Russian Diaspora

Contributions to the Sociology of Language

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Russian Diaspora

Culture, Identity, and Language Change

by

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To my husband Sasha

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Preface

… A crisp spring afternoon … My mother and I are in our sunlit St. Petersburg apartment. She is standing on a stool and hanging the freshly washed drapes at the window while I pretend to be working on a school assignment to avoid the boring chore of helping her with the spring cleaning.

– *Mom, what would you do if I said I was marrying a Jew?*
– *My mother's hands froze in the air with the drape that she was about to hang.*
– *A Jew…? You have no Jewish friends! Why are you asking this? I hope you do not mean it….*

5 years later I married my Jewish husband. In early 1990 I left Russia with him and our five-month-old daughter.

Whenever I open a new book I always think of the author and his reasons for writing on a particular topic. I believe that our academic interests are a continuation of our personal interests and that a dispassionate approach to the academic subject is just the way in which we transform our passion into a scholarly activity.

I have been nourishing the idea of this book for years: thinking of it, discussing it with my colleagues and my husband, and dreaming of a day when I finally could work on it. When the opportunity arose and I had a chance to fulfill my dream I felt excited and a bit scared. I began on a long journey of exploring my own roots and rediscovering my own past. The questions that I am focusing on in this book are the questions that I have been asking myself for the last 20 years of my two immigrations and throughout my entire life on three continents. How has my self-perception changed over the 20 years that I have spent outside of Russia? How did my perception of my host countries and their cultures change over time? How did those cultures change me? Did I close the circle and come to peace with Russia? Do I feel that I belong where I am now? As a linguist, I always have been interested in the way our first language changes under the influence of a second language and how linguistic measures could be explored to see the much deeper change in our thinking. Why do I struggle for words that no longer seem accessible and why do I monitor myself in the way I use a phrase expressing belonging in Russian? In search of these and other answers and in the attempt to see myself as one of the multi-millions of the Russian Diaspora I launched a project that culminated with this book.

The quest for answers set me on a difficult journey of meeting the Russian Diaspora on three continents: USA, Israel, and Germany. More than 170 people briefly walked through my life leaving behind unforgettable marks through their stories, personalities, and the commonalities they share as Russians.

A year and a half later I still go over the incredible amount of data collected during my trips. I read the interview transcripts and hear the voices, often choked with tears, and clearly picture some faces that forever are carved into my memory. I want the reader to see human lives and hear the stories behind the dry numbers that as a scholar I will be presenting in this book. I faced a challenge of combining different writing styles, genres, and analyses in this book while keeping my immigrant voice and my personal experiences out of the discussion as much as possible. In order to detach myself from the subject of my research I kept a travel diary where I reflected on my personal recollections and voiced my reactions, impressions and concerns. One day selected entries from my diary may be added to the numerous autobiographical memoirs written by other immigrant writers. For this research the diary served its purpose and helped me to separate my immigrant life and experiences from those of my participants.

Clearly my study does not rely in any way on my personal experience, but my interest in culture, identity and language retention and acquisition is personal as well as professional. I have lived in Russia, Israel, and America, and have made frequent, prolonged trips to Germany. I am an ethnic Russian married to a Jewish Russian. Arguably, my experience – living in the cultures that I study – has helped me to provide what Geertz calls “thick description” of the ethnographic, social and linguistic phenomena that are at the heart of my book.

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Introduction

This book is the culmination of a comprehensive interdisciplinary study of Russian immigration to three countries, i.e., the United States, Israel and Germany. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and its consequent liberalization resulted in the biggest flood of Russian immigration to the West since the early 20th century. This last wave traditionally has been named the third wave of Soviet/Russian immigration and includes those immigrants who left Russia before (the late 1980s) and immediately following the collapse of the USSR (the early 1990s). Despite the scholarly interest in Russian immigration during the last two decades there are relatively few publications on the topic. Most of the work is focused on strictly Jewish immigration or casts the immigrant community as "Russian," ignoring the reality of two distinct ethnic groups, Russian Jews and ethnic Russians.

Russian Diaspora examines two distinct ethnic groups, relies on empirical data based on sizable groups in three countries, looks into three elements of acculturation (culture, identity, and language), and engages qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. Of the 214 people who participated in the present study, 174 are Russian immigrants who had resided in the United States, Germany, or Israel between ten and thirty years. Two tasks were offered to the participants: a survey and a semi-structured interview. The purpose of the book is to look at the process of transformation in the three components that are key issues in immigration studies: cultural adaptation, identity shift, and first language change. All three elements are studied within the Acculturation Framework. In addition to offering a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses, the book adopts sociological, anthropological, socio-linguistic and psycholinguistic methods of analysis.

