

Title of the paper

Intergroup interactions or not among Russian-speakers in Berlin

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Abstract

This paper explores interactions—or lack thereof— between three Russian speakers living in present-day Berlin. While the existing scholarship typically discusses specific Russian-speaking groups in particular settings, my work thus focuses on intergroup transfers in the context of Berlin.

I set the stage for the main part of analysis by sketching a brief history of Russian-speaking groups' presence in Berlin; that is, ethnic Germans 'returning' from the Soviet Union and its successor states (commonly known in Germany as *Russlanddeutsche*), Russian-speaking Jews and ethnic Russians. The primary data are collected through semi-structured interviews with one member of each of the three Russian-speaking groups. Analyzing intergroup communication, my paper sheds new light on the lifeworld of immigrants in Germany, at a time of the Covid-19-pandemic, the 'migrant crisis', and growing anti-minority discourses in Europe.

Key words: Interactions between Russian-speaking groups; Berlin; Immigrants in Germany; Qualitative method; Semi-structured interviews; Oral history; Minorities in Europe; Russians; Russian-Germans; Russian-speaking Jews

State of the art

This paper offers a new insight into Russian-speaking communities in Berlin by challenging the dominant non-intergroup approach to the communities analysed. By studying relations among Russian-speakers, the paper analyses interviewees' self-perceptions and memories.

Several scholars have explored social networks among Russian speakers in Berlin (Gromova 2014; Schütze 2003). However, their studies do not specifically examine transactions between ethnic-Russians, Russian-Germans and Russian-speaking Jews, but rather focus either on Russian-speakers in general or only on a specific Russian-speaking group. Thus, Schütze (2003) focuses on the relationship, or lack of it, between Russian-speaking Jews and native Germans in Berlin. Gromova (2014) is interested in Jewish dating among Russian-speaking Jews living in Berlin. Conversely, Panagiotidis (2021) study is an important first step in intertwined research on Russian-speaking communities in Germany. However, its focus is not on interactions among Russian-speakers in Berlin, nor does it focus on ethnographic research by means of semi-structured interviews, which my study does.

Several other works on Russian-speaking communities in Germany (Panagiotidis 2019; Jebrak & Reichling 2010; Hegener 2008; Remennick 2007; Peck 2006; Goldbach 2005; Becker 2003; Berend 2001; Meng 2001) explore related questions. For instance, from a generational perspective, Meng (2001) surveys linguistic biographies, including the phenomenon of code-switching between German and Russian, among Russian German families in Mannheim (in southwest Germany) over time. Panagiotidis (2019) focuses on co-ethnic immigration to Germany and Israel, and shows how the post-Second World

War renegotiation of Jewish and German nationhood is an interwoven process. By contrast, I tap into the largely unexplored area of intergroup communication in Berlin, a major European hub for Russian-speaking diaspora. As we shall see, my findings will provide a qualitatively rich idea of contemporary Russian-speaking perceptions of self, community, and belonging in Berlin.

Historical context for Russian-speaking communities in Germany

During the 1920s, around 360,000 Russian-speakers, including Jews, fled the Russian revolutionary violence, and settled as refugees in Berlin, the capital of Weimar Germany. A second, smaller wave of immigration took place in the 1960s when Russian-speakers, particularly dissident intellectuals, sought refuge in West Germany. A third wave followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The Contingent Refugee Act of 1991 (superseded by another legislation in 2005) allowed Jews from the Soviet Union to settle in Germany, on account of anti-Semitism in their home country (Casteel 2018: 181; Runge 1995: 77). Out of 220,000 Russian-speaking Jews who emigrated to Germany during this period, approximately 40,000 settled in Berlin (Remennick 2007: 317).

In the case of *Russlanddeutsche*, they descend from the Germans who had moved to the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century at the invitation of Empress Catherine II (cf. Römhild 1998: 40), who was born in Prussia. Catherine the Great, as she became known, hoped that the Germans would modernize and westernize Russia. During the Second World War, Soviet leader Stalin ordered a deportation of four million *Russlanddeutsche* to labor camps in remote regions of Asian parts of the Soviet Union, to Siberia and to Kazakhstan, in order to prevent their potential collaboration with Nazi Germany (Schönhuth and Kaiser 2015: 12; Kühl 2000: 256). It is relevant to bear in mind that Second World War and Holocaust remembrance in Western Europe and the United States has developed under different ideological frameworks, and that these regions went through a different wartime experience than the former-Soviet Union. After the Second World War, there was a general tendency in Soviet public discourse to describe the war in terms of an overarching narrative of victimization. The dominant resistance narrative was about the transnational communist Red Army and partisan guerrillas, which left little room for acknowledging the suffering of any specific ethnic group, including the Jews and Roma—in relative terms the war's greatest victims. They, and others, were mostly folded into a larger story about the communist-led resistance against fascist aggression. Moreover, in absolute terms, Russians and other Slavs suffered significantly higher losses.

