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Russian Food Stores and their Meaning for Jewish Migrants in Germany and Israel

Honor and ‘Nostalgia’

This article deals with the special meaning of food practices in the migration process taking as a prism of Russian food stores which have turned out to be very popular among ex-Soviet Jewish migrants in Israel and Germany. Fieldwork in the German context was conducted in parallel periods between 2002 and 2004 substantiated earlier findings. The Israeli case study was conducted in 2006–2008. The researcher and participants had extensive and intensive contact in both contexts. Three additional frameworks for data-gathering proved to be informative in the German context. First, I participated in and observed activities within the Jewish community in Germany that play an active role in the lives of the Jewish immigrants. Second, I conducted regular participant-observations in different centers and churches where several participants received free food rations. Third, I visited official agencies with participants on a regular basis and observed their interaction with public servants – serving as their translator from Russian to German on a number of occasions, helping participants communicate with representatives of official organizations. In the course of this, participants generously shared information with me about their lives. In addition, I collected, catalogued, and categorized numerous artifacts of the packaging of food products sold in the Russian food stores over the last ten years in Israel and the last six years in Germany. Indeed, many of these exemplars were actually given to me by participants who concluded that this was my own unusual hobby. The total collection consists of thousands of artifacts organized in four thick binders, which represent a multitude of images and product affiliations. This collection proved very rich, interesting, and useful in two ways: First, the artifacts provided relevant topics for discussion during the observations and interviews. In particular, trends in and cultural messages on the packaging were discussed with participants in both settings. This enabled me to understand the participants’ perceptions of these products and especially the contradictory, often politically laden messages found on the packaging. Second, the collection was a rich resource for content analyses.

The research population selected consisted of 30 families (comprised of 55 persons) in Israel and 30 families (consisting of 57 individuals) in Germany, all of whom were 48–65 years of age or older, although most were above 50 years of age. This made it possible to view the sample population as one generation and

assume that they share common memories. All the participants in the case study held university degrees in technology or the humanities and immigrated from the big cities of Russia and the Ukraine. Most of the interviewees were not employed in their original professions, made their living in jobs that did not require extensive education, and, consequently, were overqualified for their jobs.

Food and Identity

Food practices encoding information about communication systems are an integral part of a person's relationship with different social groups and can be seen as "a physical as well as a social event."¹ Various kinds of food, when used in different social contexts, signal an economic and political status and are codes to the individual's concepts and behavior, which need to be deciphered in terms of defining group boundaries, social status, and economic class.

Some food choices can define success, ethnic association, or spiritual values. In this way people can aspire to certain foods on the one hand and limit themselves to certain foods on the other. Food and drink are often used by different groups to recall memories, demonstrate identities, or construct "their own sense of nostalgia for customary sociability."² Not only is cuisine a product of 'double orality' – taste, and talk;³ consumption of food can be linked symbolically to multiple identity affiliations where the consumer is prompted to buy a product by different visual images, names, and statements displayed on packages. In doing so, food functions along a spectrum between two poles: Nationalization of food that is presumed 'to belong to us' versus post-modern Western consumer societies in which everyday mobility requires open-mindedness, culinary cosmopolitanism, and authenticity.⁴ Clifford described this as "travelling in dwelling, dwelling-in-travelling."⁵

The packaging of commodities is particularly characteristic and is a key to understanding the connection between food and identity. Herzfeld referred to "packaging [as the] poetics of authenticity,"⁶ and Grasseni argued that it also symbolizes the "shift toward a marked commodification of taste."⁷

1 Douglas, *Food in the Social Order*, 1984, p. 15.

2 Miller, *Consumption and Commodities*, 1995.

3 Ray, *Nation and Cuisine*, 2008.

4 Ching, *Beyond 'Authenticity'*. In: Döring / Heide / Mühleisen (eds.), *Eating culture*, 2003.

5 Clifford cited by Döring / Heide / Mühleisen (eds.), *Eating culture*, 2003

6 Herzfeld cited by Grasseni, *Slow Food, Fast Genes*, 2005.

7 Grasseni, 2005.

Food and Homeland

Some researchers described the meaning certain food products carry as creating a sense of home in the migration process, for example Ayse S. Cargal in her research of Döner Kebap among Turkish migrants in Germany;⁸ Mankekar Purnima in her investigation of “India shopping” among migrants in the United States;⁹ and Tsili Dolve Gandelman’s findings about the meaning of *injera* among Ethiopian Jewish women in Israel.¹⁰ In my study I investigated Russian food stores as a creative scene manifesting identities and ‘images of belonging’ for ex-Soviet Jews in Israel and Germany.

