

Triple exclusion: Life stories of Jewish migrant academics from the Former Soviet Union at a contested university under siege

Abstract

Almost three decades have passed since the commencement of the largest influx of immigration in the history of the State of Israel, during which approximately one million Russian-speaking Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) immigrated to Israel. Thousands of these immigrants held academic positions in the FSU and sought to continue their work in Israeli academia, which at that time lacked the capacity to include them. Many of the immigrants were channelled to work and sometimes reside in the West Bank, a contested region acknowledged by the international community as occupied Palestinian land. This study examines life stories of scholars who emigrated from the FSU and are currently employed at Ariel University, an institution located in the Israeli city of Ariel in the West Bank. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with sixteen academics, this study explores their experiences of immigration, its effects on their academic career in Israel, and their integration into Ariel University in light of the intractable Israeli-Arab conflict. Triple exclusion is used as an umbrella construct to bring together three layers of participant experiences as Jews in Soviet society, as Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel, and as academics working at a contested institution. The study provides a nuanced analysis of each of these three layers of exclusion, offering insights for further research in the field of academic mobilities. Moreover, it reveals that many of the interviewed academics de-politicise the conflict, as a survival strategy, and thus contribute to the normalisation of the Israeli presence in the occupied territories of the West Bank.

Introduction

Almost one million people immigrated from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) to Israel in the last three decades (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). The gates of the Soviet Union were unsealed during the relatively liberal rule of Michael Gorbachev (1985-1991), when hundreds of thousands of Jews fled the country, heading mainly to Israel, Germany, the United States, and Australia. Most of these immigrants who headed to Israel arrived in the early 1990s, but the flow of immigrants continued in this century. Immigrants from the FSU have been characterised as highly educated and interested in preserving their cultural and linguistic heritage (Bodankin & Semyonov, 2016; Remennick, 2003). In contrast, Israeli society at that time was accustomed to large waves of immigrants from less privileged backgrounds (Smootha, 2008) and was known for its strong assimilationist approaches towards immigrants (Lewin-Epstein & Cohen, 2019).

Israel is a relatively young country, founded as a Jewish and democratic state in 1948 after the atrocities of the Holocaust and World War II. It is located in the Middle East and from its very beginnings has been engaged in intractable geo-political conflict with neighbouring Muslim countries. Israel rapidly developed from a centralised, agricultural entity into a westernised economy driven by high-tech industries that contribute to global scientific and industrial advancement. The Israeli population of nine million citizens consists of a Jewish majority of around 75 percent, most of whom either immigrated themselves or are no more than third-generation on the land, and an indigenous Palestinian Arab minority of around 20 percent. Five percent of the population is defined as “other,” including many immigrants from the FSU who had family relations with Jews, but are not Jewish according to the formal definitions of the state (CBS, 2019).

Despite the multiple marked divisions in Israeli society along ethnic, national, religious, and cultural lines, the biggest divide is between the Jewish and Arab populations (Agbaria, 2019; Sabbagh, 2019). Palestinian Arab Israeli citizens¹ reside in various regions around the country, mainly in Arab towns but also in mixed cities. Most Palestinians who are not Israeli citizens reside in the Gaza Strip enclave (nearly two million) or the West Bank territories (nearly three million). Many parts of the West Bank are under control of the Israeli state and acknowledged as occupied by the international community, with Jewish Israeli settlers residing in parts of the West Bank since the 1970s. Violent collisions occasionally occur between Jewish settlers and Palestinian residents, at times accompanied

¹ Although the term “Palestinian Arab Israeli citizens” is contested (see Magadley, Amara, and Jabareen [2019] for clarification), we use it here as it has been shown to be popular as a self-definition for this population.

by terror attacks on civilian populations carried out by Palestinians and clashes between the Israeli Defence Force and the Palestinian population.

For the most part, the West Bank settlers reside in small villages. However, there are four Jewish towns of at least 20,000 residents each in the West Bank, one of which is Ariel. Established in the 1980s, Ariel is inhabited by a population with a large proportion of immigrants, mainly from the FSU, who were channelled there because of the lower housing prices rather than necessarily any ideological motivation, as well as through informal pressure from various governmental agencies (Weiss, 2011).

Ariel University is Israel's youngest university and the fastest growing academic institution, located in the mountain ridge of Samaria in the West Bank. The institution was established in 1982 as a regional college and only in 2012 attained recognition by the state as a university – a status that has been furiously opposed by other universities in Israel (Authors, 2018), the international community, and left-wing political actors, given the campus' location in the occupied West Bank. Indeed, Ariel University is banned by the funding mechanisms of the European Union (EU) and the bi-national funds with Germany and the US. However, these funding repercussions have been partially addressed through the allocation of sizable subsidies from the Israeli government.

This study explored life stories of immigrant academics at Ariel University. Towards this aim, we carried out semi-structured interviews and conducted inductive analysis using the grounded theory framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The major themes that emerged through the interview data analysis were brought together under the umbrella construct of the triple exclusion that the participants of this study experienced as Jews in Soviet society, as Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel, and as academics working at a contested institution. The experiences of immigrant scholars who find themselves in the midst of a geopolitical conflict show how they normalise and de-politicise the conflict. While empathetic to these scholars' struggle for recognition, the study reveals how their professional development played a role in the legitimisation of Ariel University. In fact, the recognition of the university was enabled by its absorption of a large community of immigrant academics, many of whom lacked full awareness of the role they played in the political project called Ariel University.