The West German law *Gesetz über die Angelegenheiten der Vertriebenen und Flüchtlinge* (BVFG) of 1953 offered German citizenship rights to *Russlanddeutsche* (Panagiotidis 2016: 211). The reasons for immigration to Germany included discrimination, assimilation pressure as well as economic circumstances. In contrast to the *Russlanddeutsche*, while emigrating to Germany, Russian-speaking Jews were not granted a German citizenship, but a residence permit, which, in turn, made it impossible for them to receive recognition for pre-migration educational credentials and work record for pensions, as well as access to public sector jobs (Beck 2019; Remennick 2007: 317; Dietz 2006). Similar to the case of the Russian-speaking Jews, the 2005 Immigration Act made it more difficult for *Russlanddeutsche* to come to Germany. As an example a German language test was introduced as part of the application process. Ethnic Russians from the post-Soviet territories have had no automatic entitlement to move to Germany, but instead have had to obtain student or working visas to enter the country.

Present-day Germany has the largest population of Russian-speakers outside of the former Soviet Union. Over 2,5 million *Russlanddeutsche* emigrated to Germany between 1992 and 2007. It is

estimated that around 200,000 Russian-speakers live in Berlin alone. According to Kil and Silver (2006: 103), the different Russian-speaking groups usually live segregated from each other; the Russian-speaking Jews and ethnic Russians tend to settle in the western parts, especially in Charlottenburg, whereas the *Russlanddeutsche* mostly live in eastern parts of the city, in Marzahn-Hellersdorf (cf. Plamper 2019: 262).

As part of reimagining Germany, 'reclaiming' and 'reintegrating' Soviet Jews is often seen as essential, even when the Russian-speaking Jews (who now make up around 90 percent of the Berlin Jewish Community) have no obvious past connection with the country (cf. Klingenberg 2019: 271). Between 1990 and 2010, Berlin had the fastest-growing Jewish community in the world (Plamper 2019: 238). Immigration of Russian-speaking Jews to Germany is an attempt by the government to rebuild German Jewry, nearly destroyed during the Holocaust. In other words, Russian-speaking Jews in Berlin serve as de facto 'replacements' for perished German Jews (cf. Mandel 2010), which in turn, can be interpreted as an ethnicization of Jews.

The official basis for German national belonging has been transformed since 2000 in accordance with the principle of *jus soli* (right of the soil). This means that all permanent residents of Germany regardless of whether they are considered to have any German 'blood ties' or not are now classified as Germans and are entitled to citizenship and passport (which previously was not the case). Importantly, the *Russlanddeutsche* and Russian-speaking Jews in Germany were given the right to come to the country on a *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) basis due to these groups' specific ethnic identities.

Methodology

I employ the qualitative method of conducting interviews, enabling me to grasp more fully a wide spectrum of identity conceptions among my interviewees. The interviews were conducted in German and Russian and I informed the interviewees about the research and its objectives.

My interviewees have lived in what was once Soviet Union and is nowadays' Russia and Soviet Union's successor states. They are small in number and therefore not 'representative' for the topic of 'inter-group interactions', nor for the three groups in question, which I will further discuss in my conclusion.

I do not assume that just because the interviewees have Jewish/Russian/*Russlanddeutsche* roots, they affirm these identities *a priori*. Moreover, I am of course aware that the researcher plays a strong, shaping role in the research process, and that the interviews do not generate a static, transparent and objective "Truth," but take form out of a social dynamic between the researcher and the interviewees. My principal research questions were the following:

- Do the interviewees interact with Russian-speakers within, and across in-group borders?
- How have they adapted and continue to adapt to their new Berlin environment?

I interpret the interviewees from a phenomenological point of view, characterizing the main substance of their experiences and omitting less crucial aspects (eidetic reduction) (Zahavi 2002: 54). This also explains why quotes from the interviewees have a monological character even if I held conversations with them.

