Julia Bernstein

Transnational Contested Identities and Food Practices of Russian-Speaking Jewish Migrants in Israel and Germany

Food for Thought

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Julia Bernstein is a lecturer at the Institute for comparative educational studies and social sciences of Cologne University.

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I would like to dedicate this book to my beloved grandfather,
Max Segal

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May, 2010 Julia Bernstein

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1 Migration collages: Studying Russian-speaking Jews in Israel and Germany

The study focuses on migrants who are involved, by necessity, in reconstructing their cultural perceptions as well as finding and confirming their place in a new reality. The comparative investigation presented here was conducted in two different contexts—Germany and Israel—among Jewish immigrants who came from the former Soviet Union (SU) after the initiation of *Perestroika*. The study's principal aim is to examine the multiple affiliations of immigrants that were shaped and modified in these two different cultural and social contexts. This analysis highlights and illuminates the cosmological perceptions and self-definitions of migrants transported from the SU along with their own meaningful experiences and interpretation of key concepts and symbols (Golden 2002; Stonequist 1935, 1937). Undertaken as a project in cultural anthropology, this study aspires to highlight the sites of conjunction and contradictions between, on the one hand, the ideas and perceptions that evolved while living in the SU; and, on the other hand, the expectations of receiving societies, normative thinking, and everyday knowledge of dominant host society.

1.1 Migration and socio-cultural affiliations

One of the basic, central premises of the study is that the perceptions as well as the physical conditions of the individual are dynamic and subject to change. Therefore, identities of individual and collective affiliations also undergo changes. As, for example, in the foods selected and prepared by immigrants on their dining table. Hence, we will find that these food products symbolize being—Russian, Jewish, Israeli, German, educated, European and/or that they signal transnational practices of belonging to a certain social stratum.

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In investigating the migrant experience, I assume that people do not *bear* or transport with them a self-contained completed culture, but rather there is fluid nature to cultural affiliations as they select and employ cultural elements that are integrated through involvement in special situations, states, or conditions of their existence (Bloch 1963; Boyarin 1994; Gudeman and Rivera 1990; Kalekin-Fishman 2000; Welz 1996, 1997, 1998). Hence, I assume that culture is created through dynamic dialogues as well as permanent changes and modifications, rather than being limited to preserving of stable habits and practices. Therefore, based on these assumptions, this study sought to understand how different affiliations of migrants—be they cultural Russian, European, ex-Soviet, Jewish and different Others—are constructed, modified, co-exist, and presented/performed in particular situations in response to needs within specific situations. Bodnar (1985) referred to this process of identity redefinition as *transplantation*.

Accordingly, analyses advanced in this study do not perceive participants through insulated categories, such as Jewish, Soviet, Russian or German, but rather as "doing being Jewish" (Inowlocki 2000, 175) or doing being—ex-Soviet, Russian, Israeli, or German—through their dynamic practices and everyday interactions. The findings demonstrate that multiple identities co-exist and often contradict one another in various ways: Interviewees speak Russian and act according to Russian cultural practices, but are offended if referred to as Russians; or, they consume pork and simultaneously feel themselves to be Jews, accept support by the social welfare system but perform elitist cultural *habitus,* invest significant energies and time over three days to prepare meals for a birthday celebration, but claim that food "has actually no meaning for spiritual life." In addition, participants in both contexts articulated affiliation with different collective and "imaginary communities" (Anderson 1991), often expressed through linguistic forms of "we" and "they." These uses were created, changed in situ, presented, confirmed, and performed in various manners. For example, self-referential terms *nashi*[1] and *svoi* [lit. ours, ourselves, our own,[2] Rus. approximated meaning as "people of our kind" or those who

1 See Caldwell (2005) for analyses of the centrality of the concept "nashi" and its instrumentalization in Russian advertisements.

2 Whereas only objects can be literally possessed in languages such as Hebrew, German, or English, in Russian the linguistic construction "nash or svoi person" and "nashi or svoi people" [lit. "my person" meaning "person of my kind," and "our people" meaning "people of our kind"] is constructed with the same word of possession and can have a symbolic meaning of common belonging, as in this case.

