Jewish identity during the Cold War; watch [this hour-long lecture](#) by Kelner at the University of Michigan in 2016 or listen to [this podcast episode](#) from the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan to hear him speak about his scholarly work on the subject.
- Listen to [Bezmozgis's interview with HIAS](#) (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) to hear about his childhood in Soviet Latvia,



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his family's decision to move to Canada, and how these experiences have inspired his writing.

- For more information about the Soviet Jewry Movement, consider award-winning journalist Gal Beckerman's book *When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry*, published in 2010. Beckerman also wrote an article summarizing the history of the movement on *My Jewish Learning*. Visit the [Archive of the American Soviet Jewry Movement](#) website to explore photographs and other materials in its collections.

Resources

1: Song excerpt, Safam's "Leaving Mother Russia," 1978.

Boston-based band Safam wrote the song "Leaving Mother Russia" in 1978. It was popular among Jewish communities involved in the Soviet Jewry Movement, and Safam continued to perform the song long after the end of the Cold War. The first-person narrator's name in the song, "Anatole," is a reference to [Anatoly \(Natan\) Sharansky](#), perhaps the most famous [refusenik](#) (a term for Jews who applied to leave the Soviet Union for Israel and were refused permission to emigrate). Sharansky spent almost a decade in Soviet jails, and the campaign for his freedom became associated—for many Jews in the West—with the belief that all Soviet Jews wanted to leave the USSR.

Suggested Activity: In "Roman Berman," it becomes clear during the dinner at the Kornblums' house that the Kornblums and their Canadian Jewish friends already have some knowledge about Jews in the Soviet Union, and that this knowledge has shaped how they view the two Soviet Jewish families sharing a meal with them. Ask students: How would the Kornblums and their friends have learned about their guests before they even met them?

Then listen to the song clip or the [entire song](#) "Leaving Mother Russia," and invite students to follow along with the lyrics projected on a screen or with paper handouts. After listening to the song, provide the students with background information about Anatoly Sharansky. Let students know that the Kornblums and their friends likely would have encountered this song, and ask them how that may have affected their view of the Bermans and other Soviet Jews. Ask them: How does Safam—an American Jewish band—imagine the voice of Soviet Jews? How might the band's desire to speak on behalf of Soviet Jews prevent Soviet Jews from speaking for themselves? What does it mean that the song was written in English rather than in Russian? Who is the audience of the song? Who has access to it? What does it represent? How do the lyrics in the song compare with the Berman family's narrative about their experience in the Soviet Union and their reasons for leaving from Mark's perspective?

Source: Safam, "Leaving Mother Russia" in *Encore*, 1978. <http://www.safam.com/popup-music-encore.shtml>

2: Vintage Soviet Jewry Movement stationary stamp and pin, 1970s-1980s.

Physical objects from the era of the Soviet Jewry Movement can help to contextualize the story. Included here are images of a pin with the phrase "Let my people go" and a stamp embossed with the words "Remember Soviet Jews." In both cases the text is in English and Hebrew, though the stamp additionally includes Russian (both the Hebrew and the Russian translations on the stamp contain grammatical inaccuracies). These objects and others were collected, worn, used, and displayed by American Jews who were concerned about the plight of Soviet Jews. The Hebrew-language *shalakh et 'ami*, from the biblical Book of Exodus, is God's command to the pharaoh to let the people of Israel leave Egypt. Its English translation, besides being known to most Jews in North America through the annual retelling of the Exodus story during Passover, has come to be identified in the broader American culture—through the words of a spiritual famously performed by the likes of Paul Robeson and Louis Armstrong—with the struggle for the civil rights of African Americans in the twentieth century.

Suggested Activity: Consider the pin and the stamp. What do objects like these say about how their American owners imagined Soviet Jews? Think about the multilingual statements on these objects: What would wearing such a pin to a meeting or protest (or, perhaps, in everyday life) or using the stamp on one's personal correspondence communicate to others? How might it shape the identities of those who owned and used these items?

Source: "Let my people go" pin and "Remember Soviet Jews" stationary stamp. From the personal collection of Sasha Senderovich; these objects belonged to Norman (z"l) and Minna Halperin of Springfield, Massachusetts.

3: Written account, Ruth Nordlicht's "A Personal Glimpse from Behind the Iron Curtain," 1975.

This unpublished account of travel in the USSR, "A Personal Glimpse from Behind the Iron Curtain," was written in 1975 by Ruth Nordlicht, a Soviet Jewry Movement activist. Nordlicht was one of many American Jews who traveled to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, conveying news to and from Soviet Jewish activists who were unable to emigrate. Many such typed-up and handwritten documents are preserved in Jewish communal and institutional archives in the West, including the [American Jewish Historical Society](#).

Suggested Activity: Read the account by Ruth Nordlicht, and discuss: how does she experience the Soviet Union? Imagine Nordlicht as one of the guests at the Kornblum house in David Bezmozgis's story: how would the Kornblums and their Canadian Jewish guests receive her story? How would the Bermans and the other Soviet Jewish family at the dinner table react to it?

