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## Tricky Hermeneutics: Public and Private Viewpoints on Jewish Migration from Russia to Germany

### Foreword on Methodology

One of the theoretical foundations of “interpretative sociology” is the assumption that phenomena do not speak to us directly, and that they are not the same thing as facts. Facts, as parts of a theory, only become facts in the framework of contextual knowledge. Especially in dealing with research based on biographical or narrative interviews, we are obliged to interpret respondents’ remarks in numerous cycles of contexts.

This finding is not new, of course. It is rather the pillar of hermeneutic research. Nevertheless, we would like to take it as our starting point, raising the following issue: we must consider context—but which context?

On the one hand, the social, institutional, and discursive contexts of the respondents are different from those of the interviewer and the researcher. This is why we must continually ask about the contents of common contextual fields, and about their boundaries as well. In order to overcome contextual barriers, research is often done by persons who are concerned. Women do research on women, homosexuals on homosexuals, and natives of a given country on persons of the same ethnic background abroad. But far from solving the problem, this strategy creates another one. The contextual boundaries are only shifted, not eliminated. The reader of research literature is no longer a potential contributor, but is relegated to the role of an outside observer of an exotic scenario. The organizational and methodological problems we face are not trivial, since the need for a certain distance in observation is well known. When the “subject” and “object” of research share a common milieu, many of the rules, norms, and habits of that milieu are taken for granted, and not reflected on. As shared aspects of a common horizon of understanding, they are visible and conceivable only from outside.

On the other hand, both partners in a given interview situation form a new context of understanding which is not taken for granted because it emerges from their negotiation of this situation. What are the topic and the purpose of the interview? Is the topic in question part of public discourse, or is it more or less private? Why would a person want to give “correct” information, and why should they do so? If this negotiation is successful, it promotes trust and willingness, and forms part of a preliminary text that third party observers do not share. Often this pre-text or subtext is not subject to interpretation.

Another level of context consists in the accumulation of texts, interpretations, and information produced by prior research. Qualitative methods are the result of efforts to avoid the difficulties which arise first from the lack of common experience, and second from the lack of distance. We wish to acquire a stock of knowledge that will furnish all the considerations necessary to understand others. We compile texts, interpretations, and extracted information in order to build a common store of knowledge. Cultivated and revised, this material forms not only the background of new research, but its very context, and even more: the context of its own merit as scientific knowledge. There is no research which does not quote other research or common knowledge to make its findings more "true", i.e. more credible.

We would like to look at a concrete empirical finding in research on Russian Jewish emigration to Germany. We will discuss the different perspectives and point out some of the difficulties in understanding the other in different cultural contexts. We would like to show how convincing divergent possibilities can be, and how irritating shifts in perspective are.

## The "Case" and Different Interpretations

One important aspect of research on migration is the discussion of reasons and motives for migration. Motivation for East-West migration, and Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union in particular, is often interpreted against the background of ethnic conflicts and anti-Semitism. Moreover, the legal criteria for immigration to Germany are ethnically defined. A person is entitled to come to Germany because he or she is German or Jewish and subjected to ethnic discrimination. These criteria are clearly different from other cases, such as political asylum or work migration. This policy is maintained for historical reasons. Germans from Eastern Europe were permitted to come to Germany after the Second World War because their living conditions seemed precarious in those parts of Eastern Europe where the war had destroyed multi-ethnic coexistence. Immigration of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe is defined as "return": immigrants who can prove their descent from German emigrants are entitled to the status of "*Aussiedler*", or returning emigrants.

In the period of German reunification in the years 1990 and 1991, the last East German government expanded the ethnic immigration options for Jews from the Soviet Union. The decision was taken in order to "compensate" for consequences of the Second World War, and to take responsibility for Jews who had survived the Holocaust. (The obvious contradiction in not extending the right to immigration to Germany to Jews from other East European countries, whose families had suffered as much or more from Nazi destruction, is

beyond the scope of this discussion.) The unified German government ratified this policy—the “Law on Measures Regarding Refugees Accepted in the Line of Humanitarian Relief Operations” (*Kontingenzfluechtlingsgesetz*)—with little modification. But since the law is not part of the German constitution, as is the right to political asylum, it can be modified or repealed at any time. This fact is not discussed in German politics, but it nonetheless influences the considerations of potential emigrants from the former Soviet Union. In the context of migration theory it is therefore a “pull factor” in its own right: persons who tend to use this “emigration gate” must decide quickly, or risk facing closed doors.

