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“Sometimes I feel that this is the Russia we  
had always dreamed of...”.

Transnationalism and capitalism: Migrants from  
the former Soviet Union and their experiences  
in Germany

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“Sometimes I feel that this is the Russia we had always dreamed of...” Transnationalism and capitalism: Migrants from the former Soviet Union and their experiences in Israel and Germany.

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### **Abstract**

The present article explores perceptions and cultural constructions of the terms capitalism or capitalistic West among ex-Soviet, highly qualified Jewish migrants from Russia and Ukraine after their emigration to Germany between 1990 and 1996. It seems that migration offers a unique opportunity to migrants to realise knowledge that is normally taken for granted, behaviour schemes and values, and to reflect on them. How do they acquire such presumed capitalist knowledge of the new society and new social world, how do they create it, and with what concrete contents do they connect the illusion about monolithic cultural, economic and political capital, the illusion which contributes to group formation and which serves as action orientation? As my research shows, immigrants try to disparage much of what appeared to them in the Soviet Union as normative, right and appropriate; now they often act by way of categories, which were defined in the previous context as “capitalist” and were interpreted as immoral. Without exact ideas or knowledge about behaviour codes, unspoken norms and silent values from the new society, many immigrants orient themselves towards the opposite of what was counted as morally proper in the origin society. Simultaneously they revive old system through the establishing and development of a Russian language enclave. Nevertheless this enclave is not located in a vacuum of “dusty” memories from the past, but build transnational cross-border space connected and corresponding to the processes of today’s CIS and with the life of those relatives and friends who still live there, und with whom the emigrants share intensive social networks.

Keywords: migration from the former Soviet Union, transmigration, ex-soviet citizens abroad, capitalism, reconstruction of knowledge, material culture, food practices, identity construction

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## Transnationalism and capitalism: Migrants from the former Soviet Union and their experiences in Germany

### Introduction

The present article explores perceptions and cultural constructions of the terms capitalism or capitalistic West among ex-Soviet, highly qualified Jewish migrants (45-60 years old) from Russia and Ukraine after their emigration to Germany between 1990 and 1996.<sup>1</sup> I focus especially on their experiences with material culture and consumption in general, and with food practices in particular. As the participant group does not have any religious affiliation, their Jewishness plays a much more limited role here than their belonging to the well educated social stratum of the Soviet intelligentsia. This phenomenon can probably be observed in other ex-Soviet migrant groups as well.<sup>2</sup>

This article presents a selection of empirical material collected during two years in Germany, using participant observation in Russian food stores and in the homes of immigrants as well as interviews and conversations with immigrants. The findings now serve as a basis for further interpretive analysis with the help of thick description (Geertz 1993). My presentation of this ethnographical material is intended to render the social reality of the immigrants involved in the research in terms that remain as close as possible to their own views, which in turn makes possible a further interpretive combination of Emic und Etic perspectives (Lévi-Strauss 1970).

This study focuses on people who are going through the immigration process, and who are exposed to the necessity of reconstructing their cultural perceptions as well as dealing with a new reality and confirming their place in it. I assume that people do not “bear” any self-contained completed culture, but use cultural elements, which are integrated through special situations, states or conditions. That means that culture is perceived as created through dynamic dialogues and permanent changes and modifications, rather than as limited through the preservation of stable habits and practices. So identities are multiple and nobody has only one identity (Gitelman 1995, 29). Using this

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Lena Inowlocki, Alex Demirović, Karlheinz Schneider and especially my husband Costa Bernstein for their support.

<sup>2</sup> It would be interesting to investigate the common aspects between the perception of capitalism among the group discussed here and the group of Aussiedler – ethnic Germans who also emigrated to Germany during the last fifteen years.

assumption I am trying to understand how the different identities of migrants, which may comprise of cultural Russian, European, ethnic Jewish in the Soviet sense, atheist and Soviet identities are constructed in Germany, as well as modified and presented. I follow the approach of Inowlocki (2000, 175), in which individuals cannot be seen as Jewish, Soviet, Russian or German, but rather as “doing being Jewish”, Russian, or German. The multiple identities not only co-exist, but also often contradict each other. People can speak Russian and follow Russian cultural practices, but would be – as in the case of the Russian speaking Jews interviewed – offended, if they were called Russians; or they can consume pork, but simultaneously feel themselves as Jews.

It is quite important to bear in mind the special migration context, since it concerns the unprecedented period of perestroika and the so called “wild nineties”, during which the country belonged to nobody (Gustafson 1999). At that time the later migrants were confronted with a special economic crisis, which determined the first stage of capitalism developing in the CIS and shaped the ideas of migrants about the free market system. It is true that as former citizens of a closed society, the Soviet Union, they are not closely acquainted with the characteristics of western abundance and western consumer culture and mass consumption, which in the opinion of Daniel Miller “is now the dominant context, through which people in modern societies relate to the material world” (Miller 1987, 4; Appadurai 1996). Emigration to the western society brings this absolutely new phenomenon for this group, which is exposed to the necessity to cope with it on a permanent basis.