Literature overview

This section starts by outlining the theoretical framework of exclusion and identity that is at the core of this study. Subsequently, the section provides a literature-based overview of the characteristics and absorption of immigrants from the FSU in Israel, with a focus on academic migrants. It then moves on to discuss the unique context of Ariel University, which constitutes the institutional setting of the study. The section ends by explaining some of the key concepts used in interpreting the data.

Theoretical background: Social exclusion

The concept of social exclusion is central to this investigation. Social exclusion refers to the de-facto marginalisation of individuals or a group by their surrounding societies, usually involving the restriction or denial of access to various resources available within surrounding society (Hills, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 2002; Hutchison, Abrams, & Christian, 2007). The term itself is contested; disputes exist regarding the agency of the excluded and causes of the exclusion (i.e., the individual or group itself, the nation state and its institutions, or globalisation and other processes). Our empirical data collection revealed that throughout the years, migrant academics have developed an acute sense of feeling unwanted and excluded, which deeply affects their identities. Strong feelings of exclusion can have damaging effects on social bonds, career plans, and living conditions (Johansson & Olofsson, 2011), while also shaping one's identity and a sense of belonging. This is true in various situations, especially when exclusion is linked to the experiences of migration. Often, immigrant scientists are perceived as inferior to their native-born colleagues in the host country. Occasionally, immigrant scientists even encounter racism and lack of appreciation in daily life and work (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Kidman & Chu, 2018). Katrine Fangen (2010) distinguishes five types of exclusion: educational, labour market, spatial, relational, and socio-political. As noted above, particularly relevant to this study is social exclusion in relation to education and work. These cases of 'othering' can vary from overt racism to institutionalised ways of treating someone as 'different,' such as offering special classes or projects targeted at specific groups of people (Fangen, 2010).

Indeed, immigrants' adaptation process in a new country may take several years and even decades. Research shows that maintaining one's culture of origin facilitates the process of adaptation to the new country, but often the pressure of the receiving society has a negative impact on immigrants (Lerner, 2013). Traditional assimilationist theories of social exclusion seem to be based on the

assumption that immigrants prefer inclusion to exclusion. In Israel, for example, there is an expectation of immediate ‘Israelization’ (Mirsky, 2005), meaning unconditional acceptance of the Israeli identity as a replacement for the diasporic identities that existed before the immigration. However, many immigrants from the FSU choose to stay outside the more institutionalised settings of society and sustain their former identities, sometimes referred to as “Russian.”

While immigrants are pressured to reshape their identities in Israel, as in any other immigrant society, the economic and social status of immigrants in Israel is relatively inferior. However, immigrants from the former Soviet Union feel ‘educational and cultural superiority’ (Lerner, Rappoport, & Lomsky-Feder, 2012:105) in relation to Sabras.² Lerner, Rappoport and Lomsky-Feder (2012) explain that this gap stems from a misunderstanding of ‘the cultural concepts of Russian Jews from the cultural concepts of their veteran Israeli people’ (105). These immigrants face greater barriers than locals, due to employers’ prejudice or their own inadequacies related to the lack of language fluency, for instance (Thorne & Griffel 1991). On the other hand, research shows that people of immigrant backgrounds often have extra drive, because they expect things to be more difficult (Lauglo, 2000). This study focuses on social exclusion as portrayed in the perceptions of immigrant scholars, who escaped from a society that excluded them only to find themselves excluded once again due to the circumstances of their personal and professional absorption. While revealing their life stories, we present the various forms of agency they practice and also discuss the macro-political consequences of their journeys.

Immigrants from the FSU in Israel and in the Ariel specifically

The State of Israel was founded on a belief in a nation-building project anchored in a claim of the common historical origin of all Jews as returning to their historical homeland, which they had never abandoned while living in exile since biblical times (Cohen, 2015; Cohen & Gordon, 2018). The first immigrants of the most substantial waves of immigration from the FSU to Israel arrived in 1989 (several smaller waves arrived in the early 1970s). In general, this initial wave of immigration was welcomed by the state. Some openly claimed that the Russian-speaking community would help in anchoring the Western nature of Jewish Israeli society, which at that time consisted of two broad communities almost equal in size; one of European-origin Jews and the other of Jews originating from Muslim countries in the North Africa and Asia (Smootha, 2008). In the late 1980s, Israel introduced a

² The popular term for native-born Israelis.

policy of "direct absorption," which freed the government of the responsibility for immigrant integration and allowed immigrants to find housing and jobs according to their abilities and needs (Mesch, 2002). Thus, immigrants who had the means to do so settled in the centre of the country, while others settled in its periphery. Additionally, despite the American administration's demand that the Israeli government refrain from deliberately settling immigrants beyond the Green Line as a condition for the US aid to Israel's immigration absorption endeavours, the State of Israel found ways to disperse its population to developing towns beyond the Green Line, and in particular to West Bank locales including Ariel (Tzameret, Halamish & Meir-Glitzenstein, 2009).