The process of ethnic migration, or rather the ethnification of the East–West migration pattern, began in the nineties. In other words, while migration across the Iron Curtain was thought of as politically and sometimes socially motivated, the new migration since the collapse of Communism is organized and described only in ethnic terms. However, the underlying assumptions are often questioned in public debates and mass media. It is claimed that the immigrants are not real Germans or Jews. Alternatively, or in addition, it is said that there is no longer severe ethnic discrimination in the Soviet Union, at least when compared with other political and/ or economic cleavages, or when considered against the backdrop of open xenophobia against people from the region of the Caucasus.

Migration research has reacted to this quarrel by designing numerous projects dealing with questions such as the following. What reasons for migration are specifically ethnic? What percentage of the emigrants concerned are Germans (or Jews), and to what extent are they conscious of their ethnicity? We do not intend to continue this very unfruitful discussion, for two reasons. First, it is useless to define ethnic affiliation by any “essentials” which do not refer to the person’s self-definition. Second, all research clearly shows that there are no isolated reasons for emigration, but only whole complexes of motivations. Nevertheless, we are confronted with the contexts of scientific explanations and public and political debates that affect not only researchers but also the immigrants themselves. This is why we should consider the way in which the immigrants present their motives, and examine the fields in which researchers interpret these patterns of presentation.

In the following we will focus on one aspect of presenting or reflecting on the decision to emigrate, as found in some sets of interviews that were made with ex-Soviet Jewish immigrants to Germany. These sets of interviews formed parts of independent research projects that were not linked to one another, and are therefore connected with different research designs with respect to the aims, samples, and guiding questions of the research. Nevertheless, the pattern of argument in question arose in many interviews in the contexts of the different sets. This fact is striking enough to justify a second interpretation of the separately published findings.

As we have already mentioned, the problem of obtaining different results by different research designs and in different contexts is generally known. Yet this methodological problem is generally discussed abstractly, and that is why we would like to take the rare opportunity to consider a concrete example.

## The discourse of “accidentalness” and “unwillingness”

One way to present the decision to migrate is the argument of having migrated accidentally or by chance. The first interpretation of this very specific pattern of argument is that of Yvonne Schuetze, who found this explanation of emigration motives during a project on young Russian Jewish immigrants in Germany (Schuetze 1997a, 1997b). When asked about their reasons for leaving their home for Germany rather than Israel, they very often answered that they did not actively make that choice. They came to Germany because their parents had so decided; they followed in the wake of others when emigration increased; they rejoined other family members, and so on.

In her first paper Schuetze (1997a) explained this pattern as follows. The young Jewish immigrants feel obliged to justify their coming to Germany because they are under the influence of the moral norm of not immigrating to the country of the perpetrators of Holocaust. Therefore they bridge the gap between the norm and the actuality by denying the act of will. They did not *want* to come, but came accidentally.

We are thankful for Schuetze's work because this finding was the starting point of our own reflections on typical patterns of argument regarding motives for migration. In the following we will present two other interpretations of this finding, and then discuss the different contexts which led to them.

In a research project that we, the German-Russian research team led by Oswald and Voronkov, conducted on ethnic community building and ethnic reorientation among ex-Soviet citizens in Russia and Germany, we also interviewed Jewish Russians. The sample of respondents was completely different, however, because Jewish-Russian interviewees only made up part of the sample together with other, part-Russian ex-Soviet citizens of several age groups, including some who still lived in Russia and others who had emigrated to Germany. But some of the respondents interviewed in Germany were about the same age as those in Schuetze's sample.

After our first joint paper based on these interviews (Oswald and Voronkov 1997), we continued the interpretation of the interviews separately. First we looked at the interviews with Russian Jews in Russia, and could not find that they gave great attention or weight to the norm of not emigrating to Germany. Only those in the youngest age group who were very closely affiliated to a Jewish community in Russia had ever heard of such considerations

and felt the influence of the norm. They firmly rejected the idea of migration to Germany, but could imagine emigrating to Israel or to the USA. This corresponds with the interpretation of Yvonne Schuetze, who, in a further paper (Schuetze 1997b), stresses the point that the norm is hardly at work in the Russian context because a public discussion of the Holocaust has only recently begun there.