How should one choose one item from the endless range of goods – particularly as one does not have any accessible “story” or as it does not give rise to any associations which belong to the common shared body of knowledge. How does one assess the material goods in the West after a lifetime spent in the Soviet Union, and how does one “decipher” their meaning? Consciously or not, migrants from the former Soviet Union to the West are confronted for the first time to such an intensive degree with this new experience, along with other new practices, for example, the importance of individual interests, perceptions of freedom and democracy, the attitude to money and material culture, bringing up children, and decision-making processes in the capitalist system. Tempted by the promise of an easily attainable better life and a better future in the West (Golden 2002), immigrants in Germany are exposed to and grapple with the different consequences of the transition, since their ideas and images about the West, which were acquired in the past, “emigrated” with these people and now turn out to be no longer valid or effective.

Confronted with the requirement of the new, anonymous receiving society that they should reassess their positions, ideas, interpretation schemes, norms and values and also to meet the expectations of the receiving society about “moral regulations” (Corrigan/Sayer 1985, 4 cited by Golden 2002, 7) and “moral transformations” (Golden 2002, 6) migrants try actively to identify the newly valid body of knowledge (here and further in the German sense of Wissen), which they define for themselves and put into the practice and action, sometimes in ways that may seem strange to the local population. The interviews show that many migrants believe there is a system of monolithic capitalist knowledge, which could give them orientation. However, the question: “How do ex-Soviet migrants understand capitalism and digest their experiences?” has not yet been investigated systematically. Although millions of former Soviet citizens proceeded to

the West after perestroika, the theme of migration is still elaborated through general theoretical concepts such as re-socialisation, multiple affiliations, or the establishing of enclaves. Nevertheless, the insights of migrants into their transition experiences in the capitalist system have often been overlooked. Very few studies have been published in this area and they do not deal with immigrants' perceptions of the Western consumption patterns.

In this article, I would like to present and analyse how migration affects established knowledge and ideas about capitalist knowledge which are supposed to be an integral part and instrument of mature social actors, or to put it other way what happens to the knowledge of migrants, which with the transition is permanently devalued and rendered superfluous, which under normal circumstances – unlike other consumer goods – is not used up through practice and usage but is reproduced and crystallised (Demirović 2004, 259). It seems that migration offers a unique opportunity to migrants to realise knowledge that is normally taken for granted, behaviour schemes and values, and to reflect on them. How do they acquire such presumed capitalist knowledge of the new society and new social world, how do they create it, and with what concrete contents do they connect the illusion about monolithic cultural, economic and political capital, the illusion which contributes to group formation and which serves as action orientation?

An investigation of the views of immigrants about capitalism is of interest not only because it is determined by the Soviet experience, but also because it is influenced by their present state, such as unemployment, economic difficulties, run-down residential areas, language problems and the frequent indifference of receiving society (Golden 1997, 2002). Migrants see the concept capitalism through at least two prisms: firstly as highly educated former Soviet citizens, and secondly as migrants who are located at the base of the social and economic pyramid of the new destination country.

The phenomena of stress, crisis and disorientation which are often described in the literature and which normally characterise the first phases should, in my view, be looked at more from the internal perspective of migrants as active thinking and interpreting social actors and members of the new society (Kivisto 1990). Accordingly, the present article, based on my research, devotes considerable attention to the descriptions of the migrants themselves, to whom I try to give a "voice". How do they transform in their narratives the body of understanding of social worlds (Schütze 2002), and how are memories about the social worlds from the past incorporated into images about the "here and now" (Boyarin 1994)?

On the one hand, the society from which the immigrants originally came has become the imaginary space (Dolve-Gandelman 1990, 121) in their perception of the world as compared with the space they now occupy in the present, and this imaginary space forms itself in accordance with the situation. On the other hand, the phenomenon of immigration can be seen in a new way as transmigration (Schiller/Basch/Blanc-Szanton 1997) as soon as the physical barriers between societies have, thanks to the media and to modern means of transport, become porous. This new globalised reality allows immigrants to have constant access to information about their society of origin, and so they can refresh, renew, and modify the old models and participate simultaneously in the life of more than one society.

The long period in which they are settling down can no longer be treated as a meaningless, “empty” metamorphosis from old to new (loss of the old and acquisition of the new), something that is supposedly summed up by the well-worn concept of “adaptation”, inasmuch as the immigrants themselves perceive this period as an equally significant part of their lives (Golden 1997, 12). The concept of transmigration is an appropriate way of describing a situation in which immigrants living in Israel or Germany are able not only to watch Russian TV channels transmitted from the former Soviet Union (sixteen in Germany), and so to follow all the news from their society of origin, but also to read Russian newspapers and books regularly, to enjoy performances by visiting Russian theatre companies and musical groups, to buy their groceries in Russian shops, to fly to their society of origin for their holidays, and to invite their friends and relatives from former Soviet republics (or those who have already emigrated elsewhere) to visit them in Germany. It is important to remember that for people aged between 45 and 60, who have spent most of their lives in a closed society like the Soviet Union, this kind of reality with its numerous possibilities and porous borders is an absolutely new and challenging phenomenon – but they have to cope with it. This article examines these immigrants’ perceptions of the concept of capitalism and the ways in which they handle it, and analyses how these perceptions and strategies are expressed in the various everyday practices of the immigrants. Two praxis forms are considered here: the practices that relate to the Soviet Union as imaginary space, and cross-border transnational practices.