The great wave of immigration from the FSU brought substantial human capital potential. Many of the immigrants were well educated, although many of them received their education in isolated, Russian only based environment (Remennick, 2003); a very high percentage of men and women arrived with academic degrees (Sikron et al., 2000). The absorption process involved a transitional period in which the immigrants adjusted to their new environment, learned a new language, participated in vocational training courses, and searched for work. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, from the beginning of this immigration wave in 1989 through 1995, approximately 11,000 academics had immigrated to Israel with Ph.D. degrees and at least three academic publications each. Most of these immigrants were scientists; roughly half were specialised in physics or mathematics, a quarter in the natural sciences, and a smaller percentage in social sciences (Sikron et al., 2000). Immigrant academics encountered many difficulties in finding employment and required government assistance. According to the official reports, between 1995 and 2000, higher education institutions hired approximately 2,000 immigrant academics in temporary positions. Many others chose to remain in their non-academic workplaces, although they were unable to fully utilise their scientific skills and knowledge there (Sikron et al., 2000). A major impediment in the process of finding a suitable job or settling into a job was immigrant academics' inadequate knowledge of Hebrew and English. This was a serious limitation in terms of preparing successful research proposals and developing social ties with their colleagues. Indeed, Toren and Grippel (1991) compared the views of immigrant academics from the FSU and the United States regarding their professional lives in Israel and found that immigrants from the former Soviet Union faced greater difficulties in establishing social ties and in developing their research. Moreover, several recent studies address the direct and indirect discrimination, faced by these immigrants including state's denial of their belonging to Judaism, substantial constant othering of immigrants and their families and institutional

discrimination (Amit, 2018; Golden, 2003; Remennick & Prashizky, 2019). The media and consequently the public discourse portrayed the newcomers as non-Jews, women as prostitutes and men as alcoholics, making the relations between the native Israelis and new immigrants complex and negatively charged (Golden, 2003).

Notably, regardless of their origin, education background, or political origin, immigrants to Israel are affected by the country's occupation enterprise. The ceasefire of 1967 resulted in Israel asserting control over the West Bank territories. Neve Gordon (2008) describes Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands as involving a process of normalisation that shifted in 1990s from direct intervention in the lives and practices of Palestinians to indirect governance through control over infrastructure and resources, without assuming responsibility over Palestinians' lives and livelihoods. Until the mid-1980s, only a few hundred Jewish settlers chose to reside in the West Bank; however, during the last three decades, Jewish settlements in the West Bank mounted, fuelled by the financial burden of a neoliberal state, the appeal to some Israelis of pioneering Zionist ideology, and increasing immigration. Immigrants in particular, facing difficulties upon arrival in the "promised land," tended to be tempted by the various incentives offered by the state to those who choose to settle in the Occupied Territories. Among the settlements, the city of Ariel specifically offered a good education system, sense of community, affordable housing, and reasonable and relatively safe commute to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem (Weiss, 2011). As such, immigrant settlers in the West Bank are expressly entangled in the state's occupation and normalisation endeavours, although not necessarily through any cognizant decision on their part to support Israel's occupation efforts.

Indeed, immigrant settlers in Ariel seem to be mostly preoccupied with their private affairs; they perceive themselves as neither agents nor victims of the state (Weiss, 2011). Immigrant scholars from the FSU are generally indifferent to Ariel's precarious status and less troubled by its broader ramifications than their native Israeli colleagues. They are less integrated in local professional networks and define themselves according to individual attachments (Weiss, 2011). Their earlier experience under a totalitarian regime leaves them distrustful of collective institutions, particularly government-sponsored ones (Leshem & Sicron, 2004). Immigrants from the FSU question the national ethos (Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport, 2001) and take on an individualist orientation that contributes to their separateness (Kimmerling, 2001). In tracing immigrants from the FSU over the 30 years since their arrival, Al-Haj (2019) found that the vast majority still maintain a strong sense of nostalgia for and social and cultural ties with their country of origin, a deep pride in their original

culture, and a strong desire to maintain their Russian culture and language. Simultaneously, native-born Israelis identify them first and foremost on the basis of their Russian-ethnic origin rather than through civil Israeli or Jewish components of identity (Al-Haj, 2019). Immigrants follow a political course confined within market perimeters, based on their pragmatic concern for their own interests. While older generations traditionally voted for sectorial parties and tended to align with the political right wing, recently the voting patterns among immigrants from the FSU were found to be similar to those of the veteran Israeli population (Khanin, 2011; Shamir & Rahat, 2015). However, immigrants' human and material investments in the city of Ariel specifically, which generated value in the West Bank, also bolstered their successful absorption in their new homeland (Weiss, 2011).