In order to understand this and other different product images, symbolic manifestations, and meanings of Russian food stores for ex-Soviet Jewish migrants in Israel and Germany it is necessary to understand the tensions surrounding self-images and statuses with which ex-Soviet Jewish participants of the study have to cope. Participants do not ‘burn their bridges’ with the original society as it was often assumed; rather, as active, creative social agents they maintain intensive networks and develop creative transnational spaces. In this context the question of loyalty has proved to be particularly relevant, as it has become most doubtful that transmigrants demonstrate exclusive loyalty towards one national state.¹¹ In this respect several status conflicts arise in the lives of participants in my study:

1. The subjects’ high professional qualifications, the product of decades of university education, credentials gained during their professional careers, and social recognition accrued in the former Soviet Union proved irrelevant and inappropriate, and remained unrecognized in Germany. In Israel the majority of participants failed to find jobs in their original professions, which were reduced to/transformed into status signifiers in/from a “previous life” (as some participants formulated it). Uprooting placed them in terms of socioeconomic status at the lower end of the social hierarchy in Germany and Israel where the discrepancy clashed with the transported self-image of highly qualified professionals, a contradiction that was very transparent. This became very apparent during of my field research, talking with the subjects in private conversations at home around the table in Israel or while waiting in

8 Caglar, McKeap. In: Lentz (ed.), *Changing Food Habits*, 1999.

9 Mankekar, *India Shopping*. In: Watson / Caldwell (eds.), *Cultural Politics of Food and Eating*, 2005.

10 Dolve-Gandelman, *Ethiopia as a Lost Imaginary Space*. In: MacCannell (ed.), *Other Perspective*, 1990.

11 Cohen, *Sociological Analysis*. In: Gordis / Ben-Horin / The / Wikstei (eds.), *Jewish Identity in America*, 1991.

line for free food rations allotted by a German church, about the importance of the professional positions they had held in the former Soviet Union.

2. Their affiliation with the Soviet *intelligentsia* engendered little interest among non-Russian-speaking groups in Israel or Germany. Their command of the beautiful literary Russian language – a source of pride and social recognition in the former Soviet Union – did not contribute to social participation in either absorbing societies. Quite the opposite; the migrants' linguistic insecurity often becomes noticeable as *existential insecurity* in the self-perception and behavioral patterns of migrants.¹² Their deep ties with Russian culture have a positive connotation in the eyes of the migrants and while many try to continue to take pride in their Russian culture, the same attribute stigmatizes them and labels them as 'Russians' (without the cultural capital this carries for and among Russians).
3. Their pride in belonging to the European cultural *habitus* (within a Russian context, particularly compared to Asian republics), was not reciprocated once they moved to the West where such status was even highly questioned in both contexts, but especially in Germany where suddenly they were often seen as 'half Asian.'¹³ The host's view stems from the long history of juxtaposing Eastern and Western European affiliations, as well as socialization to negative perceptions of the totalitarian regime of Soviet European republics, such as Russia and Ukraine.
4. Another key source for collective pride for the migrants was pride of being part of one of the world's superpowers – socio-political capital that dissolved with the fall of the Soviet Union. The dismantling of the Soviet Union was viewed from a 'Western perspective' in Israel and Germany as evidence of the failure of the socialist system. Ironically, the dream maintained over decades – of material wealth in communism, was only symbolically realized in the 'capitalistic West' within the German but also the Israeli case.
5. Affiliation and identification with the collective 'winners of the Second World War' shifted significantly from being a source of pride and strong support, to being but another 'narrative of Otherness' – in their case, assuming the role of victims reserved for Jews. For Jews already residing in Germany for some time, the essential 'Jewish contribution of the migrants' to the Soviet victory was pushed into the background (i.e. treated with scepticism or questioned due to Soviet policy of withholding the truth about the Holocaust).

¹² Ehlich quoted by Reitemeier, Gute Gründe für schlechte Gesprächsverläufe. In: Chirly dos Santos-Stubbe (ed.), Interkulturelle Soziale Arbeit in der Theorie und Praxis, 2005.

¹³ Stölting, The East of Europe. In: Breckner / Kalekin-Fishman / Mieth (eds.), Biographies and the Division of Europe, 2000.

6. The migrants' identification as 'being Jewish' – an affiliation that involved much pain and difficulties in the Soviet Union – was perceived to be a fabrication or at best flimsy by resident groups in both new contexts. Indeed, attitudes towards their 'Jewishness' was often patronizing, reflected in statements that the veteran Jewish community "must make them real Jews."¹⁴ In this context, the migrants' experience of anti-Semitism was viewed insufficient as a badge of being 'genuinely Jewish.' Although many Jewish migrants were interested in Jewish religion and history, many participants reported that they are again being 'punished' for suppression of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union that led to a lack of knowledge of Jewish religion and culture, while the parts of the Russian-Soviet *habitus* they had internalized were transformed into a 'liability' in the eyes of veteran members of the Jewish community – as evidence of 'not being Jewish.'

