Return to Charlottengrad (1995)

Abstract

The memory of the Russian presence in Berlin during the Weimar Republic, with its lasting traces in literature and art, places current discussions on migration and integration in a broader historical horizon.

Source

No other European metropolis draws as many immigrants from the East as the German capital. Berlin has become a center for Russian emigrants. The just one thousand members of the colorful colony have only one goal—an enduring better life in the West.

The party begins after midnight. The tiny bar, which has no name and no license, fills up quickly. Almost every one of the young regulars greets the barkeeper Vassja with a short "Privjet [Hi]"—the clientele speaks Russian, Czech, Polish, or French. German only appears on the price board for drinks.

Silver foil hangs from the crumbling stuccoed ceiling in the ground floor apartment of an old building in East Berlin. Someone pressed barbed wire into the masonry around the pink-colored poster of a Russian beauty. The worn and sagging living room suite and several chrome chairs come from the bulk trash, as is appropriate for homeowners.

Vassja Linezki, 26, who grew up in a Moscow family of academics, came to the German capital in 1990 with a backpack full of books and was among the first Russian squatters in Berlin. In the meantime, two dilapidated tenement blocks are predominantly in Russian hands. Youths from Kiev, St. Petersburg, and Odessa earn their living with occasional jobs as bike messengers.

In the "Thermen" thermal spa at Berlin's Europa Center near the *Gedächtniskirche*, intense Russian activity prevails on Sundays. Members of the old crowd sweat on marble benches in the "Roman-Russian steam bath." Gold bangles, huge earrings, and necklaces with orthodox crosses sparkle in the mist. Tattoos from their time as prisoners adorn many men's legs, left a hooker, right the Statue of Liberty.

After the sauna, men pull on snow-white bathrobes and discuss business in the facility's restaurant. A bald art dealer extols his knowledge: "In the case of Renoir pictures, the nude from the back always costs more than the nude from the front." The man purchased a painting at the "auction price of five million" and now wants to sell it "with a nice profit" in Moscow: "The new bankers there are really hot for expensive art."

The desk of Friedrich Gorenstein, 63, is strewn with closely written sheets of paper. In fall, his new work, *Der Platz* [The square], is supposed to be published; it is an essay on the "roots of the Russian problems." Concerned with the great issues of humanity, the writer from Kiev resides in West Berlin social housing, which he only leaves in an emergency. His preferred conversational partner in the "intellectual triangle among Russia, Judaism, and Germany" is the Persian cat Chris, who has marked his territory with a strong scent.

The Russians are here. No other European metropolis attracts as many immigrants from the Eastern bloc as the German capital. And probably no other immigrant group dazzles with so many colors as the immigrant scene from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS): Eccentrics and honest manual laborers, ambitious artists, clever intellectuals, shrewd traders and major black marketeers are rushing to Berlin.

In the meantime, an estimated seventy to one hundred thousand former Soviet citizens live in the city, far more than in Paris or London. No one knows the exact numbers. About twenty thousand Russian Germans from Kazakhstan and Siberia are missing from official statistics; they are considered Germans and are not counted. In addition, the number of Soviet citizens who had already moved to East Berlin at the time of the German Democratic Republic to get married is unknown. And no agency dares to speculate on the how many people came to Germany illegally or submitted an application for asylum in vain and now live in the underground.

The immigrants have—today, as seventy years ago—built a little Russia in the foreign big city. The Berlin Russian can in the meantime satisfy almost all his needs by doing business with his countrymen. Whether he wants to have his shoes resoled, needs a new haircut, or must consult the family physician—he will always be served in his mother tongue, if he wishes. Even a kindergarten and a small, privately financed Russian school have been established in Berlin. Anyone seeking a life partner places an ad under the heading "Lonely Hearts' Club" in Germany's only Russian-language newspaper, *Jewropazentr,* appearing three times weekly in Berlin (circulation: 40,000).