Ariel University

The Ariel University of Samaria (its official name) was established in 1982 as a college – the Academic College of Judea and Samaria – under the support and supervision of the religiously oriented Bar-Ilan University. Initially, the college had two branches – one in the settlement of Kedumim and one in Ariel. In 1990, all college activities were transferred to the Ariel campus. The founders hoped that this step would expand the institution and attract students from the population outside of the West Bank (Davidovitch & Soen, 2009). Since the 1990s, in a deliberate process that lasted over 20 years, the institution managed to attain university status, which was officially confirmed in 2012. Since its establishment, the university has been growing steadily and is expected to continue to develop, in terms of both its growing faculty and student populations and its physical infrastructure. This development is made possible mainly by the State of Israel, which invests heavily in this institution, disproportionately to its investments in other academic institutions (Krupsky, 2016). According to the university's website, researchers at Ariel University are engaged in over 500 studies and projects in a variety of academic disciplines, including Engineering, Natural Sciences, Life Sciences, Social Sciences, Health Sciences, Mass Communication and Architecture. With a student body of 11,000 and 300 faculty members, it is the fast-growing Israeli university. A prominent milestone in the university's development was the recruitment of academics from the former Soviet Union who arrived in Israel in the early 1990s, today constituting more than half of the faculty and the vast majority of the faculty in hard sciences. While major part of the academic staff at Ariel University composed of FSU immigrants, the instruction and teaching are solely in Hebrew and all

academics we interviewed possessed a high level of proficiency in Hebrew and in English (required for research).

Given its location in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank, Ariel University has struggled to be recognised and legitimised by the international community and by parts of the Israeli public (Authors, 2018). Indeed, the university is subject to boycotts by institutions, organisations, and academics within Israel and worldwide (Davidovitch & Iram, 2014). The decision to recognise the institution as a formal research university was strongly criticised on political grounds by several members of the Council of Higher Education, by other Israeli universities, and by prominent Israeli academics (Authors, 2018); the university leadership maintains that the decision was limited to academic criteria and ignored political considerations (Lex, 2010). Notably, Ariel University's researchers are prohibited from submitting grant proposals for international research funds, and some have reported being banned from international conferences, forums, and publications (Authors, 2018).

Although Ariel University operates in the geographical area of the West Bank, it is totally disconnected from the Palestinian institutions. According to the Ariel University website, there are numerous Palestinian Arab students studying at Ariel University; yet we could not find evidence that any of them come from the West Bank. Still, the fact that Palestinian students attend Ariel University further provides legitimisation to the institution and contributes to the normalisation of the current state of affairs.

Palestine has eight universities and four colleges, all of which offer bachelor's degrees in arts and sciences, while a few offer limited programmes that lead to master's degrees (Abu Lughod, 2000). These institutions serve over 52,000 students, drawn from the population base of slightly less than five million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian institutions of higher education employ some academics with degrees obtained at European or American universities, teach and use textbooks in Arabic and English, and receive financial support from the EU.

Methodology

The study followed the professional life stories of 16 scholars who immigrated from the FSU and are currently employed as faculty members at Ariel University. The first author identified scholars through snowball sampling, accompanied by a purposeful search of immigrant scholars (by their

names) on the university's website. We followed the principles of theoretical sampling and refined the sample on the basis of the analysis of each additional interview. We sought to interview a diverse sample in terms of their age, year of immigration and country of origin, academic rank, and gender. Out of 16 participants, eight were 45 years old or younger, nine migrated to Israel in the early 1990s, and only four were female. The participants immigrated from Russia (6), Ukraine (5), Uzbekistan (2), Belarus, Georgia, and Tajikistan. Most of them very educated in Israel, thus were proficient in Hebrew and English. All participants worked in the field of mathematical, physical, and life sciences, and were at different stages of their careers – ranging from the last phases of their doctoral degrees to the ultimate years nearing retirement. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tel Aviv University Ethics Committee prior to undertaking the fieldwork. Participants were first contacted by email. Once they provided their preliminary consent, an interview was arranged. Most of these semi-structured interviews were held at the academics' own offices at Ariel, while several took place in the faculty lounge. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The respondents were given a choice to speak in English, Hebrew, or Russian; most interviews were conducted in Russian. The three interviews that all the three authors conducted together were held in English, with spontaneous transitions into Russian and Hebrew. All of the interviews were conducted in spring 2019.

The process of interviewing, analysis, and revision of interview questions was cyclical; the preliminary analysis of interviews started during the data collection stage, and the interview questions were refined throughout the process. At the beginning of the interview, each respondent was asked to share his or her life story from childhood to adulthood, including the migration story and experiences of settling in Israel. This formed the basis for an in-depth conversation with the interviewee and allowed us to pose questions relevant to the individual's circumstances of migration and absorption in Israel. Specific questions were posed regarding these academics' experiences of working at the university and commuting to Ariel or living in the area.

The diverse personal and professional experiences of the authors helped to balance the insider-outsider perspectives during the study design and the data analysis. The first author is a Jewish immigrant from the FSU who struggled to find her place within Israeli academia; most of the interviews echoed her own experiences, thus enabling a more nuanced, context-sensitive exploration and discussion. The second and the third authors were also born in the FSU. The second author is a Jewish immigrant from Ukraine to Israel, whose family immigrated when she was twelve. The third

author does not have direct links with Israel or Jewish origins; she is an academic immigrant from the FSU, currently working in the UK.