Codes and Nostalgia

Loss of feeling at *home* on different levels combined with subjective memories, motivated the participants to long for the *real, original, authentic, same*, but also '*the right stuff*' and '*that taste*.' Such yearnings for warm and familiar tuft were based on idealized, images of *home* with a positive connotation and "rosy recollections"¹⁵ of past experiences. In analyzing the concept 'nostalgia,' Boym found that nostalgia places different emphases on restorative and reflective components, namely on *nostos* and *algia*: "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembering."¹⁶ Both of these components are present within Russian food stores and in the participants' consumption patterns in Israel and Germany.

Migrants immigrating to Israel encountered a milieu rife with hegemonic nationalist messages extolling the Jewish homeland that at times appeared in tandem with images extolling the Russian motherland. This can be seen when one compares labeling in Russian versus labeling in Hebrew on the same product, available in Russian food stores. For example, the Russian brand name on a package of mushrooms – *Domik v Derevne* ('Little House in the Country' in Russian – is accompanied by depiction of a house that is likely to arouse asso-

¹⁴ Riebsamen, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, November 11, 2006.

¹⁵ Lupton, *Food, the Body, and the Self*, 1996, p. 50.

¹⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001, p. 41.

ciations with a Russian *dacha* for consumers. However, the Hebrew label states *kafri ve beiti* ('My Country Village' and 'My House' in Hebrew), associated with the Zionist idea of a home in the native (Israeli) *homeland* (A second meaning of this label can be understood as meaning 'country-baked' and 'home-baked.') Similarly, the plastic bag packaging bread baked by the Angel Bakery in Jerusalem states *Rodnoe Selo* ('Native Country Village' in Russian) accompanied by a picture



Fig. 1: Brand name for special bread: “Rodnoe Selo” (Native Country Village).
Foto: Bernstein.

of a field with harvested yellow sheaves associated with vast Soviet expanses, along side the Hebrew *HaKfar Sheli* ('My Village' in Hebrew) which appeals to Jewish consumers. Thus, a Russian-speaking consumer whose eye is likely to perceive the Russian text first and then the Hebrew receives two conflicting messages from the product's packaging – with different ideological content, the Soviet versus the Zionist *national home*. Such commercial messages are hardly compatible as the nationalist terminology is absolute and each demands loyalty to the 'correct' national home.



Fig. 2: Nostalgic Signifier: Rye Bread of the Past. Foto: Bernstein.