In Germany, as elsewhere in the Western world, the situation is totally different. There is extensive discussion of the Holocaust and, moreover, an ongoing dispute over the question of whether or not Jews should live in Germany. As Schuetze shows, young Jewish immigrants perceive the problem after their immigration, and then begin to conceive the relevance of the norm of not immigrating to Germany. This means that they remember not having felt they were violating a norm, but now, after their immigration, they acknowledge its existence and feel uncomfortable. In their argument of accidental immigration to Germany, they try to avoid conflict with the norm which exists in the Jewish world and which therefore affects them now whether they like it or not.

In the light of this thesis, Ingrid Oswald took up the interviews with immigrants to Germany from the former Soviet Union (Oswald 1998). These interviews were conducted in the context of the above mentioned research project on ethnic communities and ethnic reorientation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the young Jewish immigrants spoke of accidental or unwilling immigration to Germany. But as other interviews show, not only did older Jewish immigrants use the same pattern of argument as well, but so did immigrants of other ethnic affiliations. Although many immigrants in this sample were Jewish, almost half of them were Russians, Ukrainians, and others who had accompanied their Jewish spouses. Even the “returning” German immigrants and their spouses—whether German or Russian—spoke in the same way. They had not originally wanted to immigrate to Germany, but other “forces” (friends, relatives, circumstances) led them there.

It must be mentioned that the interview manuals in the two research projects were not identical. Whereas Schuetze asked directly about the respondents’ reasons for coming to Germany, this was not the case in our project on ethnic community building and ethnic orientation. Nevertheless, when we invited the respondents to speak about the circumstances surrounding the decision to migrate, they very often used the same arguments as Schuetze’s respondents did. Our interview partners additionally reported that they considered migrating further—to the USA or to Israel—or migrating back to Russia. Superficially, both interview sets showed the same pattern of argument, although, as already noted, the questions guiding the research and the sampling were different.

Schuetze’s interpretation of the “accidental” or “unwilling” pattern of argument is highly plausible in regard to the young Jewish immigrants, but why

should others—as described above—use the same arguments? This was the key question for our interpretation. Turning to the interviews conducted in Berlin among ex-Soviet immigrants of different ages, we could see that the pattern in question was very often combined with another argument. The immigrants felt somewhat uncomfortable because they were dependent on the social welfare system. Although—or perhaps because—they live under good conditions and are given enough money, they feel uneasy. Some of them expressed the hope that some day they would be able to pay back all the expenses that the German state had undertaken on their behalf. They added that they experience xenophobia in Germany only when they are at the social welfare office to get their benefits: the civil servants there regularly make them feel they are a burden on German taxpayers. Against this background, Oswald interpreted the discursive element of being in Germany accidentally as follows. The immigrants—particularly German and Jewish ones—had been invited to come to Germany, and now feel that they are not really welcome. They are aware, of course, of the public debate on undesired economic immigrants and on eventually closing the borders to further immigration. Therefore they express their reservations, as if to make their presence in Germany more harmless by stressing its accidental nature.

At this stage of interpretation, Oswald gave little attention to the various ethnic affiliations of the immigrants. Against the background of our interviews in Russia, it seemed unlikely that Jews could have another reason for stressing their accidental immigration (in the context of considering the consequences of the Holocaust) than Germans (in the context of disappointment of their hopes concerning their “home country”). Without exception, the respondents in Russia had discussed the “German option” without reference to any historical context. Moral considerations or anticipation of deprivation had no place in these interviews. There was no specific ethnic argument, only a specifically ex-Soviet argument: to leave a country that offered slim prospects for them and their children. Accordingly, they seemed rather similar in Germany, being immigrants in a relatively marginalized social position.