Interviews with one Russian-speaker from the three respective groups

L.S. is Russian-speaking Jewish. She works as a clerk at the front desk in a hotel, and lives in Lichtenberg. She was born in Leningrad in 1985, and came to Berlin 2019. She previously lived in Tel Aviv for three

and a half years and became an Israeli citizen. L.S. has earned a Master's degree in World Literature from St. Petersburg State University.

She succeeded in obtaining a work visa in order to come to Berlin because of her Israeli passport. Before immigration, had a work-contract with the same hotel chain in Berlin as where she had worked before both in St. Petersburg, and later in Tel Aviv. L.S. decided to go abroad already in 2014, mainly because of the Russian-Crimea conflict. She explains:

I understood that there was not much I could expect from Russian politics... Israel was my plan B, as I first wanted to move to Germany. I had studied German in Russia, both in school and at university, so I thought it would be easier to go there than elsewhere. I applied to come to Germany as a contingent refugee. It took very, very long though because it was during the same time as all the refugees from the Middle East arrived in Germany, and the authorities were probably overwhelmed, and didn't have time to consider my application. I only received feedback about one year later, and by then I had already made *aliyah*¹.

L.S. mother is ethnic Russian and her father Jewish. L.S. was told by her mother all her life that she was not Jewish, because only her father is Jewish.² When she by chance found out about the Jewish Agency's Zionist *Taglit-Birthright Israel programme*, enabling Jews from all over the world to visit Israel, she realized that she was actually eligible to the programme and thus considered Jewish as well. L.S. contemplates:

I was 25 years old at the time and only then started to identify as Jewish. Today I feel half Jewish and half Russian. The time spent in Israel influenced me a lot...

When I grew up, my dad's family wasn't religious but my grandma used to speak Yiddish with her mum so that my grandpa wouldn't understand. Moreover, my dad hadn't been able to study math at the state university, as he wanted, because he was declared 'Jewish' in his passport, and was not admitted for this reason.³ Therefore, he prompted that at least I should study at the state university. Personally, I was never discriminated. Only once, when I was 8 years old, a daughter of my mum's friend told me that I didn't look Russian... I later found out that many of my school-friends also were half Jewish, so we started to discuss Israel and other related topics. But only in Israel I started celebrating Jewish holidays.

When L.S. came to Berlin, she looked up *Morasha Germany*, a student organization and learning center welcoming Jews of all backgrounds, where L.S. continues to learn about Judaism and celebrate the holidays. She moreover takes Hebrew and German classes at the *Volkshochschule* (education center for adults). L.S. tells me that she plans to return to Tel Aviv someday. She does not wish to return to Russia because of the political situation there. She says, it is more international in Tel Aviv than in Berlin, and as

¹ According to traditional and nationalist conceptions, when a Jew migrates to Israel, he or she makes an *aliyah* (Heb. Ascent) from the diaspora to Zion.

² According to mainstream orthodox *Halacha*, the mother should be Jewish in order to transmit the Jewish bloodline.

³ It might be argued that at certain times antisemitism was institutionalised in the Soviet Union. See Egenhoff (2014) and Karklins (1984) for discussions regarding Jews' access to higher education in former Soviet Union.

long as you are Jewish everything is smooth. "Israel is a land of immigrants, whereas Berlin has an image of being cosmopolitan... In reality it's different". L.S. continues:

I don't feel discriminated here but with my accent... People make funny faces, which would never happen in Israel. They are super-happy even if you speak just a little bit of Hebrew. I was told by a Russian friend when I moved here that when I apply for an apartment I should say that I'm Israeli, not Russian. I think she was right. Luckily, my surname is Jewish. If you have a Russian surname ending with 'ov' or 'ova' it's like a red flag and you're rejected just because of your name.

A friend of mine from Israel told me he could never live in Germany. His grandma is a Holocaust-survivor and he would never buy a German car or listen to German music, even if he's a DJ playing electronic music, and Germany is all about electronic music... I don't feel the same, but my dad can't understand how I can choose to live here. My grandma's family were killed in Belarus. For me, the Holocaust is history and Germany payed a high price for it by being divided after the war.