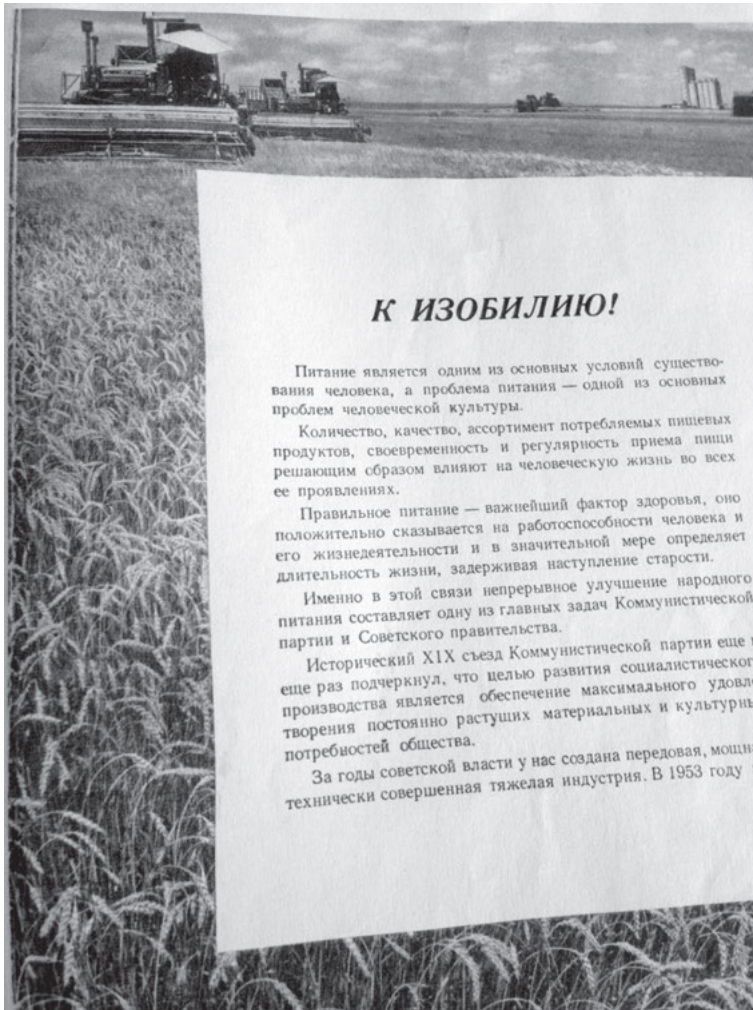


Fig. 3: Harvester gathering an abundant wheat harvest. Picture from the Soviet Food Encyclopedia, published by Igor Sivalop: “*Kniga o Vkusnoi i Zdorovoi Pishche*” [The Tasty and Healthy Food Book], USSR Ministry of Food Industry, Moscow 1952.

Similarly, the packaging of the Israeli *Pa'am* Rye Bread (‘once-upon-a-time’ in Hebrew or ‘old-style rye bread’ like the Russian ‘rye bread of the past’ – in Hebrew, a shortened version of the Hebrew expression *im ta'am shel pa'am* – ‘with the taste of yesteryear’ – an expression used as a nostalgic signifier of ‘the the good old days’ – not only for food) depicts a field of rye with a huge combine harvester gathering the yield from the soil of the Jewish homeland. The bread’s bakery is

called *Ahdut* ('Unity' in Hebrew), a word associated with the concept of *ahdut ha'am* ('unity of the Jewish people' in Hebrew). However, the Russian statement on the same package is "rye bread of the past".

Thus, even if Russian consumers understood the reference to the Zionist value embedded in the Hebrew text, they are more likely to associate it to the promises of communism in the Soviet Union and one of its central symbols – the harvester gathering an abundant wheat harvest, as depicted on one of the first pages of the Soviet-era 'food encyclopaedia' entitled *On the Tasty and Healthy Food Book*.

In the Israeli context, Russian-speaking Jewish migrants are also exposed to additional commercialized nationalistic nostalgia – for example, the six-pointed Star of David, use of a blue-and-white color scheme (similar to the Israeli flag), or Jewish religious symbols such as the menorah, candles, or certain food products connected with particular holidays. Collectively, these symbols are integral to and representative of the hegemonic Jewish-national political narrative which is reinforced by its appearance on consumption products encountered daily by Israelis in the course of their lives.

During the 1920s, consumption of local food products by Jews distributed under the label *Totzeret Ha'aretz* (literally, products of the Land [of Israel] in Hebrew), but this ideologically-driven labeling refers to products from the Jewish economic sector only of Mandate Palestine and buying *Totzeret Ha'aretz* was considered 'a patriotic act'¹⁷ and this value played an important role in the promotion of products. Although not in the scale of the 1920s, there are still many products today that incorporate symbols of politically-loaded images related to the centrality of the Jewish homeland. For example, in honor of the sixtieth jubilee anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel in 2008, special marketing strategies employing national symbols appeared in regular Israeli supermarkets to attract Jewish consumers, such as a package of regular Elite Turkish coffee that prominently displayed an Israeli flag along with the statement about the producer – signifying Elite was part of the 'founding generation': "Roasted and ground Turkish coffee – 60 years of coffee roasting in Israel."

Images of Paradise

In fact, the *esprit de corps* of the unconquerable Soviet empire narrative with its fifteen republics led by Russia continues to be salient in the Russian-speaking

¹⁷ Raviv, National identity on a plate, 2001/2002.

enclave. Even if the powerful empire no longer exists physically, symbolic and often stereotypic revival serves as active signifiers for ex-Soviet citizens abroad. This is apparent in the food products consumers purchase – adorned with images of the powerful Soviet empire and “patriotic gigantomania.”¹⁸ Here, the symbolic emphasis on the richness and power of the Soviet empire serve a compensatory role for migrants who are usually perceived to be a marginal minority by the absorbing society and lack political, social, and economic resources. Thus, one encounters the phrase “one sixth of the land” – referring to the richness, expansion, and power of the Soviet empire that at its height spanned one-sixth of the land mass of planet earth – a term frequently used by Russian and non-Russian-speaking entrepreneurs, as it is assumed to have a positive connotation for ex-Soviet emigrants.

Russian food stores made it possible to realize, for the first time, the opulent “spread on the table” depicted in illustrious Russian fairytales with its powerful and magical ability to produce the desired abundance of dishes, wines, fruits, and gourmet delicacies. Through symbolic realization of the ideal image of the proper home and hearth in the communist food paradise in the Soviet homeland, migrants could participate in its imaginary political power, and richness – albeit in the Western ‘here and now.’ Highly politicized in the Soviet Union, food retained many of its characteristics after emigration.

