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## Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies

### The New Wave of Russian-Jewish Cultural Production: An Evening With Anya Ulinich and Lara Vapnyar

“I’m done loving Russia, but I keep going back,” the novelist Anya Ulinich told an audience at the Harriman Institute on Thursday, December 4, 2014, during a reading and discussion with fellow American Russian-Jewish émigré novelist, Lara Vapnyar. The pair opened “The New Wave of Russian-Jewish (Trans-national and Trans-generic) Cultural Production” conference with a discussion of writing, their troubled relationships with Russia, and sex in the Soviet Union.

Ulinich, who moved from Moscow to Phoenix, Arizona, as a teenager in the early ‘90s, is a formally trained painter. In the United States, she discovered that “a talent for making realistic images is like riding a unicycle—interesting, but totally useless.” She became a writer instead, publishing her critically acclaimed first novel, *Petropolis*, in 2007. But recently, she found a way to put her visual arts training to use. Her second book, which appeared among the *New York Times*’ Hundred Notable Books of 2014, is a graphic novel called *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel* (Penguin, 2014).

Ulinich joked that the story of Lena, her thirty-seven-year-old Russian-born Jewish novelist protagonist, is “exactly seventy percent autobiographical.” She read from several sections of the novel, displaying images for the audience on a projector. Lena is recently divorced with two children, and finds herself in the heat of an existential crisis: she fears she has lost her agency, allowing life to drag her along instead of directing it herself. To cope, she goes on an online dating binge. “Because,” said Ulinich, “thirty-seven is the new twenty-seven.”

Ulinich was never much of a comic book reader, and had to learn the tenets of the genre on the fly (she had no idea, for instance, how to differentiate visually between speech and thought). Puzzled by how to illustrate Lena’s rich interiority, she decided to put the character in imaginary conversation with famous authors, fictional characters, and a miniature alter ego who questions

Lena’s choices and debunks her ideas. The crux of the novel, said Ulinich, is that “life is a serious thing that will hurt you.”

Ulinich sees her story as universal and laments that literary readers have tended to relegate it to the “comic book” genre, while comic book readers have rejected it as too literary. “It’s a story like any story,” she said. “I’m looking forward to the time when it doesn’t live in the comics ghetto of bookstores.”

Anna Katsnelson, conference organizer and moderator of the discussion, identified a common thread between the works of Ulinich and Vapnyar: both authors explore the loss and rediscovery of sexuality. Ulinich’s Lena reawakens her sexuality with her midlife dating spree, while the protagonist of Vapnyar’s new novel, *The Scent of Pine*, who also happens to be named Lena, rediscovers hers during a midlife affair. Katsnelson wondered whether these characters’ tenuous relationships with sex were the result of inadequate sex education in the Soviet Union. Ulinich laughed, “What sex education?” And Vapnyar explained that the Soviet Union was at least fifty years behind other countries. “We had nothing. We found everything in classic literature. I had the Soviet *Kama Sutra—1001 Arabian Nights*. That’s where I learned everything as a young girl,” she said.

Vapnyar experienced only the very beginning of Russia’s sexual revolution, before moving from Moscow to New York City in 1994. When she arrived, she knew almost no English, and learned it by reading books and watching movies. “Seriously,” she said, “I learned English from *Pretty Woman!*” By 2003, she published her first short story—about, of all things, a Soviet sex education class—in *The New Yorker*. Vapnyar said that the effort required to write in English caused her writing to become lyrical.

In *The Scent of Pine*, Vapnyar contrasts her heroine’s extramarital sexual exploration with flashbacks to a repressed childhood in Gorbachev-

era Moscow and a teenage summer as a camp counselor. At camp, Lena is tasked with enforcing a ban on masturbation that she can't bring herself to implement. Twenty-five years later, she finds herself sleeping with a man who brings her life choices into question and makes her realize that, despite having married and become a mother, she has never truly explored her sexuality. It is only in middle age, with this new man, that she learns to open herself to sex and love.

Both Vapnyar and Ulinich return to Russia in their fiction. When Katsnelson asked about the

authors' relationship to their country of birth, each agreed that the land of her childhood is gone, and expressed disappointment about the current political situation in Russia. "I'm just waiting for Putin to go away," said Ulinich. "I'll move back there after they have a revolution." To which Vapnyar nodded emphatically.

*Reported by Matthew Van Meter  
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