Viktor Voronkov, co-leader of our project on ethnic communities and ethnic orientation, agrees with Oswald’s interpretation in viewing the emigrants as “Soviet”. This corresponds with findings from many sets of interviews on ethnic problems and on ethnic community building in Russia, which demonstrate the relatively weak ethnic bonds in ex-Soviet urban populations, especially within higher educated strata. The “nationality” factor in Soviet politics on the one hand produced clear official demarcation lines between the nationalities because the ethnic (“national”) affiliation was registered in all vital statistics and personal documents. Nevertheless, this official stigmatization became blurred in the 70s and 80s, and above all, ethnic identity formation in daily urban life was weak. Only in some exceptional cases did it outweigh the shared “Soviet” self-definition that arose from the influence of

Soviet socialization over decades. This is the reason why official ethnic classifications very often do not correspond with individual self-definition, especially when the persons affected are descended from so-called “mixed marriages”, which are extremely widespread in ex-Soviet metropolises.

For this reason Voronkov tends to understand the argumentation of accidentalness and unwillingness more literally, pointing out that ex-Soviet citizens, when thinking about their emigration options, do not consider historical dimensions at all, but decide on the basis of their actual social situation and living conditions. The opening of the borders in 1989–90 was completely unexpected, and many people decided overnight to get their documents ready and emigrate. They wanted to be abroad in case the post-Soviet regime should close the borders again. Today—potential emigrants already face a different situation: they can act more calmly because it seems very unlikely that the Russian authorities would interfere with their leaving the country. But up to the mid-1990s, when Yvonne Schuetze and we conducted our interviews, the respondents very often had emigrated in a hurry, or had lived in a situation where the question of emigration or staying was one of survival.

## Interpretative Cycles and the Influence of Public Discourses

We would now like to present the different social and discursive contexts that could have had an influence on these three interpretations of a single finding: the accidentalness or denial of active intentions in emigrating to Germany. To put it briefly, the three of us are involved in separate fields of public discourse, each of us shedding a different light on the pattern of argument in question, leading to different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, interpretations. Schuetze’s interpretation emerged in the context of a German-Israeli research project; Oswald’s interpretation is linked with the discussion of immigration to Germany in general; and Voronkov’s interpretation arose from the knowledge of everyday life on the one hand and from familiarity with the corresponding scientific discourse in post-Soviet society on the other. These three discursive fields serve as different interpretative filters, which we would like to describe here.

Schuetze’s project compares the situation of young Jewish immigrants in Germany and in Israel. In the German-Israeli public discourse, the question of emigrating to the “country of the Holocaust” plays a considerable role, and it became even more significant at the time the interviews were conducted. Ezer Weizman, then president of Israel, officially stated at the beginning of 1996 that he did not approve of Jewish emigration to Germany. Jews should “return” to Israel, i.e. they should aspire to *aliya*. Schuetze (1997b) gives us an impression of how strongly the norm to emigrate to Israel was felt in the

Jewish world by explaining the meaning of *aliya*. The term *aliya*, used to refer to immigration to Israel, literally means ascent or rise, while the opposite, emigration from Israel to another country, is called *yerida*, or descent. But, as Schuetze supposes, we may be sure that few people in Russia are aware of this usage. Nevertheless, the public discussion about Jewish immigration to Germany in the mid-nineties became a controversial mass media event in Germany, and doubtless influenced both sides of the interview situation. The researchers became interested in the moral and intellectual position of the young Jewish immigrants on this question, and the immigrants themselves may have felt an ethnic dilemma in accepting life chances from the descendants of the Holocaust perpetrators.

The frame of Oswald's interpretation was not primarily linked with the Jewish-German discourse, even though many of the respondents were Jews. This was because the project focused on socio-structural and not on ethnic specifics of migration and ethnic orientation. It was therefore very useful to learn of Schuetze's interpretation, which provided the impulse to re-read the interviews from a new perspective. As noted above, the pattern of argument pointed out by Schuetze was indeed found, but in interviews with both Jewish and non-Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union. The finding could not be compared with reports from non-Soviet immigrants, but those immigrants from the Soviet Union who came to Germany in the "fourth wave"—the migration that started in the late 80s—presented very similar stories of, and reasons for migration, as well as very similar descriptions of their life situation in Berlin. In fact, the lives of the new immigrants from the ex-Soviet Union seem standardized to a high degree, and differ greatly from the lives of other immigrants, such as labor migrants. In contrast to other immigrants they can benefit from the welfare system without the problems that labor immigrants or asylum seekers must face. At the same time, their legitimacy is regularly questioned in public and political discourse—without special consideration of their ethnic affiliation. All Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany are considered ethnic Russians by the native population, and to a certain degree this accords with the immigrants' self-perception.