### **1. The Soviet Kind of Capitalism: Spiritual Soviet vs. Materialistic Western**

The concept of capitalism, which belongs to the new context, appears in a variety of interactions between immigrants and in their ways of dealing with different situations in Israel and Germany. As this happens, the concept is filled with new content, which sometimes appears strange or unexpected to those who have grown up in the free market system. Taking the Other as an example, in this case Jewish immigrants from a socialist country who are aware that they constantly have to find ways of dealing with, internalising, interpreting, and understanding capitalism as it is expressed in everyday life, a new perspective comes into being both for the immigrants and for other observers. This perspective is a new way of looking at what is familiar and of reinterpreting both cultural capital that is treated as self-evident (Bourdieu 1984) and one’s own social world (Schütze 2002).

The ideas of these immigrants about the social world are predominantly taken from the political context of their earlier lives. In that context everything described as capitalist was rejected immediately on ideological grounds, and furthermore various myths about this unknown but greatly desired paradise came into existence. These myths were then taken as ideas to Germany, a country seen as a strong symbolic embodiment of capitalism. After this they are reactivated and changed, and some of them are strongly criticised and even destroyed. The picture of foreign countries of the capitalistic abroad, which appeared to Soviet citizens on the other side of the tightly closed

iron curtain as “the world beyond the grave”<sup>3</sup>, an unknown and distant planet (Dovlatov 1995; Genis/Vail 2003), was filled in bit by bit like a jigsaw puzzle, with the help of stories passed on by word of mouth and occasional episodes from carefully filtered television programmes. These included programmes on journeys around the world, those dealing with the different peoples of the world, and reports on foreign delegations visiting the Soviet Union.

The knowledge and understanding of the social world in the capitalist system had been made up of components of Soviet mythology about the West, which had been developed by Russian writers who emigrated to the West after the revolution of 1917 and became popular in the Soviet Union (Yelenevskaya 2005). Above all, there was a hidden deep amazement about the West. Its ‘excessive rationality’, the orderliness of the capitalist system, in which people ‘function’ like mechanized robots, was contrasted with the spontaneity of the “life after the heart”, impulsivity and humanity of Soviet citizens, who have a different, non-capitalist “mentality” (ibid.).

The material goods which had been mentioned with negative connotations also contributed unintentionally to shaping the population’s idea of capitalism, as for example in some well-known lines from Mayakovsky: “Eat your pineapple, chew your hazel grouse, your final day has arrived bourgeois” (translation from Glants/Toomre 1997, 19). This has led to pineapple, as one of the best-known symbols of abundance in capitalist society, becoming a component of festive meals in immigrants’ homes in Germany. In this way, it now symbolizes an active capitalist practice and economic opportunities that are not open to friends and relatives who have remained in the CIS. Even so, the overall picture of the capitalist world in the Soviet Union remained fairly nebulous, albeit enchanted and secretly desired, until the end of the 1990s when people set off on their journey westwards.

However, even after their emigration most of those I have interviewed do not acknowledge that a desire for material prosperity was one of the main reasons why they decided to leave the Soviet Union. Striving for material prosperity was frowned upon in the Soviet Union as a value, and remains so at the level of verbal interaction. In interviews, people preferred to present Soviet life’s constant preoccupation with getting hold of the basic material necessities (especially foodstuffs) as a humiliation for highly qualified intellectuals. As Irina describes it: “I was fed up with reading books while standing in the queue for soap powder.” There is, though, another reason why immigrants reject the Russian-language Israeli press’s use of the term “sausage immigration” to describe the last wave of arrivals from the Ex-Soviet Union (in order to suggest economic rather than Zionist motivation). This attitude seems to reflect the politically distinctive and widespread dichotomization of the cultural and the material, which was ideologically important in the socialist context and which also finds expression in conversations with emigrants conducted in their new homes. The expression material culture is barely comprehensible in Russian. In the Soviet collective culture, free education for all Soviet citizens and the strength of “spirit”, which were seen as opposed to material values and capitalist comfort and frowned upon wealth, took on a unique political significance. The

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<sup>3</sup> This description of the West as “the world beyond the grave” was often repeated as immigrants told about their memories, how they imagined the West from the closed SU during the 1970s, 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. For example Alex: “You know at that time the capitalist West had seemed to us to be ‘the world beyond the grave’ – nobody come back...”

concept of “intellectual nourishment” as a kind of surrogate or split between the spiritual and the material functioned, and was strengthened, in the minds of the intellectual strata as a sort of substitute in a situation of economic restrictions and permanent shortages or as “forced ascetism” (as Roesler 2005 formulates it concerning mass consumption in the GDR).