The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the first author. The three authors read the transcripts and established the codes independently, sharing observations on new themes and new questions to be asked in subsequent interviews, following the principles of grounded theory. When the saturation was reached, the authors independently read through all interview transcripts and came up with the list of themes. The themes were consolidated to generate the list of codes for the analysis. Finally, we developed the narrative report of findings on the basis of these codes.

Interviews provided insights into life stories of immigrant scholars employed at Ariel University regarding their experiences prior to their immigration and their subsequent professional integration within this politically controversial institution. The study provides a glimpse into struggles in the context of a contested political situation – one that these scholars found themselves to be active participants in, sometimes without proper understanding of this reality at the beginning of their career at Ariel. We follow the sense they make out of this situation, revealing how the state's enterprises played an active role in shaping the lives of these scholars alongside the broader reality of Jews and Palestinians in the area.

Findings: Triple exclusion

Interviewed academics shared stories of their lives, starting from their experiences as pupils at Soviet schools and delving in-depth into their current life and work as Russian-speaking migrant scholars working at a university under siege. The academics' professional experiences revealed a common theme of exclusion; i.e., being actively prevented from enjoying the same rights and freedoms as others in their community. They reported that exclusion happened at different periods in their lives, but even such experiences that took place in the distant past played an important role in their perceptions and rationalisations. They shared experiences of exclusion as Jews in Soviet society, as Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel, and as academics working at a contested institution. Here, we bring together these three layers of exclusion under the umbrella construct of triple exclusion.

Exclusion suffered by Jews in the FSU

Jews in Soviet society were recognised as an excluded minority. A number of our interviewees described the physical and verbal abuse they experienced at Soviet schools. They used to be beaten

up by pupils and teachers and had to ‘learn through fear’ (Boris³). Besides the physical abuse, they felt they were often mistreated academically, being graded harsher than others were (Jenia). The perceived abuse continued in higher education. Jenia recollected how he had to defend his doctorate twice despite producing a strong thesis and having several academic publications. Jenia felt that he was never given valid reasons why he had to struggle so much to obtain his doctorate and attributed the difficulties to his Jewish origins. The struggle continued for him after he was appointed Department Head at a Russian university. Colleagues used to try to bully him into resignation, as they did not wish to have a Jewish Head. This and other experiences represent typical examples of the harassment of Jews that was normalised in Soviet society (Yuval Davis, 1990).

Different forms of harassment and the resultant feelings of exclusion pushed many of the interviewees to work harder to demonstrate their academic abilities and minimise opportunities for others to humiliate them. They felt they ‘had to excel all the time’ (Larisa). A few study participants indicated that they graduated from their secondary schools with honours, as they had ‘no other choice’ (Jenia, Larisa). In some ways, these struggles were perceived as useful in terms of developing individuals’ resilience and motivating them to seek a better life. The common characteristic of Soviet immigrants was ‘a certain tenacity and some kind of idealism to explore in order to truly understand how things work. The interest and determination not to give up was also very important’ (Vladimir). This tenacity, or ‘Soviet immunity’ (Larisa), was a recurring theme in the interviews, in which respondents talked about ‘a built-in feature within us, that if you do something you do it best and take it all the way’ (Kostia). The tenacity helped many of them live through the exclusion in the FSU and move on. In Larisa’s words, ‘for the rest of our lives we have to prove that we are better than others. We are used to working and we must be better than everyone else in order to succeed.’

Indeed, this exclusion was an underlying factor in the decision to emigrate. Some participants aspired to break away from the anti-Semitic environment in the Soviet Union after learning about Israel from others or through their own travel experiences. Yasha explains:

I came to Israel as a tourist and I was impressed. There was a lot of freedom here – Jewish freedom – that only the people in exile can understand. You do not have to blush when you talk about Jews. In Israel, they make jokes about Jews and everyone laughs. Back in the Soviet Union, I did not laugh because of covert anti-Semitism. I had a hard time with it. When I came here to Beer Sheva on vacation and saw that everyone was Jewish, it was mind-blowing.

³ All names are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Besides their own life stories of discrimination, some respondents shared the experiences of their Jewish spouses in the FSU. Alexander recollected how persistent his wife was about their immigration to Israel: 'she said she would not live in the Soviet Union; she was tired of us being mistreated as a Jew. She wanted to go to Israel so much that she was ready to work in the kitchen or as a cleaner.' Under those circumstances, making Aliyah (the Hebrew term for moving to the Land of Israel) was an act of great hope.

Some reported that their colleagues and acquaintances envied the opportunity they got to 'start over' (Oleg) and considered them lucky, as they were able to escape Russia where the academic research environment was 'not at its best' (Yasha), and 'where science has been destroyed or almost destroyed because of the government, because of the environment of dependence and fear' (Kostia). Indeed, most reported escaping the environment of exclusion and terror, and were less motivated by potential financial gains of moving to Israel. Immigrant academics were hoping for a setting in which they would not be abused for their Jewish background and where they be able to pursue their academic careers. Indeed, the majority of interviewees recognised the professional opportunities that opened up to them in Israel. However, they were also aware of the challenges associated with being a Russian-speaking immigrant academic from the FSU and being based at a contested university under siege; these were not the challenges that they had anticipated before immigrating.