The book follows a consistent structure devoting one or two chapters to each of the three key components: one explores the issue through the Acculturation Framework, the other complements the findings by adding a small study conducted within the scope of the present research or by elaborating on a particular concept.

The book opens with an overview of Russian immigration in the 20th century, focusing primarily on the most recent wave. It provides a profile of Russian immigrants, the major reasons for their departure, and an explanation of the technicalities accompanying the complex process of obtaining permission to leave Russia/the USSR. In addition, it clarifies the scope and content of Russian immigration in the United States, Israel, and Germany (Chapter 1). Then the theoretical framework and the methodology of the study are discussed in the next chapter. As mentioned above, all three components central to this research, i.e., culture, identity and language, are studied within the Acculturation Framework, which was adopted from cross-cultural psychology and adapted in order to meet the goals of this project.

After the reader becomes familiar with the history of the recent Russian immigration and the research questions posed by this study he turns to the background information on the participants in this project. The discussion of the socio-demographic information on the immigrants is followed by an analysis of their narratives that pinpoints the reasons behind their immigration and for their choice of a particular host country. The chapter also discusses the major hardships, problems with integration, and success in finding employment among Russian immigrants in three countries (Chapter 3).

The chapter on the change in cultural perception opens with a discussion of the concept of culture as defined in the four pertinent languages, i.e., Russian, English, German, and Hebrew. Then it analyzes the results of the qualitative analysis of narratives related to the immigrants' original perception of the host culture and the way they view it now. A comparison of the host cultures with the native one allowed me to draw on the collective portraits of the "cultural other," i.e., American, Israeli, and German cultures, through the eyes of Russian immigrants at the societal and interpersonal levels. This leads to a discussion of the role of nostalgia and immigrants' need for the Russian community in their respective host countries (Chapter 4).

The next chapter expands on a question raised in the preceding one: Why do Russian immigrants miss the Russian concept of friendship abroad? It reports the findings of a psycholinguistic study conducted within the framework of the individualism/collectivism paradigm adopted from cross-cultural psychology. Two groups of United States participants, i.e., those well integrated and those poorly integrated into American society and culture are compared against two groups of Russian and American monolinguals who served as control groups. Linguistic measures of the individualism/collectivism construct (personal pronouns, pro-drop, and lexical measures) were used as dependent variables while integration and employment success were independent variables (Chapter 5).

The chapter on identity transformation addresses a few questions. It looks into "official identity" as it was imposed by the Soviet system, discrimination and stigma, and the process of identity shift among Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants. An analysis of the administered surveys and narratives identifies those trends common to immigrants in all three countries and those that are distinct to each. Moreover, the immigrants' attitude towards being referred to by the collective name "Russian" is explored in this chapter (Chapter 6).

The discussion of identity transformation among Russian immigrants moves further into the immigrant's sense of home and belonging. This chapter relies on the surveys and interview narratives to explore the following factors that may be responsible for the individual's sense of home: citizenship, language fluency, ethnicity and age. It is illustrated further by the linguistic measure of belonging, i.e., the way Russian immigrants use the possessive pronoun "our" in their daily discourse. The analysis of the immigrants' self-perception of an outsider, both in the host country and back in Russia and an examination of the immigrants' relationship to their native country conclude the chapter (Chapter 7).

The book's final chapter deals with a socio-linguistic approach to language change and retention which looks at the immigrants' socio-linguistic background information, language fluency, attitudes toward language maintenance and bilingualism. The analysis is conducted in three steps, i.e., language proficiency and its change, metalinguistic awareness of the language change and attitudes toward an accent, and the generational view on language maintenance. The discussion section illustrates the way in which language change, as a critical component of any immigration study, can be explored within the Acculturation Framework (Chapter 8).

Since the book's structure and contents allow each chapter to stand as a separate study exploring a particular topic, the integrity of the book will not suffer if the reader chooses to bypass any chapter that is beyond his range of interests.