The historian Musya Glants, who has analyzed the significance of food in the Soviet Union, argues that in this context the culture of “intellectual nourishment” served as a means of defence and a symbolic flight from the difficulties of reality (Glants 1997, 223-4). During the interviews, the immigrants always distinguished between “food” and “culture”, considering them as two opposite areas. Although they spend a lot of time preparing meals and meeting friends around the table, they constantly stress that food has no significance for them: “After all, it’s only food.” It is difficult to reconcile this rejection of the importance of food on the part of the immigrants with the practice of serving lavish (and luxurious) meals at every opportunity. This suggests that we might see these statements as a kind of self-presentation. It is extremely important for the migrants to present themselves as a highly-educated intellectual group, trying by means of a familiar and politically loaded dichotomy between the spiritual (as Soviet) and the materialistic (as decadent capitalist) to preserve their dignity and to revive a social status which has been lost with migration.

## 2. “Arrival on a new planet”: The case of Misha

I suspect that the move to a capitalist society influences both ideas about material values (which can also remain hidden) and intellectual, cultural, and social life. In order to pursue this idea, I would like to concentrate on the immigrants’ own descriptions. The following material is taken from an interview with reflections about capitalism by a highly educated person, who is no longer employed in his original occupation. These reflections can serve as a basis for the further discussion about coping with the new capitalist society. The story was told to me in Russian and has been translated into English, sticking as closely as possible to the original. All names have been altered.

Misha is a mechanical engineer and scientist, 53 years old, who immigrated with his wife and daughter from Odessa (Ukraine) to Germany in 1991. He divorced and later married a German woman, with whom he has a nine-year-old son. Misha worked for seven years in Germany as a scientist with a grant from a national science foundation; he lost his job in 2004 because of budget cuts and is presently unemployed.

*“Germany was my first foreign country for me. It was the shock of a human being who had seen nothing similar in his life before. Our arrival was like the arrival on a new planet... Also an economic shock, with me namely the food shock: in this crazy ‘Rewe’ store in Unna – Massen – these yoghurts, we left the state when there was nothing there. And here no fewer than a hundred pots of yoghurt for a person who knows only one kind, namely yoghurt [in Russian “Kefir”], or for example sour cream or sausage. I was stunned and confused by this variety of cheeses and different wrapping materials. Of course, my jaw hung down in be-*



*wilderment ... It is no surprise that I gained ten kilos after that. Because you don't know how many calories things contain. For example, yoghurt – you think it is not a meal and eat immense quantities ... well ... The shop window is flooded with light, a system with mirrors through which everything is seen double ... And I try from the other side until today, to walk around the shops, not to enter or to go quickly through it. It makes me furious that one must search and search and I start to get annoyed. I still have not and I probably never will get used to it. I get tired very quickly from this variety ... I would have nothing against it, if there would be ten times less. I have no need for all these seasonings ... One must maybe be relaxed about it, but it takes so much time from you!”*

In this passage we can follow Misha's first impressions of his arrival on the “new planet” and its material abundance. At the beginning he is obviously shocked by the general situation and particularly by the situation in relation to food, which he calls “gastro-nomic shock”. The differences are so great and the new world is so unknown that he calls the new environment a “new planet”. Things, which he sees, obviously contradict everything he knew about the West and Germany before. His powerful impression of the “new planet” is not only described through such strong words as “my jaw hung down in bewilderment”, “crazy” supermarket “Rewe”, getting furious and annoyed by searching for pepper at the supermarket; Misha even reports about feeling physically unwell because of the variety. This element of not being able physically to cope with the phenomenon of abundance is repeated in many other interviews, in which participants describe dizziness, getting tired, a sick feeling or nausea caused by the endless amounts of commodities. As we can see further Misha copes reflectively with different expressions of the capitalist life in the West. The next paragraph refers to fundamental and essential western concepts like citizenship:

*“I think I am, so to speak, an average person out of those who came here, – and what did we know before? Zero. Only here in Germany, I have discovered that it is an expressive picturesque country. If one says: ‘German lyric’, what do I understand by it? It was told to me since my childhood: sweetish lyric, the word Bürger (citizen) had no connection to the word grazhdanin (citizen in Russian). If somebody was called a ‘conscientious and neat German citizen’ (‘dobroporyadochnii nemezkkii grazhdanin’), it was accepted always with arrogance from above, said always negatively and it was clear that this human being is a piece of shit. [I asked here: ‘Why then?'] He is too good, he is not human, such a robot who lives only according to laws and written down rules. At the same time he has pink cheeks, is fat and lives in Munich, he eats and drinks sumptuously and these are his only interests. And nobody has ever mentioned that he lives as a free human being in a dynamically developed society and knows his duties and rights. It is very convenient in politics to show reality one-sided ... There were linguistic and conceptual difficulties. All the first difficulties are also the last. The difficulty of life on a new planet – where should we go, how should one select the*