In comparison to their lives in the Soviet Union, the participants in both Germany and Israel acknowledged and ‘celebrated’ the improvement in their material state, evidenced in their everyday diet and occasional luxurious festive settings. It seemed that a visit to the Russian food store was more than a means to acquire commodities. In fact, as described by participants, it was more like an adventure involving a ‘hunt’ for a variety of symbols of a wealthy, powerful, and rich life often dreamt of but seldom realized in the Soviet Union. The pictures used in advertisements and displays of Russian food stores were identical to or very similar to illustrations in the original, politically-laden version of the Soviet book. In some cases pictures on tins of food products were almost identical to pictures in the book: For example, “Glory Chocolate”¹⁹ from *On the Tasty and Healthy Food Book* is very similar to the same chocolate sold in Russian food stores in Israel. Products mentioned in the famous Soviet recipe books as well as products commonly known to be hard to find in the Soviet Union ‘back then’ – such as sturgeon, beluga, carp, mackerel, calamari, crayfish, shrimp, catfish, squid, trout, and especially cod-liver, pink salmon, and sprat – are available in

¹⁸ Genis / Vail, *Poteryannyi rai*, 2003.

¹⁹ The Russian word *slava* can also be translated in English as ‘honor’, which conjures up associations with military honor.

numerous variations in Russian food stores in both Germany and in Israel. As there is no universal consensus about expensive and prestigious food, some of the food products mentioned above did not necessarily carry high status in the local dominant market in Israel or Germany and were for the most part affordable and even cheap, however, within the framework of the Russian food stores, they remain prestigious and special.



Fig. 4: “Glory”-Chocolate, once a beloved delicacy in the USSR, is a fast seller in Israeli Shops, too. Picture from: Igor Sivalop, “Kniga o Vkusnoi i Zdorvoi Pishche”



Fig. 5: “Glory Chocolate” with Israeli price tag. Foto: Bernstein.

Western affluence is expressed in the Russian food stores by groceries imported from Russia or the Ukraine such as the attraction of chocolates produced by confectioners whose brand names sound paradoxical in the new reality: “Red October”, “Bolshevik,” “Karl Marx,” “Krupskaya” (Lenin’s wife).

Gastronomic Slavophilism

Two parallel processes are involved in these phenomena. The first, the newly nationalized Russian mobilization of shared symbols of national pride taken from the Soviet period. The second, introduction of new images from old Russian traditions including symbols from Slavic folklore and Eastern Orthodox Christianity; crests of nobility and feudal markings; portraits of Russian tsars and empresses; motifs from old Russian fairytales; and legends about Russian heroes conquering foreign enemies (such as Tatars and Mongols) and saving the Russian motherland. Among them one can encounter *Vivat Russia!* Chocolates depicting Catherine I (the first Russian empress); *Lyubite Rus Vodka!* (‘Love Russia,’ where “Russia” appears in pre-revolutionary version *Rus*); and Motherland Vodka which is sold together with Jewish vodka in Russian food stores in Germany. Interestingly, some but not all of the motifs and marketing initiatives promoting Russian nationalist feelings are not local; for example, the logo “*Rossiya shedraya dusha*” (‘Russia Generous Soul’ in Russia) is found on chocolates in Israel and Germany produced by a Swiss firm in Russia – Nestle-Russia Yet, independent of where *Russianness* was produced, “Russia shopping” undertaken abroad is perceived by consumers differently from consumers of similar products in the Russian Federation. In particular, the findings suggest that the act of “tasting/savoring nation-

alism”²⁰ from abroad was significantly limited, smoothed over, and relativized due to the physical distance of participants from their former national borders, as well as through the very act of voluntary emigration which in national terms could raise questions vis-à-vis their patriotism and loyalty to their land of origin. Consuming such manifestations of *Russianness* from abroad while independent of the Russian system allows participants the opportunity to distance themselves from it and to criticize the system. Thus, construction of *Russian motherland* as a total signifier appears to have lost its totalizing nature, post-emigration. Furthermore, in looking for the *authentic* and the *Russian*, the participants often overlooked or neglected national-nationalistic Russian signs, perceiving only the fragmentary image of *Russianness* offered in the stores and, in particular stereotypic, all-encompassing signifiers of their collective cultural affiliation – exported to and designed to appeal to and preserve the identity of Russian émigrés in Israel or Germany. Thus, direct manifestation of *Russianness*, even if nurtured by contemporary Russian nationalized symbols, are employed by ex-Soviet Jewish participants abroad as an empirical category as a ‘was bought, and served’ – served in every sense – as a ‘badge of affiliation,’ even if it became a stereotypic, homogenized cultural marker of immigrants. Furthermore, in the German case, symbols of nationalized *Russianness* may signify an imaginary homeland with which the émigré consumer – who for the most part continue to hold Russian citizenship – can partially express their affiliation; this is in contrast with their counterparts in Israel who hold Israeli citizenship and therefore are more open to ‘trying out’ the national Israeli narrative about the new homeland – identification that Israel actively seeks to inculcate among its immigrants.