Chapter 1
Russian immigration: The third wave

> *"We all become internal immigrants well before we leave our country. . . ."*
> (From a conversation with a Greek immigrant in the US)

Introduction

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 has shaken the world and brought about numerous sociopolitical changes both inside the former Soviet Union and to the rest of the world. The fall of the giant super empire marked the end of an era. In years to come historians will continue to write books and articles about the seventy years of the Soviet totalitarian regime and its subsequent collapse. They will bring in new perspectives, explanations, and interpretations of the event. The collective memory of the communist epoch will be formed in the Russian nation. Because we lack sufficient historical distance and emotional detachment from those times it is hard to make an objective judgment about the long-term impact of those years on Russians as a nation, nor is it easy to assess the significance of the fall itself. Whether contemporary Russians view the collapse as the beginning of a more progressive future for their country or as the worst geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, we will leave it up to time to decide. What remains undeniable is that there was a huge positive outcome in shattering the very foundation of the USSR: the once tightly sealed borders of the totalitarian superpower opened up. Thousands of Russian citizens had the chance to travel and see the world beyond the Iron Curtain, and thousands chose to immigrate. Those years marked the end of the third and last wave of Soviet immigration. However, in order to understand better the history of Russian immigration I will take the reader into those times when the USSR seemed as unbreakable and impenetrable as ever.

There were three successive waves of Russian/Soviet immigration. The word "wave" and "Russian" will refer here to immigrants from the former USSR, both of Russian and non-Russian ethnicity. The precise census information on immigration from the former USSR is either unavailable or not entirely reliable. Thus I will refer to those numbers that can be found in numerous publications on Russian immigration in the West.

However, those works focus predominantly on Russian Jewish immigration and their numbers can be inconclusive.

The communist revolution of 1917 and the creation of the first communist country destroyed the very foundation of the Old Russian Empire. Many people enthusiastically embraced the communist slogan "We will build a new society on the ruins of the old one." Others felt pain, fear and hatred. Their "beloved Motherland" was in grave danger and they felt helpless, disillusioned and often crushed. This led to a huge exodus when thousands of people loyal to the old regime left their country with the hope of coming back to Russia when the revolution and the chaos created thereby were over. Russian émigrés of the first wave cherished the naïve belief that their exile was a temporary measure and that belief was passed on to their descendants. The recent powerful and emotionally charged documentary, *Russians Deprived of Russia* (Chavchavadze 2004) shows an interview with an elderly second generation Russian immigrant in Paris who proudly refuses to become a French citizen and remains the last official citizen of the nonexistent Russian Empire. This little episode portrays what many Russians believe was a typical émigré of those post-revolutionary times: idealistic, naïve, well educated and filled with pain and love for the country that he left. Many immigrants of the first wave could not tolerate the emotional pain of separation from their land and later returned to Russia. Upon arrival they either were executed by the Soviets or were locked up for years if not forever in labor camps. That was the end of the so-called first wave of immigration. The first wave of Russian immigration settled predominantly in Europe with the original locus in Paris. There was also a relatively big community in Germany. Among other major routes of that wave were the US, Latin America, Manchuria (Harbin), Australia, and Palestine. Many first-wavers later resettled in the US but the European community remained sizable. According to the US Department of Justice (Chiswick 1997: 235), almost a million immigrants came to the US from Russia starting with a few years prior to the revolution and until the dark years of Stalin's rule in the 1930s. However, Glad (1999: 403) refers to a much smaller number of 103,322 (1917–1939) as the US statistics on immigration. In the late 1920s the door to immigration from the USSR slowly was closing and the entire country was submerged into the dark years of terror, fear, and seclusion. During Stalin's years and until the early 1970s there was virtually no immigration from the USSR. The US received between 5,000 (Chiswick 1997: 235) and 18,400 (Glad 1999: 403) immigrants in those years while Palestine altogether became home to 52,350 Russian immigrants from

1917 to 1947 (Glad 1999: 403). The last figure includes the second wave immigrants.

The second wave of immigration is not as easily identifiable. Some scholars include resettled first wavers and their descendents, while others limit it to those Soviet citizens who were caught up in the crossfire of WWII, went through POW camps or camps for displaced people and chose not to go back to the USSR when the war was over. If they returned, those people would be put in jail or sent to the labor camps. Therefore many preferred to stay in the West. The statistics on the second wave of immigration are quite scattered and contradictory. It is important to notice that the first two waves of Russian immigration were not predominantly Jewish. People of Jewish ethnicity were part of those early immigrants but being Jewish was not a prerequisite to emigrate from the USSR. That will change for the third and last wave of Soviet immigration.