*city? Our dog did the selection for us: we ended up in the only hostel in X-town, where one was allowed to take the dog along."*

Here as well as in the last part of the story, Misha thinks over the "conceptual difficulties", which appear with the transition to the West. These difficulties do not only go back to his past, the social concepts are also politically loaded ones and are incorporated in behaviour he takes for granted as well as in perception patterns, and become consciously evident through the "collision" with the new life, namely through the example of the Other society and its everyday life. Pointing out the unchangeable nature of the "conceptual difficulties", which in his view has still not changed, implies a certain degree of alienation from this new Other society, which accompanies his current life. Sometimes he is confronted with the necessity to decide and lacks the "tools" – the social competences – needed to make such decisions. He stresses ironically the absurdity of this state, when the decision is taken by his dog. Nevertheless as we will see further he permanently tries to find his way around, to think the concepts over, and to act as a mature social agent rather than to be a victim of circumstances. As we can see from the next paragraph, he is not only permanently confronted with the necessity to change but also actively tries to do it, transforming his everyday experience into the new understanding of the German environment and not being ashamed to admit this learning process. This point distinguishes him from many other participants, who often refuse to speak about this learning process because it contradicts their social status as already formed mature social agents and highly qualified persons, who prefer to stress the resources (not necessary material) they already have, their professionalism and social knowledge, which they hope to apply in the new society.

*"Everything was a question mark. One had to learn the whole time to know one's way around, exactly like a child – little knowledge, psychological lability ...Many connectional difficulties for example the word shares. Of course I knew the word shares, but I didn't know what it looks like concretely. That is not comparable with my former life and there is no chance to find your way around, although I have devoted much time to maths and chess ...Immigration brings to people in mature age an eternal stress, maybe not so big as at the start, but just permanent. They will feel never at home. The human being is shaped so strongly by his childhood, education and surroundings and is so defined by it that one cannot accuse him ... [Here I ask: 'Who accuses him?'] Well yes, or cannot expect, that he should change. Our Soviet remnants are everything. For example, a concrete remnant – now I must change my job. There, in Odessa the capitalist situation was unthinkable – you never had to change your job; everyone went to the same work his whole life. Here, I need to make a mental effort in order to understand that I am fired from the research project after seven years of work not because people do not like me or because I am not suitable, but because now is exactly the time when a permanent position in my department is no longer possible economically. It is difficult for me not to take it personally and to understand that economic circumstances also decide this."*

Misha's initial enthusiasm changes quite quickly as a result of the first "collision with life" into helplessness, "psychological lability". But he tries to manage his situation actively and to undertake at his own initiative important changes in his life: Misha gets divorced, marries a German woman, and finds a research job in which he will be employed for seven years. Misha's reflections are also directed towards the new economic conditions, as for example through conceptual coping with terms such as shares, stock exchange, the dynamic processes of the Western market system, the defining of prices in the capitalist system, the production of artefacts with an intentional "short life". He even tries "not to take personally" his own retirement, attempting to explain it with reference to the general economic circumstances. At the same time he is conscious of his misunderstanding of the local social, cultural and economic world and its codes, since his personality has been shaped by his life in the Soviet Union. His feeling that the receiving society expects immigrants to undergo crucial inner transformations ("one can not accuse him...") in order to be integrated contradicts his own everyday experience, through which he finds out that his "Soviet remnants are everything". This contradiction or inner conflict is experienced by the most participants, as will be explained in part three.

As we see from the whole story, the very personally and candidly described experiences, the cynical comments, the absurd situations mentioned, the associations made, the discoveries about Soviet political manipulation, the everyday observations, the comparison made between what they have been taught by earlier immigrants and their own experience – all these points to an active confrontation with the concept capitalism, and Misha's self-reflections concerning his position in the new system of the free economy. His consciousness of and way of dealing with it, as Misha expresses it – not just in terms of language but also of conceptual difficulties connected with the transition to a capitalist system – is typical of many other interviews with people from the group under investigation. Despite Misha's unemployment at the time of the interview, he is an active, energetic and thinking person, who manages by making great efforts to protect his dignity and personality and not to be ashamed of what Misha calls the "Soviet remains" shaping his whole personality. This effort to "save" his place in the understandable social world is combined with his confusion about intuitive noticed challenge presented by the host society to migrants, requiring them to turn into completely other persons who are suitable, fitting, respected and "adapted" (of course in the terms of the receiving society that are not clear for him) or, in the terms of Golden, requiring them to be (like children) re-reared and "schooled" (Golden 2001, 70). In spite of internal changes and transformations, many of Soviet experiences survive; Misha refers to these experiences in order to justify himself and to avoid being "accused" by the (invisible) host society. Misha conducts an internal dialogue between his reflections on the previous experiences and the attempt to maintain them and interweave them in "here and now"-situations. He also wants to counteract images like the labile child who does not know his way around, as migrants are often perceived (Golden 2001, 2002) but rather to present himself as a mature, responsible and socially active agent.