Most of L.S. friends in Berlin are ethnic Russians who have come to Berlin for similar reasons as she did; to study and work. L.S. got to know one of them already at the university in St. Petersburg. Another friend she knows since she was a little girl in St. Petersburg. And with one friend she has friends in common in St. Petersburg. L.S. says:

I have some expat non-Russian friends from New Zealand, Canada and Australia as well, but no German friends, even though my colleagues are mostly Germans. In Israel my friends were Russian-speaking Jews. it's easier to explain things to them, but my Russian friends here are also interested in Jewish culture... I think it's the shared language and culture connecting me with Russians here. And my friends are also from St. Petersburg so we were raised the same. If I want to go to a museum, I would invite one of them, and not one of my English-speaking expat friends. I know if I would call one of my Russian friends and ask them to come with me to an arts museum, they would say yes. They also miss cultural life. Maybe it's not even a Russian, but a St. Petersburg thing.

In L.S. view, the Corona-pandemic has made it impossible for her to make new friends. She says that she is stuck with her inner circle of Russian friends and that they have been meeting more frequently since the pandemic's outbreak. She thinks there is more solidarity between them now.

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Y.K. is ethnic Russian. He works as free-lance journalist and event manager and lives in Wilmerdorf. He was born in St. Petersburg 1981. In 1996, Y.K.'s father, who is ship-engineer, was offered a one-year long position at a newly founded company in Bremen (a port-city in North Germany), and accepted. At the time Y.K. moved to Bremen with his family, he was 15. Eventually, his father's contract was prolonged, and then became permanent.

Y.K.'s parents enrolled him to the school of the Russian Embassy in Berlin. Every second week he went there from Bremen with his father and got all the assignments, and then studied alone at home. After his graduation, he went to St. Petersburg and completed a Bachelor's degree in Transport Logistics. He then returned to Bremen again. At the age of 21, Y.K. says, he learnt German. He enrolled in a Business Administration Bachelor programme at Bremerhaven University, and worked as a journalist on the side. In 2008, he applied for a job at a currently non-existent Russian publishing-house in Berlin. He came there 13 years ago. Y.K. recalls:

My mother left her position as deputy director at a St. Petersburg primary school. She's a language teacher for French and German. For her, it was hard to live in Bremen at first. She didn't have a work permit and initially we weren't integrated into German life, also because I attended the Russian school in Berlin. We used to hang out with two other families from St. Petersburg who had moved to Bremen. And we always thought that we were in Germany only temporarily. When I arrived the second time, after my university studies in St. Petersburg, it was completely different. I made a lot of German friends.

Y.K. tells me that he is not well connected with Russian-speakers in Berlin. In his circle of friends there are only two persons having Russian as their mother tongue. At work, however, he comes in contact with more Russian-speakers, including Russian-Germans and Russian-speaking Jews. Y.K. recalls:

The 'other Russians' tick differently. Not better or worse, just different. In the streets of St. Petersburg, people talk like in the movies and on TV in Russia. For me it was like a cultural shock to hear other Russian dialects in Berlin. It was really a shock to hear how people from Kazakhstan and Siberia speak. Many Russian-speakers, who have grown up here in Germany, speak Russian, but with a German melody.

I noticed that Russian-speaking Jews and the Russian-Germans like to emphasise that they aren't Russians. I also find it amazing that many Russian-speaking Jews who came here to Germany have suddenly become Jewish which they weren't in Russia. They celebrate Channuka and Jewish holidays, and in Russia they never celebrated anything Jewish. Many Russian-Russians also strengthen their Orthodoxy much more here.

Y.K. explains that he thinks the two other Russian-speaking groups have little to do with each other because they probably do not meet anywhere. "Only at the Russian Embassy during elections." He would personally meet members from both groups when he organises events at *Russisches Haus* (Russian cultural center in Berlin). Russian-speaking Jews tend to come from cities and Russian-Germans from small towns and villages, he says, and continues:

I bump into Russian-speaking Jews at museums and at the opera, and Russian-Germans in Russian supermarkets. Both members of Russian-German and Russian-speaking Jewish groups talk about politics straight away. You have to explain your political views, especially in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It's not for me, nor is the Russian-Orthodox church in Berlin, which is just as conservative as the ones in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Y.K. has not been to Russia since 2004, almost 17 years now. At the beginning it was for pragmatic reasons, because he had not enrolled in the military service, and until he was 28 years old he could get into trouble because of that, and thus stayed away from Russia. Later, he only had two weeks of holiday a year, and then would rather go to the warmth, to Spain or France. All his grandparents died young too so there was no close family to visit in Russia. Y.K. tells me that he also was afraid of being disappointed when going back there, because St. Petersburg has changed so much. "I'm scared to go there because I've such fond memories and I would have to stay in a hotel, which would be strange... Russia is my *Heimat* [homeland] but Germany is my *zu Hause* [home]..."