The social, professional, and ethnic differences among the immigrants from the Soviet Union were equalized in Germany. It seemed obvious to interpret the respondents' presentation of their motives for migration as a reaction to their current social situation in Germany, rather than as a consequence of their former situation in the Soviet Union, and even less as an expression of abstract moral considerations. In the context of latent and manifest xenophobia, and of institutional discrimination against immigrants as an important issue in migration research today, Oswald read the explanations of our respondents as reservations typical of persons who expected more than they could actually get. This disappointment does not refer to the material standards found in Germany, but to professional disqualification that results



in loss of prestige and intellectual isolation. Stressing the accidentalness of the given situation could help them to relieve the discomfort of these negative implications.

Voronkov's interpretation in the joint project is linked to his position in post-Soviet society, both in everyday life and in scientific discourse. As an ex-Soviet citizen of partly Russian origin, he is familiar with the position and self-perception of potential emigrants; he has been aware of the everyday discourse on emigration for over a decade now. As a scientist who is deeply involved in the field under study, he feels enriched by learning about the perspectives of Yvonne Schuetze and Ingrid Oswald, who combine knowledge of the problem examined at a certain distance. Nevertheless, he is convinced that the immigrants' perception of accidentalness should be read more literally, because it arises from the Soviet and post-Soviet context of everyday life, with its political influences. Above all, this entails an acute consciousness of the various possibilities of diminished emigration options—either by the repeal of the right to emigrate from Russia, or by the closure of the German borders.

According to Voronkov, there are several aspects to consider. The first is that ethnic origin has lost its significance in everyday life in the past two decades, at least as far as Jews, Germans, or Ukrainians are concerned, for example (see Oswald and Voronkov 1997).<sup>1</sup> Soviet citizens, especially in the big cities, practically always live in bi-ethnic or poly-ethnic families because the proportion of "mixed marriages" is extremely high. In families of good education and high qualifications, as is the case with the respondents in both sets of interviews, they identify themselves first as members of the "intelligentsia" and only secondarily, if at all, as members of an ethnic group. Everyday life has lost its specific ethnic coloring; religious and cultural traditions are almost totally unknown. Now in the post-Soviet era, of course, some ethnic communities are endeavoring to rebuild "ethnic life", but without making a great effort to enhance the size of their memberships. After all, Jewish potential emigrants who are closely affiliated with the Jewish community and who are taking part in the Jewish reawakening in Russia do not tend to emigrate to Germany: they choose Israel or the USA. The result is that the emigration wave of Jewish Russians splits before leaving Russia, and moral doubts about being in Germany as a Jew only arise once a person is in Germany. This, of course, does not contradict Schuetze's interpretation, which stresses the influence of public discussion in the Western world. The point is how to distinguish the original motivations and considerations before emigration from retrospective judgments. Voronkov's position stresses the weak ethnic but strong Soviet identity of emigrants from Russia. Accordingly, he

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1 The problem of the new xenophobia against people from the Caucasus is a relatively new phenomenon which does not affect the sets of interviews discussed here, and cannot be outlined in this paper.

points out that ex-Soviet immigrants in Germany very often perceive themselves not as ethnic emigrants, but as emigrants who can take advantage of the ethnic options that Germany (or Israel or the USA) offers them.