### 3. Reviving Soviet knowledge about the social world in the capitalist system

How does the symbiosis of politically loaded Soviet ideas the immigrants have “brought with them” and images of capitalism that have been formed as a result of everyday experiences in the new context take shape? As my research shows, immigrants try to disparage much of what appeared to them in the Soviet Union as normative, right and appropriate; now they often act by way of categories, which were defined in the previous context as “capitalist” and were interpreted as immoral. Without exact ideas or knowledge about behaviour codes, unspoken norms and silent values from the new society, many immigrants orient themselves towards the opposite of what was counted as morally proper in the origin society.

I would like to demonstrate this thesis on the basis of ethnographical fieldwork, which points out certain stereotypical opinions about capitalism which crop up repeatedly in conversations with immigrants. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that in comparison to similar fieldwork conducted in Israel, examples for widespread stereotypes about capitalism were much more frequent in Germany. The explanation for this remarkable fact may be that in Israel, the concept of “capitalism” is only one of a number of equally important features thought to characterize the country (along with “Mediterranean”, “Jewish”, “Zionist”, “oriental”, “returning from the Diaspora”), while in Germany, at least in the symbolic construction of the immigrants, it is seen as one of the most important characteristics<sup>4</sup>.

One must also note that the immigrants in Germany remain in much closer touch with friends in the CIS, which is made possible by cheap bus travel to Russia and Ukraine. Another important factor is that whereas immigrants in Israel are granted Israeli citizenship as soon as they arrive in the country, immigrants in Germany must wait for seven years before they become German citizens, and in order to do so must also pass German language tests. Even after this seven-year period, most of them retain their CIS passports. Having the status of a contingent refugee (Kontingentflüchtling) enables them to commute permanently between two societies, to constitute their “social worlds” (Schütze 2002) in both contexts, and to find and modify in each context the niche they occupy as transmigrants. Now they act as transmigrants, presenting themselves as “capitalists from the West” through the intensive interaction with their friends and relatives who remain in Russia or other CIS states.

#### 3.1 “We always thought capitalists (the bourgeoisie) were rich...”

For many migrants, the Soviet idea about rich capitalists collapses as soon as they themselves become part of the free market society, where they mostly have low economic status. At the same time for the friends and relatives who “stay behind” in the CIS, and with help of whom they can maintain and treat intensive social networks, they have at-

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<sup>4</sup> One should also remark that sometimes the images of “wild capitalism” and the USA as its embodiment were partially transferred by immigrants to the German case, as for example in the further stereotype: “*Under capitalism, people sue each other all the time.*” Here we should remember that at the time of the mass emigration to Germany it was officially no longer possible to emigrate to the USA, which changed its policy in 1991.

tained the new symbolic status of bourgeois immediately after their departure to the West. It is therefore expected from them that they accept this role and act in accordance with it. Nevertheless, at this moment there emerges a significant and powerful growing misunderstanding in their friendship with those who are still living in the CIS.

The obvious statuses in which they find themselves conflict: firstly as people who request support from their best friends in the difficult stage of disorientating migration, and secondly as people who are now living in the rich capitalist West, which is often desired by many of those still living in the CIS. This brings many frustrations and complaints for the immigrants, who frequently express them in the interviews as for example Natasha elaborated:

*“All our relatives and friends who are still there think we must be unbelievably rich. If you live in the West, you are rich. The moment we crossed the border, we became capitalists, inostrantsy in their eyes. [The Russian word for foreigner is often used as a synonym for capitalist.] No-one wants to hear anything about your problems, your only duty is to send presents to all your friends there.”*

Yet one can point to partial acceptance of this troublesome capitalist role – after all, the group of their friends and relatives in the origin land is the only one in the eyes of which they can revive their lost respective social status and enhance their apparently low economic position as (mostly) social welfare recipients at the bottom of the pyramid. Moreover, this capitalist role is only possible within a group that understands and shares the same symbolic system and social capital. In that sense, as transmigrants they have the unique opportunity, to fight against their low status in the new society, by “lending” and activating the status of rich capitalists or bourgeois at least for the short time of their visit to the CIS and through the presents they bring with them.

Around this capitalist role, a number of transnational cross-border activities which can be described as “help for the poor” has come into being. The transmigrants can purchase Russian food in Russian food stores in Germany, goods, which are advertised in Russian channels in Germany, and also in the CIS, and which their friends there cannot afford themselves. Transmigrants can and do extend economic markets to the origin land and support their friends and relatives there in form of remittances, or sending them parcels with things bought in the flea-market (mostly clothes) and taking as many clothes as possible with them when they visit Russia. There are frequent and detailed discussions among immigrants about the dozens of kilos of clothes that have to be sent, if at all possible, to all one’s acquaintances there – what one bought and where, what it cost, how well and carefully you washed and ironed it, how nicely you wrapped it up in the parcel. One often hears the additional comment that people there (in Russia) have no idea how expensive it is to buy all these things, or how difficult it is to get hold of them and then to find someone prepared to take the parcel to Russia or Ukraine.

