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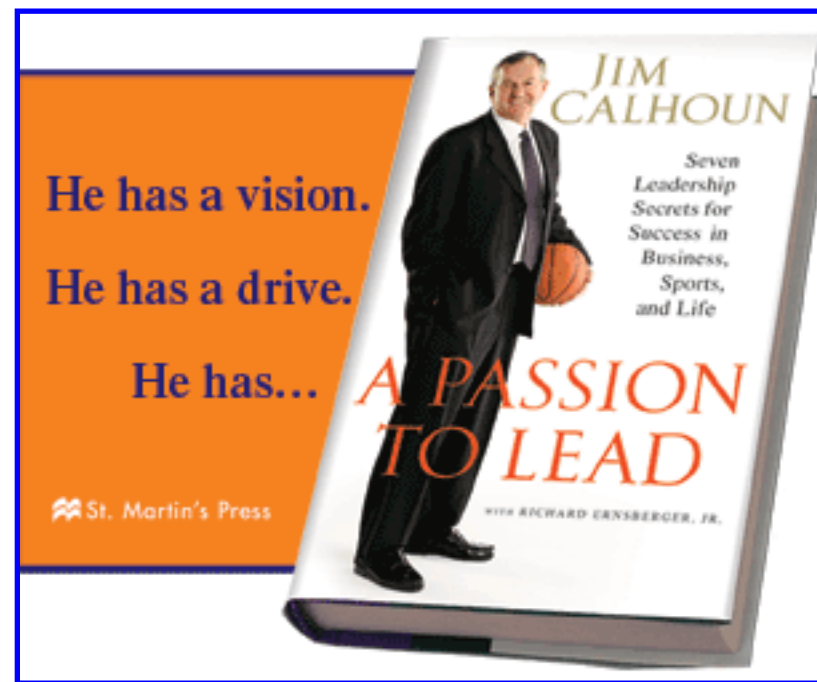
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## Finding Their Home In America

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It may always be sunny in Philadelphia, but not in Pittsburgh, at least not in Squirrel Hill, the neighborhood where a steady influx of Russian-Jewish immigrants has made its new home.

The gloomy weather, dilapidated old houses and stores selling Kiev cakes provide a melancholy but oddly reassuring refuge. That suits these wanderers, many of whom were professionals but now survive through welfare, menial work or computer-programming jobs. After deprivation and discrimination in Russia, low expectations areas high as they can comfortably reach.

Ellen Litman gives marvelous voice to a dispirited community tentatively absorbing American aspirations in her debut novel, "The Last Chicken in America." Litman, who immigrated to Pittsburgh in 1992 when she was 19, earned an MFA from Syracuse University, won a Rona Jaffe Award and now is an assistant professor and associate director of creative writing in the English Department at the

University of Connecticut.

Although the stories that comprise her novel are not autobiographical, they are based on life in Squirrel Hill, where the stresses of being strangers in a strange land are exacerbated by clashes between the generations. Through the voices of disaffected teens, disillusioned moms and ailing oldsters, Litman conveys a community in flux, always with dry wit and an empathetic heart.

Not as over-the-top as fellow Russian-immigrant writer Gary Shteyngart, nor as dark as David Bezmozgis nor as surreal as Anya Ulinich, Litman writes with admirable control sharpened by sardonic humor. Her characters, young and old, are wise and resigned to the absurdity that marked life in Russia and followed them here.

The book opens and closes with Masha, for whom the supermarket "is still a bit of a miracle..." When her frantic mother starts loading the cart with frozen chicken parts, her always-cranky father snaps:

"Slow down, Lina. It's not the last chicken in America."

At her parents' urging, she dates Alick, a college boy who will lift her up and then let her down, and she gingerly navigates the cliques at school. She knows this much:

"This is what's wrong with immigration. Those who could be your friends at home here become cautious competitors. Parents envy their children... It's about surviving. Immigration distorts people. We walk around distorted."

Masha, who appears in several stories, has some adventures in baby-sitting that show her the downside of success, American-style but she is not the only character to whom Litman introduces us.

There also are Mira and Liberman, two elderly folks who meet on the plane to the U.S. and warily become entangled; Tanya, whose stultifying marriage is threatened by a ballet dancer; and Natasha, who is living life "In the Man-Free Zone." There's Lariska, who is settling for marriage with the boorish Zhenechka; Kamyshinskiy, who has lost a wife and is pursuing a woman his daughter's age; and Kostya Kogan, who left his wife for a dancer whose act involves a python, but all he really wants is to go home again.

In fact, all these characters really want to go home again, but home, when you are a recent immigrant, is elusive. Still, as Masha realizes in the final story, the journey has not been for nothing.

"They were trying," she thinks. "And maybe not everything was a mistake. Maybe we had learned something, and next time we'd do a little better, if only we gave it a chance."

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ELLEN LITMAN will talk about "The Last Chicken in America on Saturday at 4 p.m. at Burgundy Books, 4 Norwich Road, East Haddam. Information: 860-575-3761.

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