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represent a unified "us"] were involved in a very dynamic and fluid process of *doing being nashi* that could be called *nashi-zation*. The meanings evolving in this process are presented throughout different chapters of this work.

Thus, the numerous examples of empirical evidence presented throughout this monograph demonstrate different uses and modified meanings of key cultural symbols in the Russian language.

1.2 The research approach

The theoretical background integrated throughout these discussions involves two principal domains: First, sociological and anthropological literatures in the area of "migration research." Particular emphasis is placed on research involved in developing the transnational theoretical perspective, in general, and involvement of groups investigated, in particular. Second, domains within the sociology and anthropology of food that study the importance of food in persons' lives and the establishment of collective cultural, social, national affiliations, and hierarchies of power. In particular, the study focused on the literature that analyzes migrants' food consumption and food entrepreneurship in different countries as compared with patterns constructed by the groups investigated in this research.

Migration and material culture research continue to be treated with disdain by scholars. Indeed, Jackson and Holbrook observed that in the case of consumption there is a "patronizing view of apparently undifferentiated members of an anonymous mass society" (Jackson and Holbrook 1995, 1913). Similarly, I found in my review of the migration literature that migrants are often presented as a passive marginal group—deprived of a voice, of any understanding of events in the new society, and of their own opinions and rights. According to this view, all migrants' transported resources represent deficits rather than contributions to the receiving-host society. Therefore, the assumption seems to be that these transported views are "frozen," permanently; that is, kept from learning and adaptation (Morawska 2003; Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1997).

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In contrast, the basic assumption underlying the investigation reported here is that consumption and migration processes[3] are acts of personal and collective agency. Accordingly, migrants are perceived as "knowledgeable consumers" (Jackson and Holbrook 1995) and knowledgeable, responsible, and mature agents who are sensitized through migration experiences as they confront and cope with different *social worlds,* make decisions that affect their lives, and change their social and local environment (Bodnar 1985; Kivisto 1990). Hence, migrants as the subject of this study are not viewed as persons who need to be reshaped, resocialized, and treated like children (Golden 1996, 2002), nor are they considered to be socially incompetent or immature (and consequently unauthorized) members of society.

Given the intent to investigate everyday practices of Russian-speaking Jews, as well as, their patterns of consumption/procurement in the Russian food stores in Israel and Germany, the transnational theoretical perspective initiated by the American anthropologists Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1997) and developed since by many different researchers was selected as potentially very applicable to this study (e.g., Appadurai 1991; Gold 2001; Hannerz 1998; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Levitt and Sorensen 2004; Morawska 2004; Olwig and Sorensen 2002; Pessar and Mahler 2001; Pries 1997; Römhild 2002; Vertovec 2004). The primary rationale underlying this decision is that this approach to migration does not assume it is an exceptional or static state, but rather a continuous, dynamic process to be investigated in terms of how social actors participate in multiple social environments. Furthermore, migration processes and the establishing of enclaves need to be examined in light of the dynamics of globalization in which the physical barriers between societies have become porous due to the media and modern means of transport. In this new reality, immigrants have continuous access to information about their society of origin and so refresh, renew, and modify old models and practices.

This approach stands in contrast to previously dominant "host society–centered" (Morawska 2003) theoretical models of adaptation and assimilation based on envisioning societal space as a "closed container" (Schroer 2004) within a definitive closed territory and border. Rather, in the approach adopted in this study, the theoretical constructs of *transmigration* and

3 *Migration process*, as used in this monograph, refers to the years spent in preparing for emigration, the act of emigration, the transition into the new society that may take place over many years.