Source: Ruth Nordlicht, "A Personal Glimpse from Behind the Iron Curtain," unpublished personal account, 1975. Courtesy of the [American Jewish Historical Society](#).

4: Text excerpts, David Bezmozgis's "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist," 2004.

The Kornblums invite the Bermans for a Friday night meal—a meal to celebrate the Jewish sabbath. Like the vast majority of Soviet Jews, the Bermans have no experience practicing Jewish rituals. This is in part a result of the history of the Soviet Union itself as an atheist state, suspicious not only of Judaism but of all religious practice. At the same time, the Bermans come to the Kornblums bearing a homemade apple cake, which, in the family's lore, carries the weight of their unique story as Soviet Jews.

Suggested Activity: Read the two excerpts from the story about the apple cake. What do we learn about Jewish observance in this family over several generations? How does the apple cake function symbolically in the excerpt? In the second excerpt, why does the apple cake not appear at the dinner table at the Kornblum house? How does its absence highlight the ways in which the families' different approaches to Jewishness conflict in the story? Now invite the students to imagine an alternative reality in which the apple cake that the Bermans brought to the Kornblums *could* appear at the dinner table—maybe it couldn't be served and eaten, but perhaps it could somehow make an appearance instead of being left in the kitchen for the duration of the meal and then given back. How would the encounter between the Bermans and the Kornblums—and, perhaps, the encounter between Soviet Jews and Toronto Jews—unfold differently in that situation?

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5: Graphic novel excerpt, Anya Ulinich's "Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel," 2014.

These panels from Anya Ulinich's *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* speak to the narrator's memories of her life in the USSR and her early days as an immigrant to the U.S. In the second page excerpt, Lena Finkle's mother shows off Lena's "gold medal" from the Soviet Union—a sign of rare accomplishment awarded only to straight-A students, which secured various privileges for the recipient, such as getting admitted to university without entrance exams. The medals, not actually made of gold, had a profile of Vladimir Lenin embossed on one of their sides. Soviet Jewish lore had it that it was particularly difficult for Jewish students to obtain gold medals, due to antisemitism among teachers.

Suggested Activity: Examine the graphic novel excerpt with students. Then discuss: why does Lena's mother bring up the gold medal in this conversation? How is she trying to represent her family to members of the local Jewish community? What does the object of the gold medal mean to Lena's mother, and is she able to communicate that meaning to her audience? Why or why not? Ask students to look for and discuss passages in Bezmozgis's story when the Berman family is trying to represent themselves in a particular light to American Jews. Why do the Bermans dress up the way they do when they go to see a rabbi with questions about how to promote Roman's massage therapy business? What goes through their minds as they dress for the Friday night dinner at Jerry Kornblum's? How do Soviet Jewish immigrants expect to be seen by local Jews in Toronto, and how do they try to counteract that?

Source: Anya Ulinich, *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 4-5.

6: Text excerpt, Isaac Babel's "The Story of My Dovecote," 1925.

In its depiction of a conflict between a father and a son, Bezmozgis's story brings to mind one of the most famous short stories of the Russian-Jewish literary canon: Isaac Babel's "The Story of My Dovecote." Set in 1905 near Odessa, the narrator's father in "The Story of My Dovecote" wishes to assimilate into the dominant culture of Imperial Russia, pinning his hopes on his son's admission to a selective Russian-speaking school. Teachers at the school have typically excluded Jewish students with parents who are assumed to speak little to no Russian.

Suggested Activity: Read the short excerpt of Isaac Babel's story. Think about how the father in Babel's story displays motivations similar to Roman Berman's when Roman takes his son to a local Rabbi and focuses on the child's ability to converse in Hebrew. Compare the narrator's recitation of a poem by the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in "The Story of My Dovecote" with the narrator's recitation of some Hebrew phrases and of "[Jerusalem of Gold](#)" in "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist." How does each father hope to achieve his goals by having his son perform in a language the father himself has not mastered? What larger social and personal opportunities are they hoping to unlock through these particular performances by their children?

Source: Isaac Babel, "The Story of My Dovecote," *The Essential Fictions*, trans. Val Vinokur (Northwestern University Press, 2018) 64-65. Translation © 2018 Val Vinokur. First published 2018 by Northwestern University Press. All rights reserved.

7: Text excerpts from David Bezmozgis's "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist," 2004.

David Bezmozgis, like other Jewish writers from the former Soviet Union who immigrated to Canada and the United States, writes in English—his second language. There are also Jewish writers from the former Soviet Union whose families moved to Germany and Israel, and they are increasingly writing on these topics in German and Hebrew, respectively. It is notable, regardless of what language they are writing in, that all of these authors are producing work in their second or third language. The satire and humor present in many of these works is particularly remarkable, given that these are often considered the hardest facets of a language to master.

In "Roman Berman," Bezmozgis judiciously uses short phrases, or even single words—drawing on double and triple meanings—to create a satirical tone.

Suggested Activity: Notice the highlighted words and/or phrases in these excerpts from David Bezmozgis's "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist." What specific meaning(s) and tone do these words/phrases convey? How would these passages—and, in fact, the story as a whole—be different if Bezmozgis had omitted these words?

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