The Jewish community—two-thirds of its ten thousand members come from CIS states—organizes social and cultural offerings. On Radio Free Europe's MultiKulti, a Moscow journalist moderates a twenty-minute magazine in his mother tongue. As of late, the "Spreekanal" channel regularly feeds a Russian television program to the cable network.

German Berlin, besotted with the glamour of the metropolis in the twenties, is already hoping for a renaissance of the "Russian Berlin" of the Weimar Republic. Back then, more than 300,000 Russians contributed to making Berlin the cultural center of Europe.

The weeklong Moscow-Berlin/Berlin-Moscow festival in September will offer ample opportunities to conjure up the myth. Dozens of concerts with world-famous artists will celebrate equally well-known Russian composers. Theater, debates, readings galore. In the Martin-Gropius-Bau, a large art exhibition on West German-Russian cultural relations between 1900 and 1950 beckons. Russophile citizens of Berlin will be able to choose among up to eight events a day over a period of four weeks.

The mammoth program will build on traditions. In the period between the world wars, civil war and revolution drove the Russian intelligentsia to leave. Their first destination was Berlin, where they kept the culture of the destroyed Russian Empire alive. Two thousand two hundred books alone were produced by 86 Russian publishers between 1918 and 1924, more than in Petrograd or Moscow.

The last living protagonist from this era is the lyric poet Vera Lourié. The elderly lady has rented the four large bedrooms of her residence in an old Wilmersdorf building to Russian students; she herself lives, surrounded by photographic memories, in the space connecting the rooms. For years she set down her memoirs on paper; then she sought a publisher for her life story, which began in 1901 in St. Petersburg.

After fleeing to the city on the river Spree in 1921, the young Lourié met all the big names. She reveled at grand studio parties with the painters Ivan Puni and El Lissitzky or philosophized with the writers Boris Pasternak, Ilya Ehrenberg, or Viktor Shklovsky.

Lourié's close friend, the eccentric writer Andrei Bely, captured the mood in "Charlottengrad," the area around the Kurfürstendamm, in the distich, "Night! Tauentzien! Cocaine!/That is Berlin!"

Russians like Bely were amazed about the imperturbability of the Berlin citizens. During extended forays through

the city, the writer pondered how he could provoke the passersby. Headstands or absurd sayings—all in vain. "The citizen of Berlin is not surprised by anything," he noted. "Any craziness is trumped by mundane, everyday Berlin.

As in the twenties, the Berlin citizens accept their new neighbors from distant Russia rather impassively and observe with a mixture of resignation and couldn't-care-less attitude how their city is becoming increasingly Easternized.

The Russians who come today are not the poorest of the poor; [they are] people from the middle class who still have enough energy, and simply want to live better in the West, learn more effectively, and earn more money.

Typical are the motives of the psychologist Galina Paderina, who left Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula "so that my sons would get a good education." In four years, the children have learned the foreign language so perfectly that the nine-year-old Misha has filled the family coffers through appearances at the German Theater. His brother, a sixteen-year-old student at the *Gymnasium*, is self-assured: "After my university studies, I am going to be a businessman."

For Russians, "business" has been the magic word since duty-free business deals with the troops stationed in the German Democratic Republic promised enormous profits during the transition days. Physicians closed their practices; scientists switched to the booming import-export business. And among Russian youths, it became a "popular sport to make a quick mark from the middlemen," recalls the saleswoman at an electronics store. She herself ditched her job as a dental assistant back then, and for fifteen marks an hour watched the stands of traveling salesmen in Brandenburg's Wünsdorf.

Those individuals not tempted by business deals come out of the desire for adventure. Money is just about the last thing that interests Vassja. Pure curiosity flashes from his green eyes. The Moscow philosophy student had wanted to leave for a long time, out of "the narrow cage," to get to know western Europe. But where to?

When Russian television reported about street battles for occupied houses on Mainzer Straße in East Berlin in fall 1990, the destination was set. "Free dwellings, music, and people who perhaps understand us," was how Vassja and three friends imagined the different life in the West—and away he went, with a tourist visa in his pocket.