At the same time the interviews also revealed a paradoxical partial revival of internalised old Soviet political images about rich capitalists, referring to local Germans in general. In this way the stereotypes, based on no more than a few experiences of informal interaction with local groups are reproduced. The following examples of Olesia and Mila demonstrate this. Olesia:

*“The Germans are happy to give you the old clothes from their rich backs, which they think is better than throwing them away – how virtuous of them ... Here everyone is fighting for themselves, we flopped down and found ourselves in developed capitalism.” Mila: “The main difference between us and the Germans is the level of material prosperity. They can afford to sit in the cafe from eight o’clock every morning, and we can’t. That’s why we will never be able to understand one another.”*

From these examples one can conclude that we are dealing not only with stereotypes, but also with internal conflicts and contradictions with which transmigrants are confronted. As highly educated professionals, they had “dedicated” the best part of their life and their capacity for work to the Soviet Union. However the state cheated them; this was their retrospective interpretation of their lives after the perestroika, after which the state gave them no more than a fifteen Euros monthly pension. The very fact that they are now dependent on social welfare in Germany and, through highly qualified professionals, must take old German clothes or cannot afford to sit in the cafés, seems to many of those I interviewed quite shameful, as expressed in the comments recoded above.

### **3.2 “Under capitalism, everything costs money...”**

This stereotype refers to the change in the meaning of money and to the consequences connected with this change, which can be seen in ideas about moral values and friendship relations among immigrants. There are discussions, confrontations and some confusions and even bewilderments about the question of “money” and the necessity to undergo internal moral transformations in one’s dealings with money. Olga:

*“You have to pay for everything here – we are living in capitalism, you know. You begin to place a high value on your own work, but what happens is that everyone suddenly remembers how highly qualified they are. This means that if they just help someone else as to redecorate the flat, even their own gut friends, they spend time on it and so they think they should be paid...None of our people [she means Russian immigrants] wants to do anything for nothing anymore.”*

The interviews reveal that the common symbolic meaning of money is still strongly marked by the previous context of the origin land. Even after personal experiences in capitalism, Soviet clichés such as “in capitalism you have to pay for everything” or “everything is measurable in terms of money” remain. Some immigrants accept this as an inevitable fact of their new life, while others are afraid of undesirable changes – that after living in the West for a while they will turn into new people, behaving differently and inappropriately. As for example Ira explains:

*“You have to pay for everything here. Our television broke down and we asked an electrician to come and repair it, one of our people [she means*

*he spoke Russian]. He came, took five minutes to replace a part, stayed for another three hours, had lunch, had a drink, told us all about life here, and then charged us 25 Euros and went home. We were completely shocked ... 25 Euros for five minutes' work, and he wasn't ashamed to sit there as if we were great friends, chatting and eating ...It's terrible, to think we might turn out like that if we stay here long enough."*

Yet misinterpretations or clichés about alleged normative behaviour in capitalism can also serve as motives for action or as something of educative value, which in this form would be unthinkable for the local Germans. Such misinterpretations cause individuals to act intuitively and experimentally, according to their understanding of supposed but actually imagined local norms. This causes behaviour, which they themselves would certainly have disapproved earlier, or would have been considered immoral in the SU. On this topic Ludmila elaborates:

*"We pay our son wages." Her son is six years old. [I ask: "Wages?"] "Yes, ten Euros a month, you know, all parents pay their children here." [I say: "You mean pocket money?"] "Yes, but it's wages you don't do anything to earn. So we worked out a system, we made a daily plan for him. If he fails to do something we deduct one Euro from his wages, one Euro for every point. I don't know yet how it will work, we only introduced it a couple of days ago."*

### **3.3 "Under capitalism, people sue each other all the time..."**

Here one can also frequently observe absurd situations, which indicate not only helplessness, but also misunderstandings and misinterpretations of various aspects of the unfamiliar new capitalist system. Such odd interpretations of supposed behaviour patterns, norms or values of the local dominant group can also be based on superficial interactions, insufficient knowledge of the language, and of course the lack of language codes, which are also part of the common known social world and socio-cultural capital. In this case the ability to take someone to court can be as a form of power, which supposedly every member of the dominant group possesses, and with the help of which one can control the order. Although those interviewed have never themselves taken anybody to court, they often refer to court cases, which they think might protect their rights. This opportunity seems to have a special meaning and significance for migrants, who frequently feel themselves powerless, deprived, and in need of protection, a group, which has no clear idea about its actual rights and social structures in the host society. As Tania formulates it: "The Germans take each other to court all the time! Even their relatives, their friends, it's seen as appropriate here, people don't see anything wrong with it."