Secondly, the semi-public political discourse on Jewish emigration in the Soviet Union was not anti-German, but was, if not anti-Semitic, then at least anti-Israeli. Above all, emigration was considered a betrayal of the Soviet Union. That means that until today all potential emigrants have had to consider the problem of violating this deeply emotionalized norm, which varies little with the choice of the country of destination. The anti-Israeli element of state politics was very often translated into anti-Semitism in everyday life, resulting in a dichotomy of Jewish behaviors between the so-called "good Jew", a normal Soviet citizen with a "normal" rejection of the Israeli state, but of Jewish origin; and the "bad Jew", who is interested in Israel and considers emigrating there.<sup>2</sup> This is the reason why Germany as a potential destination for emigration is far more attractive than Israel for a large part of the Russian Jewish population. Russian Germans are not exposed to the same question, of course, but face other difficulties. Their problem is that of identifying themselves as Germans while separating this idea from that of the fascist Germany that invaded the Soviet Union. Two possible solutions are open to them: making a connection with the former GDR, or a non-historical, "cultural" bond. In the mid-1990s, both solutions turned out to be anachronistic. Neither the GDR as an "antifascist bulwark" nor a culturally homogeneous Germany existed any more (if indeed it ever had existed). Nevertheless, Germany plays an important role as one of the rare countries that still represents an option for emigration. This simple fact still has its implications for motivating migration and the considerations that are weighed, even if expectations and hopes turn to disappointment and disillusionment.

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2 In this respect it might be useful to glance at another research project on Jewish migration, by Schoeps et al. (1996: 280ff). The respondent B., a Russian Jewish immigrant in Germany, also stresses the point that immigrants speak about accidentalness because they are considered traitors in their country of origin. To a certain degree this could indeed explain the emotional dichotomy of the immigrants in Germany. But if we follow Voronkov's interpretation, emigration to Israel should then be doubly burdened: as a betrayal of the home country, and as migration to a politically dubious country. Schuetze however, who had the opportunity to compare the German and Israeli situations, could not find corresponding arguments in the interviews with young Russian Jewish immigrants to Israel. As we know from the literature, the situation of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel is also not always easy, because they are often seen as non-Jews bringing strange customs and crime to Israel. We may say that they sometimes face the same situation as Russian Germans in Germany: invited by the government, but mistrusted and estranged from the native population. Nevertheless, they obviously do not express such doubts and uneasiness in referring to their immigration as do the immigrants to Germany.

## The Nature of the Soviet “Public” Sphere

A third aspect that must be considered in order to interpret the respondents' reports adequately, is their specific reaction towards persons from the “public”, i.e. the official, sphere. Voronkov's interpretation of the private and public spheres in Soviet Russian society clearly differs from that common in Western societies (Chikadze and Voronkov 1997). In short, the two spheres corresponded to the different fields of written law and custom which had developed under the Soviet regime. Although official control has weakened since the middle of the 80s, persons socialized in Soviet society continue to act under this influence. Whereas written law regulated and still regulates social relations in the public sphere, social relations in the private sphere are regulated by custom. Nonetheless, both law and custom were legitimate. The private sphere was subdivided in turn into a private sphere proper and a private-public sphere.<sup>3</sup> The latter turned out to be a niche for social action, and being relatively outside state-party control, it was regulated by custom. Anything could be discussed in this sphere. Conversely, it was strictly taboo in the public sphere to discuss events occurring in the sphere not regulated by written law—that is, events in real life. As public discussion was restricted, social action and its discussion necessarily vanished into the private sphere. Certain issues of social “real life” took on an official form: standardized patterns developed which imitated the experiences of everyday life and could be discussed in this semi-private or “private-public” sphere. The strong division between private and public spheres became a norm for the Soviet personality. No one mixed the two spaces, since that could lead to harsh consequences.

For Soviet citizens, sociological research, including biographical interviewing, was an act of public communication and therefore regulated by written law. Only certain issues could be discussed in this sphere, and even today a meeting with a sociologist is not an appropriate setting for talking about problems of private life. This is the reason why a sociologist always has difficulty interpreting interviews. When does the respondent speak in the framework of the public sphere? When does he/she use the patterns of the public-private sphere? When and under what circumstances is he/she able to

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3 It may be useful to compare this concept with Goffman's theory of several “stages” in societal communication (1959). In Goffman's terms, the Soviet “public sphere” would coincide with the “front stage”, although smaller in extent, and the “private sphere” with Goffman's “back stage”, but larger. The “public-private sphere” could be described as part of the back stage that works as a well-guarded, and well-monitored channel or corridor to the public sphere. Within this picture we can easily conceive that only a small proportion of potential communication acts concerning Soviet everyday life could be discussed openly by everyone, and that each new item could reach this field of communication only by passing through the channel that functioned as a “censor” of private, not public, morals.

cross the strict demarcation line to discuss problems arising in the purely private sphere, those that have to be solved within the family?