The situation within the USSR from the late 1920s till early 1970 resembled a closed box that was hard to penetrate from the outside or escape from the inside. Soviet people had virtually no freedom to travel or even obtain permission to leave the country. On those rare occasions when they submitted a request to go abroad as tourists they were supposed to go through an endless application process and numerous communist party and KGB committees. Being Jewish or having a Jewish relative, having had parents or grandparents in a Nazi camp or just living in the Nazi-occupied territory during the WWII would deny the person permission to travel. Not being a member of the communist party or having had contact with anyone in the West most likely would make him unreliable in the eyes of the Soviet authorities and preclude him from getting a tourist visa. For ordinary Russian people the very thought of immigration was inconceivable. People who openly showed their dislike of the communist regime could easily end up in a mental institution. According to Soviet propaganda, a sane person would never want to leave the “best” country in the world. Yet, in the early 1970s and then in the late 1980–early 1990s more than a million Russians emigrated. That was the third and last wave of Soviet immigration. In order for us to understand the legal mechanism behind the third wave immigration and the reason why it was predominantly Jewish we need to get a closer look at *who* those people were and *why* and *how* they left the USSR during those years.

1.1. Who were they?

The third wave of immigration usually dates back to the early 1970s when Brezhnev’s administration eased emigration restrictions for Jews. In 1948 the state of Israel was founded and the Law of Return was adopted. According to this law, all Jews who can prove their Jewish origin (i.e., having a Jewish mother), have a right to return to their homeland of Israel. That was the exit door from the USSR. In case of inter-ethnic marriages, non-Jewish relatives were granted permission to emigrate as well. In the absence of any other legitimate way to leave the country, Jewish immigration represented almost an exclusive channel through which people could escape in those years. The Soviet totalitarian system secured the borders to such an extent that occasional marriages to foreigners, non-return while on a trip abroad or any other imaginable ways to escape were close to impossible. Thus the third wave of Russian immigration was predominantly Jewish with a certain injection of non-Jewish family members. Many Soviet Jews were married to non-Jews. The recent cohorts show almost 70% of Soviet Jews were married to non-Jews (Tolts 2003). To many people in West Europe and the US it remains unclear why Russian Jews represent a separate ethnic rather than a religious group. The latter was pointed out by Andrews (1998) and Remenninck (2007) in the most recent comprehensive publication on Jewish immigration. Indeed, one has to understand the bizarre, to say the least, system where people were given their formal identity at birth and had to carry their own "Yellow Star" for the rest of their lives. Judaism was considered an ethnicity/nationality and Jews were ostracized as the most persecuted group in Soviet Russia. We will be coming back to this in the following chapters.

1.2. Why did they leave?

The question of why Russian Jews wanted to emigrate is essential for understanding many issues discussed later in the book. Throughout the entire post-revolutionary history of the USSR, Russian Jews represented the most intellectually influential and politically persecuted group. From the infamous pogroms at the turn of the 20th century to Stalin's purges in the 1930s and later in the 1950s, from anti-Semitism at the official level to pure anti-Jewish hatred at the domestic level, many Russian Jews had lived with mixed feelings of loving the country, hating their fate, and fearing for the future of their children. In the Russian Empire Jews were not allowed to live in major Russian cities. This led to numerous Jewish settlements, predominantly in the south, i.e., Byelorussia and Ukraine. Jews were precluded from getting into universities or attaining certain professions. Many leaders of the communist revolution were, in fact, Jews who sincerely believed in creating a new life for the country and themselves. In 1934 Stalin made a decision that was supposed to solve the Jewish issue in the USSR: an autonomous Jewish Republic was created in Siberia along the Chinese border. Just a few thousand Jews decided to relocate there. Altogether that was a failed attempt to solve the Jewish problem in the USSR.

After the communist revolution Jews were allowed to move into major cities. Getting into a university was now officially open to Jews but the Soviets had a hidden quota for certain minorities, including the Jewish population, which made it hard, if not impossible in some cases, for Russian Jews to get opportunities equal to those of ethnic Russians. Landing a better job, getting a postgraduate degree, or making it to the top echelons of the political leadership was either extremely difficult or altogether impossible. Being married to a Jew would automatically place a non-Jewish spouse in the same category. Nevertheless it remained clear to anyone in the USSR that Jews represented one of the most educated and professionally successful groups known as intelligentsia, a social class that is historically unique to Russia. Yet the open and hidden anti-Semitism, fear of a new wave of pogroms, and uncertainty about the economic and political future of the country were troubling thoughts for Russian Jews. Also many were unwilling to stay in the communist country when there were other alternatives available. Some Jews were driven by Zionist feelings to return once and forever to the land that they could claim as theirs. All this made thousands of Russian Jews take an often uneasy step in applying for emigration from the USSR.