#### 4. “The Russia we had always dreamed of” – Some Conclusions

The next step is a discussion of ways of coping with abundance as a form of transnationality. Here, the tension between fulfilling one’s dreams and frustration is important. On the one hand, the people I have interviewed no longer have to put up with economic shortages, the main limitation of the socialist system. They also have no more need of close social networks, which were vital for survival under the old system of limitations and shortages (Markowitz 1993). Even though they are experiencing economic difficulties at present, they can now for the first time serve whatever they want at mealtimes. This freedom of choice is a new social and existential condition for them. The first burst of enthusiasm for the limitless, and for the first time accessible, supply of goods (they are there, you can see them on the shelf!) is repeated in some narratives. At the same time, however, abundance comes as a shock: for example to Misha, who mentions that he felt deadened by the hundreds of pots of yoghurt, the sour cream, the sausages. This is the “gastronomic shock” of someone who “wouldn’t mind if there were only one tenth of the number of spices”. Where do you start? How do you choose one thing out of so many, when the individual products have no obvious history for the immigrants and are not associated with anything? Using the terminology of cultural anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986), one could say the product has had its life story withdrawn. The unknown, anonymous array of goods on the shelves, and the absence of anything the immigrants could associate with these products, is a reminder of the fact that they are strangers in this new country. The abundance seems faceless. The “flight” to the Russian enclave in this case is of course, not just a matter of chance.

What actually happens here is that the content of the concept capitalism, in the Soviet understanding of the term, is frequently replaced by a myth of Soviet prosperity and material abundance on the stage of the Russian-speaking enclave, and especially of the Russian grocery, in the form of a mythical transnationality. Sometimes the idea of an “ideal Russia in a German environment” becomes a subject for discussion. Inna explains how she sees this:

*“You can get almost everything in Russian here: TV, newspapers, visitors from Russia all the time, contacts, and we can travel there: it’s as if this were the Russia we had always dreamed of. A Russian-speaking Germany is a Russia where everything is fine; if it were only possible to live like that in Russia, no-one would leave.”*

The dream of accessible abundance in Russia first became a symbolic reality through emigration to the West; the Russian fairy tales of the “spread tablecloth” have come true on the immigrants’ tables, with a wealth of delicacies and every imaginable dish. There is a concern to place on the table the most desirable foodstuffs when visitors from the CIS are invited. Most of these visitors cannot afford such meals, and one can suspect that the immigrants want to put on display their lifestyle in the capitalist world, their economic status, the way they have come up in the world, and the horizons that have now opened up for them. The globalized, postmodern world, which is given expression on the table via the presence of dishes from France, Italy, Mexico, Turkey, and so on, is in this special case interwoven with the idea of a Soviet empire represented by dishes



from the different Soviet republics (plov from Uzbekistan, leche from Georgia, borshch from Ukraine, Moldavian wine).

This involves not just making the most of the opportunity to demonstrate that one can afford to buy all conceivable foods (either global or local Soviet), but also showing that one belongs simultaneously to the global village and to a powerful state that has now become part of imaginary space (Dolve-Gandelman 1990, 121) and in fact no longer exists. However, being able to find and buy, without any difficulty, all the foodstuffs you want can also – paradoxically – be perceived as frustrating and even as making life more difficult. During my participant observation I regularly heard people speaking of the “right” taste, which cannot be authentically retrieved, and memories came back of what a struggle it was trying to get hold of foodstuffs in the Soviet Union and of the capabilities and social competences this required. In some cases, immigrants spoke of the frustration and senselessness of consumption in Western society.

Frequently it went further than a remark about “boring sausage”, and was more to do with producing a familiar social system and social contacts, which are vital in the new society. I would disagree with the view about the lost essential necessity of social contacts after migration (Markowitz 1993), and would claim on the basis of my interviews that for some migrants the especially intensive treatment of social migrants’ networks is a form of coping with and learning about the new social reality. To be informed on time about the cheapest offer, about the new regulations introduced by the authorities, the social welfare and employment office, about new bus routes and the opening of Russian food stores; to expect linguistic, concrete, psychological or emotional help and support when in difficulties – all this requires a stable social Russian-speaking network.

Taking into consideration the fact that most interviewed have difficulties with the German language, this group is part of a migration context determined by the Russian language. In this sense I consider that social networks of Russian speaking migrants remain essential, after as well as before migration. However, one cannot assume that the social contacts of migrants are of a new type. The common collective way of coping with difficulties in the receiving country brings the need for an artificial resuscitation of the old system, something that not only serves as a demonstration that one is socially capable of feeding one’s family in a suitable way but also offers a system of symbolic coding that everyone (among the members of this group) can understand, a system in which people feel at home (which is not true of the new contexts) and which is the only system in which they know their way around and with which they feel comfortable. The echoes of Soviet life can be seen as a form of symbolic transnationality.

Both, this need for resuscitation of the old system and the social legitimisation of multicultural lifestyles in the host country, lead to the establishing and development of a Russian language enclave and fragmental reproduction of the old Soviet reality. Nevertheless, the Russian language enclave in general and imaginary space of Soviet Union in particular are not located in a vacuum of “dusty” memories from the past, but build transnational cross-border space connected and corresponding to the processes of today’s CIS and with the life of those relatives and friends who still live there, and with whom the emigrants share intensive social networks.

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