Y.K. says that he only felt discriminated in Germany once. He was working for a publishing company in Bremen, and during a telephone meeting, his colleague, who spoke with a Swabian (Southern German) dialect, suggested they take someone for the meeting who speaks better German than Y.K. "That freaked me out. I told her, you know, I understand you wonderfully, even though you speak Swabian, and then she was quiet".

Y.K.'s best friends are all Germans coming from different corners of Berlin. At his last birthday party, before the pandemic, there were twenty people and twelve of them were born in Berlin, two of whom have an East-Berlin background. "I think Berliners are very direct and honest and I like that about people in general." Since the Corona-pandemic, he has become more friends with his neighbors, none of whom are Russian speaking.

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N.K. is Russian-German. She works as an innovation strategist and design thinking coach. She completed a Bachelor's degree in European Media Studies and a Master's degree in Social and Business Communication. N.K. lives near Treptower park. She was born in a small mountainous village Issyk in Kazakhstan in 1988. When she was almost 5 years old, she immigrated with her family (mother, father and two elder brothers) to Germany and she has lived in Berlin since 2009. N.K.'s mother is Russian-German and her father ethnic Russian from the Omsk region in Siberia. Her father's family moved to Issyk when he was little and N.K.'s parents got to know each other in primary school.

N.K. learnt German following her immigration to Germany and her parents spoke and continues to speak Russian with her, but the mother frequently use German words to describe food-dishes, for example. N.K.'s mother acquired German with a Swabian dialect and as Hamburg is situated in the North of Germany, she felt more comfortable continuing speaking Russian to N.K. For N.K.'s grandparents it was natural to speaking German among themselves and with their daughter. There was a large Russian German community in Issyk. N.K. tells:

The villagers considered it to be unwise to marry ethnic Russians [instead of Russian-Germans] so my mum was questioned for wishing to marry my dad. There were prejudices circulating that you are 'this way' as a German and 'this way' as a Russian-German... Russians are lazy and bla bla... And you could even recognize from the house facades if Russians or Russian-Germans lived there.

N.K.'s parents decision to immigrate to Germany was made because of the economic situation in Kazakhstan at the time. Instead of money, N.K.'s parents used to get sugar and rice in salary, and it was

not possible to find many food products. Moreover, her mother had relatives having had already immigrated to Germany, and they sent parcels to Issyk, and this way it was obvious—from the parcels—that the standard of living was better in Germany than at home.

N.K. maintains that her grandparents experiences during the Second World War are central in the family memory. N.K.'s father's mother was displaced to a forced labor camp near Hannover (in northern Germany) and managed to return to Siberia shortly before the war ended. N.K.'s father told her this story as they discussed the fact that her mother was both Russian and German, and that they were planning to immigrate to Germany. N.K.'s maternal grandmother was deported to Kazakhstan as a young girl, and the grandmother's parents died during the deportation. N.K. thinks that these secondhand experiences have influenced her a lot.

Upon arrival in Germany in 1993, N.K.'s family spent their first years in a dormitory in Kiel and then in a dormitory in Hamburg (both cities are in northern Germany). During her first years in Hamburg, N.K. was shy, and she thinks it was for not mastering German as well as her native German class-mates. In school everything was in German, but outside of school, and at home, she only spoke Russian. N.K. was embarrassed to bring home German friends, especially because of her father's accent. She recalls:

My mum always fought against discrimination, for example when our family was made responsible for some wrongdoing, having scratched a car as an example, that we weren't even responsible for, just because we were 'Russians'. I was 'Russian' in Germany and 'German' in Kazakhstan, always the other, and never really belonging... In Berlin, however, there is more awareness about Russian-Germans, and there are so many foreign-born persons with more than one nationality. My identity is more normal and accepted here.

N.K. recalls that in school, her best friends were Turkish, Persian and Syrian. She explains that the food and smells and interior at these friends' home reminded her of Kazakhstan. Moreover, N.K.'s mother used to go to Turkish grocery stores and make similar food that was served at her Muslim friends' homes.

