

Wladimir Kaminer, “Why I Still Haven’t Applied for Naturalization” (2000)

Abstract

Wladimir Kaminer (b. Moscow, 1967) studied dramaturgy at the Moscow Theater Institute. He has lived in Berlin since 1990 and has published in various newspapers, had a weekly show on Radio Multikulti and regularly read his latest texts at Kaffee Burger in Berlin-Mitte. With his collections of stories *Russendisko* (2000) and *Militärmusik* (2001) he became known beyond Germany. His most recent books are *Meine russischen Nachbarn* (2009) and *Das Leben ist kein Joghurt* (2010). In the following text he takes a satirical look at the bureaucratic hurdles of naturalization for immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Source

Every night, outside our place on Schönhauser Avenue at the corner of Bornholmer Street, there were new, always bigger ditches. They were dug by the Vietnamese who had chosen this corner as their spot for the cigarette trade. At least that’s what I surmised after seeing them out there over and over at the crack of dawn with shovels: two men and a very nice woman, who have been playing a quite enterprising role on this corner for years. “Why are the Vietnamese digging? Are they trying to make more storage space for their goods?” I wondered while walking to the District Bureau to see Herr Kugler, in yet another attempt to apply for German naturalization (already the third time). Annoying. The first time, everything went like clockwork; I had all of the photocopies with me, my financial circumstances were all cleared up, all of my residency dates and locations since birth were listed, the 500 German mark charge had been accepted, and all of our children, wives, and parents were accounted for. I talked with Herr Kugler for two hours about the meaning of life in the FRG, but then it turned out that I had failed at one simple task: preparing a handwritten resume. It was supposed to be unconventional, brief, and honest. I took a pad of paper and pen and went into the hall. After about an hour, I had written five whole pages, but hadn’t even made it to kindergarten yet. “It just isn’t so easy—a handwritten resume,” I said to myself and started over. In the end, I had three drafts, all of which were interesting reading, but none of them made it as far as my first marriage. Dissatisfied with myself, I went home. Once there, I tried to figure out the difference between a novel and a handwritten, unconventional résumé.

Next time, I was unsuccessful because of a different problem. In a medium-sized box, I was supposed to declare the grounds for my “entry into Germany.” I wracked my brains on this question. But not a single reason occurred to me. I came to Germany in 1990 for absolutely no reason at all. That evening, I asked my wife, who always knows the reason for things, “Why did we come to Germany back then, anyway?” She said we came to Germany for fun—to see how it was. But we wouldn’t get by with those kinds of formulations. The clerk would think we were just applying for naturalization for fun, and not because of. . . “Why are we applying for naturalization, anyway?” I wanted to ask my wife, but she had already left for the driving school, where she would make a series of drivers’ education teachers crazy and strike terror into a few women lingering on the street. My wife has a very unconventional driving style. But that is a different story.

Then, cautiously, I gave “curiosity” as my reason for our entry into Germany, which appeared to sound more prudent than “fun.” Then I copied off my resume by hand from the computer screen. I put everything in a folder and went back to Herr Kugler the next day. It was very early and still dark, but I wanted to be the first one there,

because the clerk at the Civil Registry Office cannot take care of more than one foreigner a day. Then I saw the Vietnamese: they were digging again! I came a little closer. Two men were standing with frustrated expressions in the middle of a big hole. The woman was standing next to them, cursing at them in Vietnamese. The men defended themselves, languidly. I looked into the ditch. There was only water in there. All at once, it became clear to me what was going on: the Vietnamese had forgotten where they had buried their cigarettes and were searching for them everywhere, in vain.

Suddenly a wind rose up and my papers fell out of the folder and landed in the ditch. The carefully handwritten résumé, all of the reasons for my entry into Germany, the big questionnaire with my financial circumstances—everything just flew off into the wet ditch. Apparently, I'll never get naturalized. But what for, anyway?

Source of the original German text: Wladimir Kaminer, *Russendisko*, München: Goldmann, 2000, pp. 191-92.

Source of English translation: Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, and Anton Kaes, eds., *Germany in Transit. Nation and Migration 1955-2005*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 421-423.

Translation: David Gramling

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