This is the context that guides Voronkov's interpretation of the respondents' reports. The opening of the borders in the early 90s was—in spite of the political reforms of the 80s—unexpected and unpredicted. To leave the country turned out to be possible “overnight”, something inconceivable for people who grew up in Western countries. The feeling of potential release was at the same time firmly connected with distrust of the political leaders. Who knew when the borders would be closed again? That is why many emigrations were planned and carried out in a great hurry, and people were up and away to any country that admitted immigration. Up to the middle of the 1990s, Germany was for many immigrants a place for re-orientation after a hurried, only half-planned move. For many Russian Jews or Russian Germans, Germany is more or less the country that gave them the chance to immigrate, but does not have a realistic social profile of its own. In general, up to the mid-1990s little was known about contemporary Germany. Russian Germans—mostly from rural or provincial regions—cultivated an anachronistic image of pre-war Germany; and Russian Jews—mostly from the urban centers—tended to compare the cultural and intellectual level of potential destinations. From this point of view, Germany is considered to be “more cultured” than the oriental or “half Arab” Israel, and therefore an option until immigration to the USA becomes possible. Both images are an aspect of the myth of Germany as a “nation of culture” (*Kulturnation*), and at the same time part of a strategy to avoid reflections on Germany's past and its role in history.

## Possible Conclusions

The discussion of these various interpretations of one area of research does not lead to a definitive solution. But can we really speak of *one* area of research, considering the different aims and sampling of the research projects carried out by Schuetze and by Voronkov and Oswald. At the very least, the findings in question could be dismissed as merely superficial, especially when the (ours and Yvonne Schuetze's) project designs are compared. Yet this would not explain the different, mutually exclusive interpretations presented by Oswald and Voronkov upon examining the same interviews. Indeed, although the logic of the interviews was different, the respondents' reactions were linked to the same issue in each case: their motivation in emigrating.

We would like to suggest that these findings provide an example of how the common situation of interaction between interviewer and interviewee influences the subtext of questions and answers. Schuetze approached her

respondents in the context of an Israeli-German research project, which necessarily highlighted the historical and moral/ethical implications of the topic. Against this background, neither the respondents nor the interviewers, nor the researchers, can easily ignore the potential uncertainty for Jews in the decision to settle permanently or temporarily in Germany. Oswald, however, could do so—or rather, she was led to put aside this issue because non-Jewish immigrants to Germany had also presented their motivations with the same pattern of argument. This led her to interpret the finding as a socio-structural phenomenon concerning all immigrants: the threat of social marginalization due to their disqualified position in the labor market and their dependency on welfare benefits.

Neither of the two “Western” interpretations influenced Voronkov when he conducted his interviews and read interviews conducted by other Russian-speaking interviewers, and therefore he emphasized the respondents’ situation in their home country. The Russian interviewers’ position in the interview situation was completely different to that of Schuetze, who used German interviewers or conducted the talks herself. As Voronkov suggests, she always found herself in a sort of “public-private” sphere, if not in a public sphere that allowed the respondents only to speak in “politically correct” terms. Oswald faced the same situation, since she could not really define her position and that of the respondents; she took the public for the private and vice versa. According to Voronkov the argument of accidentalness is not an interpretation or postponement of something that belongs to the public sphere, such as moral considerations in the Israeli-German dialogue or considerations of repositioning in the societal space, but rather refers to the private sphere. In terms of logic, it is the *explanans*, and not the *explanandum*. It explains how the more or less spontaneous decision to leave the country was the outcome of every day life experience that could not be discussed openly.

We have traced our path through numerous cycles of interpretation. One problem is the shifting of meaning through different perspectives, because we can hardly fix on a single position as *the* most valid one. This is the well-known problem of interpretative sociology. A second problem has to do with the proportions of public, semi-public, and private spheres which are not shaped in the same way in each society. One way of overcoming these problems is, we suggest, the formation of cross-cultural research teams, or at least continuing discussion in poly-cultural forums. This is the opportunity we gratefully have taken advantage of in this article.

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