The exclusion of being "Russian" in Israel

Immigrant academics from the FSU brought with them their academic qualifications, as well as the spirit of trying to consistently excel in all undertakings. The majority arrived with very limited financial means and very few professional contacts in their new homeland; they did not speak Hebrew, 'did not know the mentality and did not know what I deserved and what I needed' (Alexander). Two-thirds of the study participants came to Israel having completed their higher education in the FSU. Boris, however, was a teenager when he immigrated. He shared the story of his university registration. When the time came register for academic studies, he explains that he did not even consider anywhere else except for the Technion (Israel's top-ranked science institution). As he explained it, 'I wanted the best. And in the end I was accepted to the Technion. There is something deeply ingrained in our feeling that we must succeed.'

Despite great motivation to succeed, certain circumstances made these academics feel unappreciated or even excluded. Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel have experienced different forms of exclusion at various stages of their careers and education. One-third of the study participants

immigrated to Israel with their families while they were still at school; they recollected their first experiences at Israeli schools as ‘isolating.’ Their classmates were mostly other immigrants, and they had few interactions with locals during their first years at Israeli schools. However, the experience of isolation turned into one of integration for those who served in the Israel Defence Forces, as part of the compulsory military service in Israel; Russian-speaking immigrants were a minority in the army, but they reported receiving support from their Israeli peers in learning Hebrew.

In university – whether studying or working – the immigrant struggle continued, largely because of their insufficient language skills. Moreover, finding an academic job was a real challenge for all interviewees, irrespective of their career stage. Some of our interviewees shared the experiences of their acquaintances who were immigrants with doctorates from the FSU and who never managed to obtain an academic post; they had been channelled into alternative skilled or unskilled occupations. Alexander, while acknowledging the systemic limitations imposed by the absorption capacity of one-and-a-half million immigrants in a country of nine million residents, referred to the underutilisation of skills of immigrants with higher degrees as ‘exploitation.’

The exclusion of being an academic at a contested university in the West Bank

While the academic job market in Israel is extremely competitive, Ariel University is relatively less competitive than other Israeli universities, for both students and academics. Indeed, the participants of this study did succeed in securing a job at Ariel, but they had failed to obtain academic positions at well-established universities elsewhere in Israel, despite their efforts. Even those with post-doctoral experiences in Western Europe and the US and solid publication records were not able to obtain a post at the highly competitive Israeli universities. For example, as Boris explained, after he returned from a post-doctorate in France to Israel, it was very hard for him to find a job. As opposed to his determined registration to study at the Technion only, this time he applied for posts ‘everywhere.’ However, ‘everywhere I applied, I received applause, but at the end nothing came of it.’

Boris ultimately found a job at Ariel; so did Oleg, who held postdoctoral appointments in Germany and Spain prior to getting a post at Ariel. The process of finding an academic job was even harder for those who did not have post-doctoral experiences at recognised Western universities. Some of these professionals, like Kostia, had to temporarily leave academia and work in industry before ending up at Ariel after a five-year-long academic job search. In this highly competitive environment,

getting a job at Ariel was perceived as a considerable achievement. Indeed, certain academics were told that they were suitable for the job, but Ariel did not have the finances to hire them. Vladik, for instance, managed to secure a fellowship that financed his employment at Ariel.

The struggle of Russian-speaking immigrants to establish themselves at Ariel University continued long after they secured an academic job. The perceived exclusion – demonstrated in the day-to-day battles to get office space, lab space, lab equipment/materials, and students – was heightened among interviewees who had also encountered open harassment within and outside their workplace. Boris said he has been called ‘a stinky Russian,’ and that his way of dealing with such situations was trying ‘not to think about it’ and concentrating on the fact that he succeeded in achieving his current academic status ‘despite or because of these experiences.’

Interviewees noted the sizable Russian-speaking community at Ariel that provided a support network for some. ‘Here in Ariel, both in the city and at the university, there are many immigrants from the FSU. I can spend a whole day speaking only Russian,’ shared Vladik. Indeed, two-thirds (67%) of academics working at Ariel University are immigrants from the FSU (Ariel University, 2019). This fact contributes to the creation of the work environment conducive to close collaboration and cultural understanding. ‘Overall there is a warm atmosphere here and no one is thinking about stabbing you in the back,’ explained Kostia. Academics support each other, especially at early stages of their career. Larisa recollected how difficult it was to teach in Hebrew when she first started her job and how a colleague of hers, also an immigrant from the FSU, helped her with lecture materials and general guidance. Outside their workplace, most interviewees were friends with other immigrants from the FSU, ‘probably because of the shared outlook on life’ (Kostia) and the easier connection (Larisa). This wider immigrant community was sometimes viewed as one’s own family in the context where ‘[native-born] Israelis have a security blanket, a family that can help. And the lonely immigrants lack this’ (Oleg). While the security of a local Russian-speaking community might have been comforting to some, the globalisation of higher education places considerable demands on academics in isolated institutions; and interviewed academics were aware of these global pressures and their own limitations stemming from their institutional affiliation.