“You Are What You Eat”?

Whereas for outsiders, Russian political images seem to be the total signifier of a particular commodity’s image, for many migrants this dimension is *only one of several dimensions* that a box of chocolates can possess, encompassing an entire ‘social world.’ There are several connotations: The prestigious box of chocolate conjures up personal experiences in Russia. Moreover, it affirms the migrant consumers’ enhanced status as ‘part’ of the well-to-do in Soviet society. This would seem to be an interesting application of the well-known adage “You are what you eat.” To what degree is this adage ‘valid’ here? To clarify this question I would like

²⁰ Caldwell, *The Taste of Nationalism*, 2002.

to note a very provocative example that clearly contradicts this notion, with no impact on the self-image of the participants.



Fig. 6: Chocolat Brand “Vecherniy Kiev” (Kiev at Night) with monument of Bogdan Khmelnicki. Foto: Bernstein.

The box of chocolates *Vecherniy Kiev* (‘Kiev at Night’ in Russian) which can be found in Russian food stores in Israel as well as in Germany, is appreciated by many migrants (particularly from the Ukraine) mainly because of the quality of the chocolate. The package boasts a key spot in the Ukrainian capital where a monument to the Cossak leader Bogdan Khmelnicki – a venerated figure for Ukrainians – stands. During the seventeenth century however, Khmelnicki was personally responsible for the massacre of many thousand Jews (some historians speak of 300,000 Jews) – a fact well-known to many Russian-speaking Jewish migrants. Yet, the product remains popular, *despite* the ‘negative icon’ for Jews (employed by the manufacturers as a positive branding enhancement within local markets in the Ukraine). Likewise, images of Cossacks decorate the packaging of *pelmeni* with meat and cheese filling; the cossacks’ notoriety as anti-Semites and as perpetrators of pogroms does not seem to annoy Jewish consumers at the Russian food stores. When I mentioned during the interviews the ‘symbolic

dimension’ – the dissonance between the packaging and Jewish history – the explanation that I received all the time was that these food stuffs tasted good, and the linkage with the oppression of the Jews was artificial/a more superficial one.

This is well articulated in the response of Katia, a history teacher who lives in Germany:

We buy the taste, you know. And when such associations [with oppression of the Jews] turn up, you try to get away from them, to extinguish them and to shift them [points to her stomach] deep down, as far away as possible.

It is important to add some biographical information about the speaker and her ‘Jewish side.’ Katia goes to the synagogue regularly, she fasts on Yom Kippur, lights Sabbath candles, and says that she has pangs of conscience when she eats pork. She has been to Israel four times already, where she has many family members. Although consumption of such symbolisms takes place, the interview leaves no doubt that ex-Soviet Jews do not identify with the resurgence of nationalism in Russia and the Ukraine reflected in the packaging, and even cite increasing anti-semitism as a reason for emigration.

The above example shows that ‘rewriting history’ and exchanging one dominant Russian or Ukrainian group for another does not mean that the new version of history will, automatically, reflect the history of minorities living (or previously living) in these territories. Indeed, the very elements being cultivated in the emerging new Russian public discourse and selected to be depicted on packaging have been problematic or controversial in relation to historic representation of Jewish life in Russia. Indeed, some of the images and narratives revived by dominant Russian groups correspond – coincidentally and in some cases directly in contradiction to the historical facts of Jewish participation in the Russian or Ukrainian national narrative. Indeed, reviving any historic events as part of nationalizing processes would be ‘problematic’ from the Jewish standpoint since this history was characterized by undeniably strong discrimination against Jews.

Realization of Dreams

Russian food stores enabled immigrants to *taste capitalism* on ‘familiar turf’ based upon past experiences in the Soviet Union, especially through the essential process of ‘procuring and getting’ desired food items. Furthermore, certain aspects of the abundance they once dreamed of attaining are realized in Russian food stores in Germany and Israel. This includes food products that were highly desired and prestigious in the Soviet Union that most participants might never or

may very rarely have been able to afford when living in the Soviet Union. Thus, paradoxically, it was only after emigration to a capitalist society that certain food products that exemplified communism's dream – as expounded in the *On the Tasty and Healthy Food Book*, – became available, affordable, and are purchased regularly by migrants at Russian food stores.