For all the differences in the reasons for leaving their homeland, most of the Russian immigrants are united by their Jewish origins. While it was a death sentence sixty years ago in Germany to reveal that one was a Jew, the entry in today's passport promises a relatively safe, but in any case, more pleasant life than was the case in the broken-up, openly antisemitic Soviet Union.

Since February 1991, Jews from the former USSR, as once the Vietnamese boat people, have had the right to reside in the Federal Republic as so-called quota refugees. As Berlin has in the meantime filled its quota, at the moment only so-called hardship cases are accepted for family reunification. Anyone who does not have, or cannot pay for, the necessary certificates must go into the illegal underground.

Many Jews only become familiar with Judaism after immigration. For affluent people, the Chanukah celebration in the chic Hotel Intercontinental is the social high point in December. Regularly visiting one of the five synagogues continues to be the exception.

For most, it is as for Vassja, who had no connection to the Jewish religion in Moscow. "I went to a Soviet school and was of course in the Pioneers," he says. He did not hear about the regulation for quota refugees until he was in Berlin, and he gladly made use of it.

Of course, for the new generation of prominent artists and writers, Berlin only serves as a stopover for a reading at the Literary Colloquium, a study year at the Berlin scientific college, or an appearance at the Fürst Oblomov Theater, which wants to revitalize East European culture, for example, with the Petersburg revue "White Nights." In exile during the twenties, educated Russians maintained "the awareness of a community and considered themselves cultural ambassadors"; the historian Karl Schlögel indicates a fundamental difference from the past. The descendants have no mission; they are not fighting for anything but themselves.

The Russian intellectual scene is splintered accordingly. It falls into kitchen clubs and semi-public groups. Predominantly the older creative artists get together in the Jewish Cultural Association; they live on social welfare and must come to terms with the problem that they "have no more readers or public" in Germany, as the writer Alexander Laiko reports. For more than a year, professionals and amateurs fine-tuned texts for the first number of the three-hundred-page literary journal *Studia*, which appeared recently in Berlin.

Chief editor and graphic artist Vyacheslav Syssoev is already illustrating the fourth number of the literary almanac *Ostrow* (The Island) on his home computer in Prenzlauer Berg. Well-known authors are sending contributions from Russia. But dissemination bumps up against linguistic limits, because up to now no money could be raised for translators.

Last year, the unemployed physicist Svetlana Kuznetsova led a "Berlin-Moscow Funding Initiative" that meets regularly in her living room and organizes concerts, readings, and exhibitions. In October they want to start a Russian music salon.

However, the groups have no contact with each other. While in the Weimar Republic, the Russian intellectuals in a very short time set up a "House of the Arts," which soon acted like a magnet for artists and people who loved to debate, today no attractive center for Russian culture is in sight.

And yet there would be enough space for it. A monumental former Soviet building, located on Berlin's future luxury mile, Friedrichstraße, would provide room *en masse*. It was possible to save the "House of Science and Culture of the Russian Federation" after the transition from the greed of a real estate speculator from Yeltsin's cabinet. However, behind the glass door of the entry to the "Russian House," many Russians already feel that "Soviet spirit" which caused them to flee their homeland.

Up until 1990 the number of Russians in Berlin remained reasonably small. In West Berlin, almost all traces of the first Russian wave of emigration were extinguished after the war. The Allies carefully controlled the influx: In 1975 only 174 former Soviet citizens were registered.

Not until the eighties, when the USSR allowed Jews to leave, did the number of refugees grow. Legally, Russians could only go to the German Democratic Republic. Indeed, anyone who was not a member of the Soviet elites or the armed forces needed a marriage certificate and had to undergo a distressing interrogation in order to do so. The journalist Irina Schabowski arrived in East Berlin in 1972, after she had earlier married the then acting chief editor of *Neues Deutschland* in Moscow.