The last three decades have brought about an unprecedented expansion globalism in higher education, with partnerships between universities in different countries becoming more extensive, global collaborations in research becoming more habitual, and the number of internationally co-authored publications booming (Marginson, 2018). In the context of the dramatic expansion of

research activity globally, working at a contested institution under siege is isolating. The academics we interviewed noted that as employees of Ariel University, they are not eligible to apply for grants from various European and American sources, face difficulties in finding international collaborators, and often have their manuscript submissions rejected by reputable academic journals. Some blamed those affiliated with other, more prestigious Israeli universities, such as Tel Aviv University and the Weizmann Institute of Science, for supporting the ‘economic boycott’ of Ariel University. Most of the interviewed academics considered the academic boycott unfair; Tolik argued, for example: ‘I do not think that reviewers of manuscripts should pay attention to the institution where the manuscript’s author is based.’ Others expressed cynicism concerning the boycott. Alexander wondered, for instance, what would happen if researchers at Ariel succeed in developing a new cancer drug that they are working on: would the breakthrough not be published, and ‘would others not use it?’

Due to Ariel University’s ban from the European Commission and other major funding agencies in Europe and the US, its main research funder is the Israeli Ministry of Science. Most of the interviewed scholars’ international collaborators are based at universities in Russia. Oleg explained these extensive collaborations with academics at Russian universities through two circumstances. First, Russians do not consider the geopolitical location of Ariel University as problematic. Second, the many Russian-speaking academics at Ariel make communication with Russian researchers effortless. However, Kostia noted one important limitation for developing collaborations with Russian academics: ‘many academics in Russia are beyond their retirement age. Preparing publications with them takes more time.’

A common obstacle many of our interviewees noted is opposition from academics at other Israeli universities who refuse to recognise Ariel University as an Israeli university. Kostia recollects an experience he encountered at a conference abroad after he introduced himself: ‘I presented myself as a scholar from Ariel, explaining its location in the centre of the country. An Israeli attendee jumped in and began to argue that Ariel was not in Israel.’ Such experiences of boycott were professionally isolating. Moreover, being based at Ariel is also physically isolating; interviewees, especially those who commuted to work from outside the West Bank, expressed being somewhat concerned about their safety there. The commuters pass through security checkpoints on a daily basis, with ‘soldiers in full heavy equipment standing at the intersections’ (Izhak). A few academics mentioned the daily experience of fear in driving to and from the workplace, usually with humour: ‘I’m not afraid to come here. I have a new car that is very fast’ (Lena). Kostia discussed fear in the context of the risk of terror

attacks: ‘There is a risk, of course. It can happen to anyone anywhere here. But as soon as I enter the city, which is fenced and secured, there is no longer any fear.’ Interviewees consider driving fast on the motorway as a measure to decrease the risk of being shot from the surrounding territories that are not controlled by the Israeli government. In contrast, those who lived in Ariel enjoy walking to and from work, and feel protected. ‘Ariel is a very special city. I have been living here for six years. The city is very calm and peaceful,’ explained Larisa.

We found that most interviewed academics normalise and de-politicise life and work in the midst of intractable conflict. Despite the experiences of triple exclusion, quite a few of the immigrant academics interviewed would agree with Kostia’s statement that ‘I love my work and I do not complain. I live in a democracy and have academic freedom’; some might even agree with Boris that ‘where I am now is my dream.’ Especially when compared with the academic work environment in some former Soviet countries, working at a contested Israeli institution can be seen as a blessing, as Yasha sees it: ‘Russia is 30 years backwards. The country has become totalitarian; there is no freedom and a lot of brainwashing there. We should be proud that we live in the State of Israel.’ Yet, these academics live in the midst of intractable conflict where everything – their day-to-day life, alongside their research funding, conference participation, and publishing opportunities – revolved around the Israeli-Arab conflict, which always remains at the centre of all political manoeuvres. Only a few interviewees, like Yasha, had strong sentiments regarding the politicisation of Israeli academia and were concerned that academics from other Israeli universities consistently interfere to negatively influence professional links that academics from Ariel University built with their colleagues abroad. Indeed, Albert mentioned some academics from other Israeli universities who went as far as to write letters to potential funders of colleagues of his at Ariel, reminding to them of the contested status of Ariel University. ‘I think that this is a mistake, and it hurts researchers at Ariel,’ Yasha concurred.

The majority of interviewees, however, chose to avoid being political at all costs. ‘I do not want to discuss politics,’ explained Alexander in reference to politics in its broad sense, including discussing the politics of building international links, applying for funding from various international and national sources, and even politics within Israeli academia. Some of those who normalised and depoliticised the conflict were not aware of the political tensions related to working at Ariel when they accepted their job offers, and chose to remain neutral in any conversation on politics. These immigrant academics remained focused on the benefits – the fact that this job allowed them to pursue their academic interests and to be paid for that. Yet even they acknowledged that because of the

boycott, ‘things are not smooth here. The working conditions are not optimal’ (Kostia). On the whole, Ariel’s status as a contested institution seems to lead to less-than-optimal resources for its faculty members, with inadequately-equipped labs, limited access to databases, less administrative support, fewer post-graduate students, and fewer opportunities for undertaking collaborative work. Some of the interviewees have been considering moving to another university. However, these are a small minority.