Indeed, shopping itself became a very pleasurable activity, particularly because in doing so the migrants are able to satisfy desires and realize dreams that were impossible to achieve when living in the Soviet Union. Applying the analysis of Jackson and Holbrook,²¹ the participants allow themselves to be self-indulgent and to splurge on delicacies and fancy foods, especially when this allowed them to 'treat' family members. Furthermore, attaining exemplars of abundance enables participants to consume "cultural tales"²² including the dreams of the opulent *spread on the table* and the *taste of life abroad*, referred to previously. Such food consumption epitomizes the materialization/actualization of the desires of those who opted to emigrate to Israel and Germany for economic reasons (i.e. pursuit of the 'land of milk of honey' in the literal sense). Thus overall, one major outcome of these processes has been that all participants in both contexts claim that their post-immigration diet had improved significantly, even though most participants believe that their social status had declined since their arrival in Israel or Germany.

Different images of products purchased in Russian food stores are inextricably linked to a projection of social status. To restate this through the terms employed by Douglas²³, the act of consumption can be conceived to be an "act of social attachment" in two key ways: First, in the sense of marking group borders in the new society; second (and no less important), in the sense of performing a respectable, past action associated with the social status that is recognizable through common cultural terms shared by participants, who in this case belong to the educated intelligentsia stratum. This atmosphere of support and solidarity helps preserve dignity and recreate lost social status disrupted in the migration process through 'changing the environment' by those who recognized this status in the past.

One particularly interesting characteristic of the Russian food stores observed during the fieldwork was that people who came to the shops often talk about their past and present experiences. Some customers explained that they have a routine of coming to the shop on a set day in the week so that their conversations were

²¹ Jackson / Holbrook, *Multiple Meanings*, 1995, pp. 1919-1921.

²² Appadurai, *How to Make a National Cuisine*, 1988.

²³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966; Douglas, *Deciphering a Meal*, 1975; Douglas, *Standard Social Uses of Food*. In: Douglas (ed.), 1984.

ongoing, and in some cases they did not even purchase anything. Here, Slava (Israel) explained his reasons for going to a Russian shop he frequents regularly: “Simply to meet acquaintances and to enjoy an informal atmosphere with nice educated people.”

Visitors to the Russian shops also exchange information and recommendations on a wide range of topics. They reported to me, for example, recommending names of Russian-speaking doctors and sharing information about new books, films in the Russian language, interesting TV programs, worthwhile activities or clubs for children, Russian-speaking guided tours, and stores offering good discounts. People shared anecdotes and news about themselves and children attending university; gave one another advice regarding difficulties or problems they encountered; and discussed cultural or political events, or newspapers articles in Russian. They also come to post or to view personal announcements on the shop’s bulletin board.

It would be mistake to claim that these *imaginary homes* and *homelands* in the shops are a kind of vacuum in which the participants reproduce and live in a hazy past, unconnected to contemporary events. On the contrary, local events in Israel and Germany as well as those taking place in the contemporary Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are discussed intensively in the Russian food store social club and, accordingly, new forms of reference are created. This was especially the case in the Israeli context as significantly different national images and contemporary Slavophil Russia and Zionist, Jewish, Israeli nationalized narratives are simultaneously consumed and re-activated in Russian food stores in Israel.

An emotional dimension – closeness and the sense of community – have developed and characterize the service provided by Russian-speaking clerks – ambiance that offers a different local level of kinship and empathy. Such an atmosphere has been preferred by participants to a visit of the regular supermarket. This preference substantiates Gold’s findings in his study of Russian-speaking migrants in the USA.²⁴ This finding is reflected by the statement of a clerk in an Israeli Russian food stores when describing what his work entails, given the social atmosphere created in the store by consumers and staff alike:

People come here to talk. To remember. They share with us what is happening to them, tell us about themselves: Whose child is in the army. Who has left on vacation. Who is working where. They talk about their problems. It really is not like it was in the Soviet stores... you do remember!?! [i.e. referring to the unpleasant nature of service in the Soviet store and the stressful struggle involved in ‘attaining’ everything]. People come here even if they don’t want to buy anything.

²⁴ Gold, Community Formation. In: Lewin-Epstein / Roi / Ritterband (eds.), Russian Jews on Three Continents, 1997, p. 264.

Similar to other studies, the clerks in Russian food store function as “cultural ethnic brokers”²⁵ and as communication sources who can interpret ‘intercultural’ issues.²⁶ Moreover, it seems that these clerks have served an additional role as surrogate social workers or demi-psychologists for migrants. I observed that they were ready to listen to various and often endless accounts of problems and difficulties encountered by new and regular customers, and to offer their advice. For example, when I stated my amazement that a clerk (in Israel) knew my name after my first visit, he explained:

My function is to know all these things, not only the products’ prices – such as names of customers’ relatives, phone numbers of different institutions – for example *Misrad Haklita* or *Bituach Leumi* [The Ministry of Absorption or The National Insurance Institute, interjecting this Russian with the Hebrew names of these key institutions] because people ask me. I am trying to create a home atmosphere here. So, I have to know all these things.

