This article is a philological inquiry into something overflowing the quiet banks of philology, an enormous migration of East European Jews to the Near Eastern Jewish state carrying in their luggage their books, pens and paper, in short, what is traditionally called literature. On its way to Israel, this literature, still in potentio, became overgrown with epithets: Russian, émigré, Israeli, making my task of describing the resulting inventory of texts an even greater challenge. Hence, my eclectic method which will be confined to the description of two key figures of the present-day Israeli reality: the Russian Reader and the Russian Writer, with a few samples of texts between them.¹

The starting point of my inquiry is the Reader and, in so far as I am one, it will be based on a certain amount of introspection. To describe the Reader, some very basic questions must be answered: From where has he come and where he is now? What language or languages does he speak? What was his cultural and social ambience in Russia? And what happened to it in Israel? However, the main question that should be asked about the Reader is even more elementary, and twenty years ago nobody would have thought that it might be of any relevance: How many readers are there? In our case, the staggering answer to the question is: between 1989 and 1995 no less than 700,000 speakers of Russian arrived as new citizens in Israel where they joined at least 150,000 native speakers of Russian who had arrived with the previous wave in the 1970s.² In other words, today Russian is

¹ I am greatly indebted to Miss Isabelle Onians, who took the trouble of reading and correcting the whole manuscript with the exception of this footnote.

² For the statistical data of the 1970s, see Gosudarstvo Izrael'. Stanoylenie i razvitie. Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Aliyah Library, 1990), p. 84. As to my data for the last six years, they are based on a number of publications in the Israeli and North American press. Cf., in particular, Exodus Campaign 1992 (Jerusalem: United Jewish Appeal. Information Department, 1992). From 1992 to 1996 we observe a steady immigration of approximately 60 to 70 thousand Russian Jews every year.
the mother-tongue for not less than 15 percent of the whole population of Israel. This overpowering figure has a qualitative meaning of its own, as I will try to show now.

The very quantity of native Russian speakers in Israel, together with a certain Zionist flavour in our everyday life and with the more or less comfortable conditions of acclimatization existing in our welfare state, prevents them from identifying themselves as émigrés. With all the nostalgic ties and cable television connecting him to the recently abandoned Soviet Union, the Russian Reader in Israel sees enough Russian Readers around him not to get lost, now that the country he left is claimed to have altogether disappeared. The market is only happy to exploit his self-sufficiency. Eleven Russian daily and weekly newspapers, some of them affiliated to large Hebrew press syndicates such as Yediot Achronot and Ma'ariv, several magazines and Russian radio broadcasting for twelve hours every day make a continuous and powerful effort to create a Russian virtual reality in the Israeli Russian-speaking media, with political problems, social controversies, intellectual prophecies and literary scandals of our own, without any relation to our place of birth.

The Russian Reader's social background is quite easy to label but painful to analyze. Five years ago he was an ordinary Soviet citizen, sovetskii cheholovek, often with a university degree in medicine or engineering, having one or two children and living in a medium-sized provincial town in the Ukraine rather than in the capital or in Siberia. He was a curious and insatiable reader of fiction and had certain firm tastes and beliefs. He belonged — according to Zinov'ev's classical definition — to "the society of men dissatisfied with their situation". At the same time, he belonged to a persecuted minority, he had his own distinctive traditions, complexes and habits, typical of European Jews, he had a mission unrecognized by others and, thus,

3. Even though the concrete economic conditions of new immigrants' accommodation may vary from decade to decade, they remain sufficient, especially when propped up socially and ideologically. Despite all the tensions between different Jewish communities, immigrants remain socially welcome, and immigration has never ceased to be a political and national priority.


5. At least three of them, Zerkalo, Alef and Obitaemyi ostrov, deal mainly with art and belles lettres.