Today, N.K. says that she is a liberal person and that most Russian-Germans are conservative, and, for example, have traditional ideas about gender roles, nationalism and patriotism. Nevertheless, she has had the opportunity to get to know like-minded Russian-Germans at university with whom she is still friends. N.K. says, she feels good with fellow Russian-speakers because of their common language and temperament, but at the same time she feels alien as she cannot express herself as easily in Russian as in German. Her closest friends are a Russian-German, a Bulgarian, a Spanish, and a Lithuanian woman, and two German friends. N.K. only acquainted one Russian-speaking Jewish woman in Berlin, but they lost touch. N.K. elaborates:

Her father was crazy rich, and he lived in Russia, and she didn't have any contact with any of her parents. Her mum was so correct and careful... It was a very tense family in comparison to mine. I feel close though to Russian-speaking Jews, even if I don't socialize with any of them. We are similar in many ways, especially our common language. But I was naturally befriended with Russian-Germans and ethnic-Russians because of the friends to my family. Most of the families had similar constellations as me; one Russian parent and a Russian-German one. My mother kept contact with all Russian-German families who left Issyk for Germany. I was never introduced to

Russian-speaking Jews. There are also many stereotypes about Jews in Russian contexts, including my own family—that they are greedy, rich, too intellectual and stick only to themselves.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, N.K. meets less people than before and she has come closer to her inner circle of friends and also her boyfriend, who is native German. She tells me that she would never be able to find a Russian-speaking partner who is liberal, and has made a similar journey as she has, and also is attractive. Too many factors have to come together for that ‘jackpot’ to happen, she says. At the same time, N.K. feels more closeness with her Russian-German friend than with her partner, precisely, she maintains, because they have more shared experiences.

Conclusion

Based on the insight gleaned from these interviews, I have identified mixed levels of interaction among the three Berlin-based Russian-speakers. L.S. frequently socializes with ethnic Russians from St. Petersburg, where she is also from. She explains, however, that with her Russian-speaking Jewish friends in Tel Aviv, there was a stronger connection, as they understood each other better. L.S. came to Germany as an adult and her parents still live in Russia. It seems, for this reason, she exhibits a more pronounced desire to stay in close touch with Russian or rather a St. Petersburg culture in Berlin.

In the case of both Y.K. and N.K., there are almost no interactions across the groups. Y.K. has two ethnic-Russian friends and explains that – similar to L.S. experience – coming from St. Petersburg is a significant part of the bond between them. N.K. has one Russian-German friend, and while growing up she was socializing with Russian-Germans and ethnic-Russians due to her family-contacts. More than actual intergroup interaction, Y.K. and N.K. have opinions about the ‘other’ Russian-speaking group members.

A recurrent theme among the interviewees is that their perceived ‘Russian’ identities have negative connotations in Germany. Thus, a narrative that has shaped their experiences as immigrants is the conception that ‘Germans do not like Russians’. What is more, they are forming their identities, I argue, on an individual rather than a collective basis, distancing themselves from official Jewish, Russian and Russian-German labels and institutions. They are interested in having contact with fellow Russian-speakers who are neither supportive of Russia’s official politics nor affiliated with a conservative Russian-speaking community in Berlin.

Moreover, it is safe to assume that it is because the Second World War, including the Holocaust, are so central for modern German, Jewish and Russian identities, that this period features prominently in my interviewees’ recollections, even if none of them have firsthand memories of the war. For example, N.K.’s (ethnic Russian) paternal grandmother was deported to a forced labour camp in Germany, which has become a central narrative in N.K.’s family history, i.e. in the context of her being both Russian and German and also an immigrant in Germany.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, Berlin’s Russian-speakers are concentrated in Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf and Marzahn-Hellersdorf. Yet, my interviewees live in various areas (in Lichtenberg, Neukölln and Wilmersdorf). Because housing is scarcer in Berlin than it once was, they live wherever they happen to find an apartment and they have friends and work across the city, which is why geography does not appear to be a factor in preventing them from interacting across Russian-speaking groups in everyday life. The most crucial factor, I argue, for the lack of intergroup interaction among my

interviewees is the cosmopolitan Berlin setting, where ethno-religious Jewish-Russian-German labels recede into the background.

As mentioned earlier, because my sample size is small, I cannot use their experiences as a basis for generalizing about a broader population. Although the interviewees represent a limited sample, they nonetheless provide the reader with a qualitatively rich idea of contemporary perceptions of intergroup interactions and their sense of belonging in Berlin today. I contend that my interviewees form a reference group, and as such, they are representative of all possible responses to the questions that I posed about belonging, and of intergroup interactions among Russian-speakers in Berlin.

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