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transnationalism were deemed to be especially appropriate and fruitful for this investigation, because they help to develop of a new perspective on immigrants' lifestyles. Furthermore, this pair of concepts has the potential to shift the analytical focus of research from viewing the "place of origin" and the "place of destination" as "binary opposites" (Levi-Strauss 1970) to understanding the moves involved in sustaining cross-border livelihoods (Olwig and Sorensen 2002, as cited by Levitt and Sorensen 2004, 2). According to this perspective, migrants are involved in managing a transnational social field composed of multistranded social relations in different countries. This is what Levitt and Sorensen defined as "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationship through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed" (Levitt and Sorensen 2004, 3).

The creation and modification of constructed identities of immigrants in transnational space, without closed national borders, fits the currently observable situation. Immigrants living in Israel or Germany have access to live Russian TV broadcasts transmitted from the former Soviet Union [44 channels in Israel and 19 in Germany] and different world channels translated into Russian in the receiving society.[4] These media outlets enable them to engage in a variety of activities: follow news from their society of origin; read Russian newspapers[5] and books regularly; enjoy broadcasts of performances by visiting Russian theatre companies and musical groups; purchase "their" groceries in Russian shops; fly to their society of origin for holidays; and invite friends and relatives from former Soviet republics (or those who have already emigrated elsewhere) to visit them in Israel or Germany. One can even observe [especially in Germany] the development of organized material support for relatives and friends who remained in the state of origin (e.g., monetary payments as well as packages containing clothing, food, electronic equipment, kitchen appliances, and toys).

Finally, in looking beyond this study, the findings from the fieldwork in Israel and Germany reported in this monograph are consistent with the trend in contemporary anthropological and sociological research to investi-

4 Media in Israel consist of: (a) six Israeli channels broadcasting with translated Russian subtitles, one Russian Israeli channel; (b) approximately 22 channels transmitted from the CIS in Russian; and (c) approximately 15 channels from different other countries translated into Russian (or with subtitles).

5 As of 2005, there were nearly 100 newspapers and magazines published in the Russian language in Israel (Yelenewskaya 2005, 267).

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gate transnational actions, activities, and phenomena in a particular society (or more in comparative research) as a case study for engaging in holistic macro-analysis in the future (e.g., Appadurai 1991; Guarnizo 2003; Guarnizo et al. 2003; Portes et al. 2002; Smith 2003). Furthermore, in terms of my own interests, I intend to report on, to demonstrate, and to analyze the domains of the participants' transnational praxis as initial insights into the nature of their contradictory and dynamic involvement and as causes of conflicts between different narratives and personal affiliations.

1.3 Research questions

General questions

1. How do migrants create, re-define, and perform their affiliations in their everyday lives and transnational practices through food consumption (e.g. in selection of food products and sharing of meals around the dining room table)? Do these affiliations differ in the two contexts (Israel and Germany) and, if so, how can we explain these differences?
2. How do immigrants in Germany and Israel construct the image of *home* or fill the vacant sense of *homeland* in their everyday lives, transnational practices, and food consumption? Are there any differences between the two contexts in this regard and, if so, how can they be explained?
3. In this study immigrants are involved in a transition from a socialist society to two different capitalistic societies. What are the meanings, significance, and consequences of this transition for them? Are there any differences between experiences in the two receiving societies and, if so, how can they be explained?
4. What do Jewish, ex-Soviet, Russian, European, Israeli, and German affiliations mean for participants in both contexts? How are these affiliations performed?
5. How do people interact in a situation in which different bodies of knowledge, different political narratives, and different constructions of social worlds, usually taken for granted, meet, and clash in the inner phenomenological domain as well as in the transnational biographic experiences of migrants? What happens, when through migration and intercultural interactions the same events are remembered, understood,

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and interpreted in completely different manners not only by different groups in the CIS, Israel, and Germany, but also by different Jewish groups in these countries? How do migrants cope with the situation, when there is pressure to demonstrate loyalty to narratives that contradict one another in many significant ways?
6. How do patterns of interpretation and remembrance change during the migration process? What new meanings of the past appear in the new environments with their local discourse contexts?
7. How do the different contexts of Israel and Germany impact on individual coping strategies? How do they shape historical memories and affect the process of collective identity construction?

