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*Transnational Contested Identities and
Food Practices of Russian-Speaking
Jewish Migrants in Israel and Germany*

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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1 Migration collages: Studying Russian-speaking Jews in Israel and Germany

The study focuses on migrants who are involved, by necessity, in reconstructing their cultural perceptions as well as finding and confirming their place in a new reality. The comparative investigation presented here was conducted in two different contexts—Germany and Israel—among Jewish immigrants who came from the former Soviet Union (SU) after the initiation of *Perestroika*. The study's principal aim is to examine the multiple affiliations of immigrants that were shaped and modified in these two different cultural and social contexts. This analysis highlights and illuminates the cosmological perceptions and self-definitions of migrants transported from the SU along with their own meaningful experiences and interpretation of key concepts and symbols (Golden 2002; Stonequist 1935, 1937). Undertaken as a project in cultural anthropology, this study aspires to highlight the sites of conjunction and contradictions between, on the one hand, the ideas and perceptions that evolved while living in the SU; and, on the other hand, the expectations of receiving societies, normative thinking, and everyday knowledge of dominant host society.

1.1 Migration and socio-cultural affiliations

One of the basic, central premises of the study is that the perceptions as well as the physical conditions of the individual are dynamic and subject to change. Therefore, identities of individual and collective affiliations also undergo changes. As, for example, in the foods selected and prepared by immigrants on their dining table. Hence, we will find that these food products symbolize being—Russian, Jewish, Israeli, German, educated, European and/or that they signal transnational practices of belonging to a certain social stratum.

In investigating the migrant experience, I assume that people do not *bear* or transport with them a self-contained completed culture, but rather there is fluid nature to cultural affiliations as they select and employ cultural elements that are integrated through involvement in special situations, states, or conditions of their existence (Bloch 1963; Boyarin 1994; Gudeman and Rivera 1990; Kalekin-Fishman 2000; Welz 1996, 1997, 1998). Hence, I assume that culture is created through dynamic dialogues as well as permanent changes and modifications, rather than being limited to preserving of stable habits and practices. Therefore, based on these assumptions, this study sought to understand how different affiliations of migrants—be they cultural Russian, European, ex-Soviet, Jewish and different Others—are constructed, modified, co-exist, and presented/performed in particular situations in response to needs within specific situations. Bodnar (1985) referred to this process of identity redefinition as *transplantation*.

Accordingly, analyses advanced in this study do not perceive participants through insulated categories, such as Jewish, Soviet, Russian or German, but rather as “doing being Jewish” (Inowlocki 2000, 175) or doing being—ex-Soviet, Russian, Israeli, or German—through their dynamic practices and everyday interactions. The findings demonstrate that multiple identities co-exist and often contradict one another in various ways: Interviewees speak Russian and act according to Russian cultural practices, but are offended if referred to as Russians; or, they consume pork and simultaneously feel themselves to be Jews, accept support by the social welfare system but perform elitist cultural *habitus*, invest significant energies and time over three days to prepare meals for a birthday celebration, but claim that food “has actually no meaning for spiritual life.” In addition, participants in both contexts articulated affiliation with different collective and “imaginary communities” (Anderson 1991), often expressed through linguistic forms of “we” and “they.” These uses were created, changed in situ, presented, confirmed, and performed in various manners. For example, self-referential terms *nashi*¹ and *svoi* [lit. ours, ourselves, our own,² Rus. approximated meaning as “people of our kind” or those who

1 See Caldwell (2005) for analyses of the centrality of the concept “nashi” and its instrumentalization in Russian advertisements.

2 Whereas only objects can be literally possessed in languages such as Hebrew, German, or English, in Russian the linguistic construction “nash or svoi person” and “nashi or svoi people” [lit. “my person” meaning “person of my kind,” and “our people” meaning “people of our kind”] is constructed with the same word of possession and can have a symbolic meaning of common belonging, as in this case.

represent a unified “us”] were involved in a very dynamic and fluid process of *doing being nashi* that could be called *nashi-zation*. The meanings evolving in this process are presented throughout different chapters of this work.

Thus, the numerous examples of empirical evidence presented throughout this monograph demonstrate different uses and modified meanings of key cultural symbols in the Russian language.

1.2 The research approach

The theoretical background integrated throughout these discussions involves two principal domains: First, sociological and anthropological literatures in the area of “migration research.” Particular emphasis is placed on research involved in developing the transnational theoretical perspective, in general, and involvement of groups investigated, in particular. Second, domains within the sociology and anthropology of food that study the importance of food in persons’ lives and the establishment of collective cultural, social, national affiliations, and hierarchies of power. In particular, the study focused on the literature that analyzes migrants’ food consumption and food entrepreneurship in different countries as compared with patterns constructed by the groups investigated in this research.

Migration and material culture research continue to be treated with disdain by scholars. Indeed, Jackson and Holbrook observed that in the case of consumption there is a “patronizing view of apparently undifferentiated members of an anonymous mass society” (Jackson and Holbrook 1995, 1913). Similarly, I found in my review of the migration literature that migrants are often presented as a passive marginal group—deprived of a voice, of any understanding of events in the new society, and of their own opinions and rights. According to this view, all migrants’ transported resources represent deficits rather than contributions to the receiving-host society. Therefore, the assumption seems to be that these transported views are “frozen,” permanently; that is, kept from learning and adaptation (Morawska 2003; Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1997).