Although generally avoiding engagement in political topics, a few scholars including Itzhak mentioned that they justify their work at Ariel University in part by the fact that the University provides an opportunity for Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. These interviewees observed that some Palestinian Arab students with high academic credentials benefit from an education there, but also noted that most Palestinian Arab students at Ariel University did not come from the West Bank; they were from other locations in Israel, such as Jerusalem. Only small minority of interviewees opened up freely about their views on Palestinians. Itzhak expressed compassion: ‘I do believe that the population of Palestinians is the poorest population; they have nowhere to go and they are imprisoned here.’ However, his open expression about an issue that lies at the heart of the conflict in the midst of which he works and which he legitimised through his own work was exceptional among his peers. To a certain extent, his statements reflect acknowledgement of the role academics play in the normalisation of the Israeli presence on the occupied territories. Another outlier in this regard, Oleg, identified himself as politically left-wing, within an institution at which most faculty members, he claimed, are right-wing: ‘most of those who work here belong to the right. Leftist people will not choose to work here, even though Tel Aviv University itself is built on the site of a former Arab village.’ In contrast, one of the other few interviewees who offered explicitly political views, Nicolai, said that he does not see Ariel as an occupied territory; ‘it is part of the State of Israel, and all the residents belong to the State of Israel. I am a proud right-winger.’

Concluding thoughts

This study improves our understanding of experiences of migrant academics based at higher education institutions dealing with sanctions from governments and international organisations. Given the flows of highly educated immigrants and the severe shortage of academic positions at well-established universities in Israel, Ariel University absorbed a large community of immigrant academics. This is a diverse pool of academics with many different identities – Soviet, Russian,

secular, Israeli, rightist, leftist, politically neutral. Mapping this range of identities lies beyond the scope of this study. We explored life stories of Jewish migrant academics from the FSU who have lived and worked at the crossroads of imperial conflicts and colonial histories. The study sheds light on the domain of academic work in a contested environment, to improve our understanding of academic migration in the midst of conflict. However, the main goal of the study was to reveal some of the perspectives of immigrant scholars working under such contested conditions regarding their own past and the present, and to portray their reflections, despair, and hope. Having experienced triple exclusion as Jews in Soviet society, as Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel, and as academics working at a contested institution, these scholars have been struggling for recognition on multiple fronts. Social exclusion occurs when an individual is not invited to fully participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives (Hills, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 2002). Our interviewees consider themselves to have suffered from social exclusion both before and after immigration, as well as in their integration into Israeli academia. Here, we offer a glimpse into the sense of agency these individuals express in dealing with this triple exclusion.

Resilience was the single strongest cross-cutting theme in the interviews. ‘That which does not kill you makes you stronger’; Kostia noted as his motto to live by. Or in Alexander’s words, ‘emigration is like removing a tree from the ground, putting it on an airplane; it dries up on the road, and then replants itself and sees if it picks up.’ Interviewees talked about their stubbornness, idealism, optimism, genuine interest, and determination in explaining the personal characteristics that supported them in their academic journeys. Larisa defined such resilience as ‘immunity ... something really good and important ... don’t wait for forgiveness from someone, just do everything yourself with your own will-power; this is the only way to succeed, to take things in your own hands.’ The triple exclusion experienced made these academics rather resilient to the challenges of immigrant life. Various types of exclusion – educational, labour market, spatial, relational, and socio-political (Fangen, 2010:133) – built up the character of academics from the FSU, since they became resilient and at the same time indifferent to politics around them, as well as focused on their private affairs. The concepts of exclusion and identity are central to this study, as the empirical data strongly suggested that academic immigrants from the FSU felt alienated and unwanted in Israel. Immigrants encounter racism and lack of appreciation in their daily life and work (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Kidman & Chu, 2018). There are different ways of dealing with exclusion and marginalization (Thomas & Olofsson, 2011), and these immigrant scholars chose to forge their own paths to success.

The study presented the voices of migrant academics who generally consider themselves to be successfully employed and whose daily pursuits are similar to those of their academic colleagues elsewhere – planning and implementing research projects, teaching, writing, working with their students and colleagues. We found a sense of partnership and cooperation among the interviewed academics, and at the same time a sense of belonging to and embeddedness within their institution.

While the interviewed academics succeeded to a certain extent in coping with social exclusion, their compliance with a contested institution is also discussed in light of the macro-political context of occupation, to which they contribute as employees of Ariel University. Most of the interviewed academics de-politicise the situation, and thus complicity encourage the normalisation of the Israeli presence in the occupied territories of the West Bank. Indisputably, their employment at Ariel serves to legitimise the university, the recognition of which was enabled by its absorption of a large community of immigrant academics from the FSU. Whether cognizant or not of the role they play in the State of Israel's occupation project, these immigrant academics from the FSU do acknowledge that Ariel University absorbed them and gave them an opportunity to thrive where other academic institutions failed to do so; thus, the relationship between these scholars and the institution is symbiotic.

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