Soviet Jews were one of a few ethnic groups that could use a legitimate reason to leave the country which was justified in the eyes of the Soviet authorities. Many Russians, burdened with economic hardships, lack of basic freedoms, and deprived of an opportunity to escape the much-hated regime, were looking at the third wave of emigration with a heavy mix of envy, sadness, and deeply rooted anti-Semitism. This can be illustrated through a joke of the 1980s: "Jews screwed up the country by organizing the communist revolution and now they are leaving while we have to sort out all this mess. . . ." In addition to purely political reasons, many people of the third wave were driven out of the collapsing USSR by economic forces. With the fall of the USSR and the subsequent transition to a free market economy came hyperinflation and a series of political and economic crises in the 1990s, culminating in the financial crash of 1998. By mid-1993 between 39% and 49% of Russians were living below the poverty line. This instability and bleak outcome prompted a large new wave of both political and economic emigration from Russia. A notable part of the 1991–2001 immigration wave consisted of scientists and engineers, who, faced with extremely poor job market at home, left to pursue their careers abroad, which created a strong brain drain effect for Russia. According to the National Science Foundation there were 20,000 Russian scientists working in the United States in 2003 and Russian software engineers were responsible for 30% of Microsoft's products in 2002 (Wikipedia 2008).

1.3. How did they leave?

As mentioned above, the official reason for Russian Jews to emigrate was to claim their wish to return to their own land, that is, Israel. In May 1947 Soviet leaders made a statement supporting the right of Jews in Palestine to have their own state. A year later the state of Israel officially was founded. The Law of Return became an official institution allowing Jews scattered all over the world to return to their newly formed homeland. However, despite their initial support of creating the state of Israel, the Soviet leaders did not plan on taking any steps in accepting the immigration rights of their own Jews. Moreover, the diplomatic relations between the two countries went through ups and downs for two decades after the foundation of the Israeli state and diplomatic ties were severed in 1967 after the Six Day War. Subsequently, the Dutch Embassy in Moscow represented an Israeli office until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. During the Soviet times, Jewish emigration from the USSR was almost nonexistent due to deliberate Soviet measures to prevent such a "shameful" event from taking place. After all, who would ever want to leave such an exemplary state as the USSR? The Soviets did not want the world to see thousands of people willing to flee the country, nor did they want to lose the enormous amount of brain power represented by the Jewish population. According to Glad (1999: 375), only 19 persons were permitted to immigrate to Israel in late 1950s, and about 3000 Soviet Jews arrived in Israel between 1951 and 1970 (Chiswick 1997: 235).

There was a quite limited and very temporary reprieve for Jewish emigration from the USSR in the 1970s but then the door successfully closed until the mid-to-late 1980s. One has to understand that whatever statistics on the actual volume of Soviet immigration are cited in various publications, they may not be reflective of the actual number of people who applied for an exit visa. The risk of not getting permission was high and the consequences of being denied immigration were exceptionally grave. People who were refused a visa were called "*refusniks*," and their fate was extremely unfortunate. Upon being refused immigration, most people would lose their jobs without a possibility of getting any decent position in the future. In order to survive, many had to take up unqualified jobs like working night shifts, guarding stores and warehouses, loading goods at train stations or cleaning offices. But the consequences of getting a refusal were not limited to a fall on the social ladder. There were much more serious outcomes. *Refusniks* became an extremely vulnerable group and were susceptible to all sorts of Soviet persecutions starting with eavesdropping on their phone conversations, watching their contacts, and ending with simply putting them in jail or a mental institution. Soviet authorities were always on guard when matters involved people of Jewish background. They took all possible measures to prevent them from getting too high in their professional standing or exercising the relatively limited freedoms that ethnic Russians still had. Some prominent Soviet Jews became known as "prisoners of Zion" and their active role in seeking human rights for Jews in the USSR can be compared with that of civil rights activists in the US. Thus people were rightly cautious about initiating the whole process of emigration. The stakes involved were very high: the chance of being denied a visa was significant and the prospect of continuing your life as a "*refusnik*" in the Soviet State was grim.

However, in the mid-to-late 1980s and especially after the collapse of the USSR the situation with immigration relatively eased. That was the time of massive immigration from the USSR, which also is known as the third wave. More than a million Russian Jews have settled in Israel since then, thousands came to the US and later, thousands found a new home in Germany. However, the path of immigration was not easy or straightforward during those years. In order to understand better the content of this book it is essential to understand how and why Russian people came to a certain country where they eventually settled. Many people in the West have an oversimplified view of how the immigrants choose a host country as well as how they technically get admitted there.

The flow of Soviet immigration in 1970s–1980s worked like this: Soviet Jews could apply for an exit visa after they got an official invitation from a relative or one who was presumably a relative in Israel. Since the official destination for all Jews allegedly was Israel the potential immigrants had to show their intention of going to their newly acquired native land. After the application was submitted the potential immigrant had to go through a nerve-wracking waiting period. If the permission to emigrate was