Special questions with reference to investigating Russian food stores

1. What products do Russian food stores offer? What different kinds of food appear on the dining room table in the two contexts?
2. What images are desired and why? Are images different in Russian food stores in Germany and in Israel and, if so, how can this be explained? How and according to what criteria is special food chosen?
3. What memories of taste, smell, outward appearance, and content of products consumed are articulated in everyday practices of participants in the new contexts?
4. What, if any, modifications are observable in food products available in Russian food stores in Israel and Germany? How do key symbols of different national cuisines and foods meet and co-exist within the framework of Russian food stores in both contexts?
5. How do social skills of consumption change after migration to either of the two contexts?
6. How can we conceptualize Russian food stores?
7. What role and significance does the Russian food store play in creating a personal identity among the immigrants? What roles and meanings do cultural and economic enclaves play in Israel and Germany in recent years, for both groups? Are their differences in the two contexts and, if so, how can they be explained?

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1.4 Research methods

This comparative study applied qualitative methods of polyfocal or *mobile ethnographic* research (Marcus 1995). In doing so it compared two different domains: First, the *physical places* in which Russian speakers live and act in a certain area of two chosen cities in Israel and Germany; and, second, *imaginary transnational spaces* as they are created modified and performed in migrants' everyday praxis—both verbal and non-verbal (through material culture)—in both contexts. Whereas physical places remain fixed, their conceptualization as *imaginary transnational spaces* is constantly changing. Given the de-territorialized nature of affiliations and cultural processes (i.e. mobile research subject), comparisons between two fieldworks are considered to be "moving targets" (Welz 1998). In this process, different transnational spaces are created simultaneously and interact with one another. Thus, on the one hand, the complex societal contexts of Israel and Germany have physical localities and, on the other hand, they are cross-bordered imaginary transnational networks involved in dynamic de-territorialized cultural processes. Hence, we are dealing with a complex subject composed of dynamic, multi-sited or polyfocal fieldwork settings in Israel and Germany inter-connected and developing through pendulum-like dynamic processes swinging between them (Marcus 1995).

Given this understanding of the complexity of the phenomena under study, I determined that the most appropriate methodologies for collecting materials were extended periods of participant observation and open narrative interviews. Accordingly, I conducted long-term participant observation in Russian food stores[6] that also included multiple, open narrative interviews with clerks and owners of shops selling Russian food products, in both locations. In addition, I visited the homes of the participants in Israel and in Germany over a two year period. The methodologies employed during these visits in the field consisted of participant observations and multiple, open narrative interviews (n.b., most of the interactions took place within the close circle of research participants as well as with salespersons and owners of shops selling Russian food products in both locations).

6 Several additional observations were conducted at the end of the fieldwork in Russian food stores in other cities in Israel and Germany, in order to assess if the same tendencies exist there.

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The Israel case study benefitted in significant ways from materials and findings developed from previous research undertaken by this researcher between 1998—2000 on food consumption and the creation of identity among immigrants from the USSR (Bernstein 2000). This research served as the basis for the present set of investigations. Three short periods of fieldwork in 2006, 2007, and 2008 enriched and validated these materials and findings. Fieldwork in the German context, conducted in parallel periods between 2002 and 2004 substantiated earlier findings. The Israeli case study was conducted in 2006—2008. The researcher and participants had extensive and intensive contact in both contexts.

Three additional frameworks for data-gathering proved to be informative in the German context. First, I participated in and observed the activities of the Jewish community in Germany that plays an active role in the lives of the Jewish immigrants. Second, I conducted regular participant observations in different centers and churches where several participants received free food rations. Third, I visited official agencies with participants on a regular basis and observed their interactions with public servants. Indeed, I served as their translator [from Russian to German] on a number of occasions and in doing so helped to meet a need that many participants had in communicating with representatives of official organizations. This way, I tried to reduce the inequality of relations between participants who generously shared information about their lives with me and researcher who makes use of this information for the research but had a relatively limited number of opportunities to compensate contributors for their time and efforts.