Such cross-border love affairs were not greeted enthusiastically at the time. At official receptions, even the wife of the prominent Berlin Politburo member [Günter] Schabowski was scrutinized disparagingly by the Soviets. Marrying someone from abroad was more or less considered treason.

Nor were the East German neighbors well-disposed toward Russian women, but they did not dare to openly show their reservations. That changed fundamentally, as a scene in the supermarket on Wilhelmstraße in East Berlin

proves: In the line at the cash register, four young, elegant Russian women chatted in their mother tongue. At the top of the shopping cart they had stacked two layers of toilet paper.

Suddenly a female citizen of the former German Democratic Republic asked loudly from the back, “Since when do Russians need toilet paper?” Slowly one of the Russian women turned around and replied in accent-free German, “Since you stopped licking our asses.”

The threshold for aggression has dropped since a conspicuous number of moneyed Russians have been visiting Berlin. Over 26,000 Russian guests booked Berlin hotel rooms last year, most of them for extended weekend shopping. The department store with rich traditions, the “Kaufhaus des Westens” (KadeWe) is very popular: “Right on the first day of the clearance sale, the Russians come with translators and make cash purchases until our inventory is gone,” says a saleswoman from the furs department.

Boutiques and Jewelers around the Kurfürstendamm have long since adjusted to the new clientele and employ Russian-speaking personnel. At Mercedes-Benz on Friedrichstraße a Russian even sells cars. Ninety percent of the customers come from Moscow or Kiev. Money does not play a role; payment is upon delivery.

Thus, a young Russian in shorts and a Lacoste shirt nods briefly to his female companion, after he has decided on a C 220 diesel, price 62,000 marks. The young woman pulls a freezer bag out of her shoulder bag and disappears to hand over the money in the back room. A short time later, a man from Almaty in Kazakhstan purchases an S class Benz for over 200,000 marks as if it were nothing.

Not only the citizens of Berlin, but also the immigrants from Russia who have made their homes in Berlin are bothered by the airs of the upstarts with a bent for the grand gesture. They fear that those people’s bad reputation will rub off on them and notice anxiously that more and more criminal businessmen are turning up with the *nouveau riches*.

Almost every shop or restaurant owner of Russian origin has already had a visit by the mafia debt collectors. Two “scouts” even showed up in Vassja’s squatter bar. The guys quickly figured out that there was nothing for them there.

The protection money collectors sometimes attempt to enforce their claims with extreme brutality. The police have listed eleven killings since 1991, more than for any other foreign minority in Berlin.

For Raschel Dimant, 51, who came from Riga, 1994 was a sad year. “Many relatives and acquaintances lost their lives,” sighed the flea market antiques dealer, who had captured a fixed place for herself as “Madame Dimant” in the Russian dealer scene at the June 17 street market.

The misery began when her brother-in-law, Berlin’s most prominent dealer in icons and other antiques from Russia, was shot to death in his Kurfürstendamm gallery by a robber and murderer. Madame Dimant also fleetingly knew the last Berlin victim, a 27-year-old businessman murdered in May. A killer had dispatched the Belarussian with ten bullets.

On the day of the funeral at the Russian Orthodox cemetery, several luxury limousines parked on Wittestraße in the Tegel district. The mourners, clad in classic black, strode through a sea of white flowers to the church. Singers accompanied the ceremony.

For Bishop Feofan, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Germany, such funeral rites are not an unusual

spectacle. Funerals for members of the two-thousand-head Berlin congregation resembled “movies about the Italian Mafia,” said the cleric. Feofan refused to criticize the way of life of the deceased—in death, all are God’s children.

Nonbelievers see things less philosophically. Without being asked, Vassja apologizes “that these guys violate German hospitality.” He yearns for normalcy.

Therefore, Vassja, who does not consider a lack of warm water in the house “a sign of dignity,” is looking for a job to escape from the existence of temporary gardener for the social welfare office. He will soon continue his philosophy studies, interrupted in Moscow, at the Free University. “However, I must still establish a registered association for the bar first”; this he has resolved to do.

Vassja has arrived in Germany.

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