Imaginary ‘Homes’

Russian food stores should not be considered to be a unique or isolated ‘self-contained phenomenon’; rather, they are part of an evolving and growing Russian-speaking enclave comprised of different institutions where participants meet and create their communal life. As found in studies conducted among other such migrant communities,²⁷ the decision to frequent a Russian store does not mean that consumers intend to go back to the original society. Rather, by participating in the institutional life of the enclave they are involved in creating and sharing a new symbiosis with different *home* and *homelands* narratives that evolve continuously and gain legitimacy in the multicultural society.

It was interesting to note that the criterion of ‘healthy food’ often claimed to be one of the most important criteria in Western food consumption does not play even a secondary role in the purchases of consumers in Russian food stores. One encounters consumption of festive salads traditionally prepared with liberal quantities of mayonnaise, as well as preference for the ‘right’ sour cream (i.e., with at least 30 percent fat content). The choice of canned meat and fish products is wide both in Germany and Israel. Particularly noteworthy in terms of health one encounters products from Russia but especially from the Ukraine – ranging from unrefined sunflower oil to chocolates made by certain companies – that are

²⁵ Darieva, *Russkii Berlin*, 2004.

²⁶ Mankekar, 2005.

²⁷ Mankekar, 2005.

produced in areas (particularly Pripyat and Gomel) located very near Chernobyl. Customers overlooked the source in all the cases I observed. Furthermore, when I inquired if they knew where the product was produced, the question was met with humor: For example, several participants argued that I had emigrated too long ago and consequently had distanced myself from what is “natural” for them and as a result I pay attention to other “strange” things. It was obvious that the desirable ‘images of home’ these products carries is much more important to the consumers than calorie content, cholesterol, or even possible radiation.

Russian food stores present what Kunow labels a “proxy for home”²⁸ by offering multiple narratives and *home scenarios* on the packaging of products for sale in these shops. I would argue, however, that this remains a kind of *imaginary* home. In this sense, Russian food stores’ *real praxis* is, above all, a “place-making practice”²⁹ – performed by displaying different food images of imaginary *homes* and *homelands*. The physical walls of Russian food stores create a special microcosm where customers can feel comfortable, embraced, and safe in a home that symbolically replaces the migrants’ prevailing sense of *homelessness* felt on a host of levels in their current lives as new immigrants.

Conclusions

Food practices in the migration process obviously contribute to “living memories”³⁰ – yet they do much more: They also “make a place” for a virtual home that preserves social status and stabilizes the self-esteem of customers who frequent Russian product stores – confirming, modifying, and, manifesting self-images; marking-symbolizing group belonging; and creating an illusion of objective reality and immediate supportive environment taken for granted.

Naturalization of the given order³¹ or naturalization of basic ideas about questions such as – How does society operate? How can I find my way around? – Along with preserving the *habitus* of people from highly educated social strata, are fundamentally challenged by the crisis of the migration experience. For migrants, both ‘recovering’/retrieving the *habitus* and ‘doing things as one is used to’ seem to take place with the help of common symbolic codes inherent in food practices shared by Russian-speaking Jews abroad. Food consumption in the migration process seems to promote contouring collective ‘we’ identities or in

28 Kunow, Eating Indian(s). In: Döring / Heide / Mühleisen (eds.), *Eating Culture*, 2003, p. 158.

29 Ray, *The Migrant’s Table*, 2004.

30 Bernstein, *Food for Thought*, 2010.

31 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 1984.

the case of ex-Soviet Jews in Israel and Germany – ‘doing-being *nashi*’ (‘our own’ in Russian) or *nashization* if you wish.

Addressing different images of food items enables me to reveal the multilayered and dynamic processes of coping with different forms (at times contested forms) of affiliation – such as doing-being *nashi* or *nashization* as fluid key-symbol category for the group under investigation. *Nashi* ‘doers’ were those who aspire to find and achieve a new *home* within the framework of Russian food stores in Israel and Germany, albeit in different way. All these manifestations of *nashi* affiliation among those who participate in it, symbolically participate in realization of the Soviet paradise abroad. This is not void of contradictions: These symbolic acts are often performed by individuals who on one hand cultivate Russian elite culture but simultaneously purchase proletarian food as the ultimate stamp of authentic ‘Russianess.’ The badge of *nashi* identity is, thus, often ‘purchased’ along with food products imported from the Commonwealth of Independent States. In doing so, it has been strongly influenced by the politics of nationalization and *nashization* processes afoot in Russia, where recently this key symbol of collective national affiliation has become even more pronounced.

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