In addition, I collected, catalogued, and categorized numerous artifacts of the packaging of food products sold in the Russian food stores over the last ten years in Israel and the last six years in Germany. Indeed, many of these exemplars were actually given to me by participants in both contexts who concluded that this was my own unusual hobby. The assembled collection consists of thousands of artifacts organized in four thick binders, representing a multitude of images and product affiliations. This collection proved to be very rich, interesting, and useful in two ways: First, the artifacts provided relevant topics for discussion during the observations and interviews. In particular, tendencies and cultural messages on the packaging were discussed with participants in both settings. This enabled me to understand the participants' perceptions of these products and especially the contradictory, often politically-laden messages found on the packaging.

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Second, the collection was a rich resource for conducting the content analyses.

While this extensive collection proved to be very useful and insightful, I concluded that it was necessary to go beyond a semiotic analysis that involves decoding of these visual materials in order to discover their implied different cultural meanings (Barthes 1957, 1964). My rationale in extending the analysis was that it would assist me to understand the dynamics and multiple layers of meanings observable in the field. Indeed, the inclusion of extended periods of participant observation sessions and the interviews proved to be very important components of this study. Thus, collectively, these visual materials as well as the participant observations of food practices developed into a rich resource that complemented the verbal articulations of participants in both contexts.

Framing/bracketing researcher involvement

Due diligence requires that the author reveals that the phenomena investigated were and remain closely related to her own autobiography. I was born in the Ukraine and experienced life in the Soviet system prior to as well as during the Perestroika period. Following emigration to Israel at the age of 18, I lived and studied there for eleven years before coming to Germany, where I have been living for the last six years while undertaking graduate studies. Consequently, all three physical spaces (SU, Israel, and Germany) are very familiar and I drew upon my personal experiences and understandings as additional resources in this research project.

I believe that our socialisation, personality and biography also play an important role in the *work alliance* with interview partners as well as regarding the quality of information we receive during the fieldwork. During the research I was able to develop a kind of *inner compass*, which helped me to position myself optimally in the work alliance, in order to remain as loyal as possible to the research object.

More specifically, my multi-sited background was utilized in a number of distinct ways. First, as documented in the monograph, I am well aware that I was perceived to be a person who had undergone similar emigration experiences and, presumably, shared a common knowledge of different Soviet-Russian symbols, norms, and customs.

Because of my socialisation in the SU my interview partners assumed that I shared the same common knowledge with them, which also contrib-

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uted to my *inner compass* as my interview partners felt that their experiences were understood—which seems to me a very important communication basis in the migration situation, when reactions and self-evident thinking categories of migrants are often perceived as incomprehensive, strange or even absurd to the outsider and many migrants have a feeling of being perceived inadequately related to their expectations.

Second, my reflections on relevant categories for analysis undoubtedly involved my own perspectives as well as insights. A part of my *inner compass* as researcher was my own experience when coping with different bodies of knowledge through multiple migration (first to Israel and then to Germany) as well as through my socialisation in the Israeli and in the German academic world. This contributed to my reflection on multiple pressures of dominant discourses towards migrants and expectations towards their "integration" and, secondly, on emotional reactions of my interview partners to such delicate topics as the Holocaust, being Jewish or conceiving capitalism. I presume that similar socialisation and common affiliations assumed by participants played an especially important role in trying to discuss such traumatic topics as their experience with anti-Semitism or painful biographical aspects of their Jewish identity and coping with the Holocaust history. Aside from continuous reflection and bracketing of the nature of my own involvement in the research, I was also an active participant in the academic discourse in migration research in Israel and Germany. The latter participation enabled me to attain a certain degree of distance from the subject of my study. Indeed, self-dialogue and these reflections were extremely helpful in enabling me to deal with the very difficult task of reflecting on such questions as: What does it means to be Jewish? What is it like to live in a capitalist society? What is the nature of reflection on the nature and meaning of the Soviet winners' narrative for Jews? Moreover, I discovered that the challenge of writing this monograph, in a foreign language, has had the advantage of enabling me to reflect on habitual concepts and to gain greater precision in their use.

An additional aspect of the *inner compass* refers to the sensibility for the used linguistic categories in Russian as well as to the formulation of investigated topics in a sensitive way which enabled me to create a positive atmosphere and to avoid potentially unpleasant questions (such as "Why did you emigrate to Germany and not to Israel?"). This was helpful in finding a way to build trust and to develop rapport between me and my interview partners.

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All interviews were conducted in the Russian language, my mother tongue, and later transcribed by myself. The use of Russian was crucial for the success achieved in the fieldwork, as it enabled participants to articulate their thoughts and feelings in ways they chose to be appropriate as educated intellectuals who have great difficulty expressing themselves at the same level in either Hebrew or German. Moreover, on a number of occasions during the fieldwork, nuances or brief remarks were made that later, during analysis of the transcripts, emerged as very important and influenced directions adopted in the analysis. Such remarks might not have been heard or understood in a foreign language, as they require a certain social experience in the SU and cultural knowledge. More precisely, I wish to note that I had to invest great efforts in both fieldwork settings to speak in the form of Russian spoken by the Soviet intelligentsia to which participants belonged and according to which many participants perceived and measured speaking partners.

In order to preserve the authenticity of the study, I have attempted to remain as faithful as possible in all translations and descriptions to the original Russian meaning and context. In this spirit, original Russian words are retained and reproduced in numerous places throughout the monograph; for example, product names and key symbols of the participants' social reality are preserved in their original form followed by translation into English that appears in brackets along with citation of the original language—Russian, Hebrew or German. Hopefully, this will enable the reader to gain some insight into the "social worlds" of the subjects of this research (Schütze 2002).

Recommendations from personal contacts and acquaintances in both field settings as well as from participants themselves were the primary resources for introductions and gaining access (entry) to participants. Entry obtained through personal contacts assisted me to arrange the initial meetings and contributed to the feeling of informal communication, which I believe helped participants to feel open and willing to share their views. However, even when I was presented by informants in the German fieldwork setting in Russian, language itself was not always sufficient for achieving acceptance. Many participants were suspicious of the fact that I came from Israel, thinking, perhaps, that I might be judgmental about their decision to emigrate to Germany or, even, would try to convince them to

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re-immigrate to Israel.[7] Furthermore, while most participants wanted to remain in contact with me and were very curious about life in Israel, they tried continually to reveal only the best sides of their life in Germany.

Indeed, fear of judgment and the perception of me as representative of the State of Israel were especially evident in one insightful case. This occurred at the very beginning of the fieldwork when I was interviewing a number of persons living in one house. Immediately upon my entrance into the house, even before I was introduced by the informant and without any prompting from me, Fira, whom I had never met, stated the following:

[Speaking aloud in a slow, pathetic tone] "Well, *we did make a mistake!* [meaning: when we came to Germany]."

Her husband, followed: "But we are proud of *you*!" [meaning: me, as person who made the *right* choice to emigrate and to live in Israel].

While this is an extreme example, this first sentence of our meeting is representative of the fear and mistrust I sensed in some migrants upon meeting me, initially, as a researcher. On the other hand, such a perception can also be seen as indicative of pre-existing ideas and *imaginary relationships* (or inner dialogue) between personal migration stories and ideas about what should be shared with different Others (i.e. Germans, local Jews in Germany, Israelis, Russian-speaking Israelis). Interpretations of these perceptions are discussed in the final chapter of this manuscript. Yet, after three-four months of meeting, participants started to open up, exhibit trust, and see in me as more than someone categorized under one certain category (e.g., as Israeli or researcher).

In this regard, it was interesting to follow how most participants created their own version of why I resided in Germany and the nature of my work. One of the most certain signs of having established rapport and gaining acceptance by participants—not only as a researcher but on a personal level with all of my family members—was a new question that replaced previous self-justifications when I was asked on numerous occasions: "So, have you decided to remain in Germany?" Through developing mutual respect and a sensitive researcher and participant "work alliance," our discussions became informal friendships and productive dialogues

7 At least two families thought that I was an agent of the Sochnut (The Jewish Agency) or the Mosad (Israeli Secret Service) charged with learning about the life of ex-Soviet Jews in Germany.

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during which we discussed different aspects of life in Germany (Inowlocki and Bernstein 2006, Resch and Steinert 2003).

In general, I was amazed by the openness and intensity of the cooperation I received throughout the entire period of fieldwork in both contexts. Participants expressed their willingness, even desire, to speak for as long and in as detailed a manner as possible about different aspects of their new lives. One indicator of such interest, indeed commitment, was the atmosphere within which our meetings were conducted. On nearly every occasion, our discussions took place around a richly laid-out dining table, always followed by dessert, even if the interview was prolonged and lasted from three and half to five hours. A second indicator was that people gave me clean wrapping papers of food products and Russian food stores advertisements. They also informed me about different Russian forums and activities in the city, invited me to celebrations of their birthdays, presented me to other participants, recommended literature in Russian that might be applicable to this research project, even if not scientific in nature.

In my opinion, one of reasons for the participants' interest and active involvement in this project was the fact that these are highly educated people who are not employed in jobs for which they were trained or which challenge them intellectually. Hence, they lack a sense of professional and social fulfillment in the new society. Moreover, because of language difficulties and rare informal contacts with members of the dominant resident groups in both contexts, many seemed to be motivated by a sense that it was very important that the *outside world* [i.e., non-Russian speakers] understand their *real educated status*, cultural capital, views, thoughts, and problems they were confronting in the new society. That is, above all, there seems to be a need for them to be recognized and understood by persons in their new environment.

The topics discussed in this research touch upon some of the most strongly felt needs of persons involved in the migration process (e.g., Schiffauer 2003). This was especially true in the German case study, as many interview partners, women in particular, often were in tears when recalling special situations encountered upon arrival and in the transition to living in a new land. Further, in retrospective reflection, they seemed to consider these past events as quite different from their current situation. This affirmed the false nature of claims made about the "irreversible nature of historic times" when "the past can be modified by the present" (Moses 1989, 39 quoting Boyarin 1994, 11). Moreover, many descriptions and

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reflections shared about experiences were closely linked to their ideas about new positioning and desire for future scenarios. As Breckner stated: "The construction of a biography functions as a way out of past experiences in order to find direction for the present and future" (Breckner 2000, 92).

Of course, an evolving work alliance can involve very sensitive questions and unresolved problems, especially when the researcher receives especially rich and sensitive empirical data. Two such issues involve the nature of the participants' authority in the research and *ownership* of thoughts shared with the researcher. One insightful situation in which the work alliance with a participant was negotiated involved potentially contested ownership of material shared. This occurred at the very beginning of the fieldwork in Germany in 2002 when near the beginning of the first meeting with Sergei he stated:

Sergei: "I can also interview you."

JB: "Sure, why not [pause]."

Sergei: "I will tell you everything, in detail, and you can then hire me as your assistant in the university [this could be] something technical. [After all,] I need a job."

JB:(confused): "You know I don't have any position myself at the university, but [smiling] as soon as I become a professor I will appoint you immediately as a professor, too (Sergei's laugh seems to be indicative that he understands the absurdity of my sentence, then we both laugh]. "

JB: (seriously): "Is working a problem here?"

Sergei: "Actually I don't know German very well, but you know it really is THE problem [the interview begins]."

Sergei presented himself as an educated person and hinted at the onset that he was unwilling to function in a hierarchical relationship between researcher and investigated person. My reaction to this well-known problem in social research was a spontaneous attempt to dismantle the tension and to reveal that I did not intend to establish or function through such a relationship.

My *inner compass* helped me to understand that to a certain degree I and my interview partners pursue a similar goal, i. e. to describe social reality and ways of self-definition and self-positioning of participants loyal to their own concepts and thinking categories as my contribution to the academic concepts and theories developed before. Conscious of the "valuable gift"

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