

A Jewish Newcomer in Berlin (2000)

Abstract

Jewish satirist Wladimir Kaminer describes his own decision to emigrate from the Soviet Union to East Berlin, where he landed in the summer of 1990. Kaminer went on to become a successful radio talk-show host, DJ, the author of several best-selling books about the everyday lives of Russian immigrants in Germany, and a symbol of the new Russo-German sensibility. The following vignette was taken from *Russendisko* [*Russian Disco*] (2000), a collection of humorous stories describing the Russian-German encounter.

Source

Russians in Berlin

In the summer of 1990, a rumor was making the rounds in Moscow: Honecker^[1] was taking Jews from the Soviet Union as a kind of compensation for East Germany's never having paid its share of the German payments to Israel. According to the official East German propaganda, all the old Nazis were living in West Germany. The many dealers who flew from Moscow to West Berlin and back every week on import-export business brought the news back to the city with them. Word got around quickly. Everyone knew, except maybe Honecker. Normally most people in the Soviet Union tried to cover up any Jewish forebears they had, because you only had hopes of a career if your passport didn't give you away. The roots of this lay not in Anti-Semitism but simply in the fact that every position that carried any responsibility at all required membership in the Communist Party. And nobody really wanted Jews in the Party. The whole Soviet people marched in step, like the soldiers on Red Square – from one triumph of Soviet labor to the next. No one could opt out, unless he was a Jew. As such, in theory at least, one might emigrate to Israel. If a Jew wanted to do just that, it was almost in order. But if a member of the Party applied for permission to emigrate, the other Communists in his branch lost face.

My father, for instance, was a candidate for Party membership four times, and every time he failed to get in. For ten years he was deputy manager of the planning department in a small business, dreaming of one day making it to manager. In that event he would have earned a whole 35 rubles more. But for the director, a manager of the planning department who wasn't a Party member was the stuff of nightmares. It wouldn't have worked in any case because the manager had to report on his work to the district committee of the Party assembly once a month. How on earth was he even to get in without a membership card?

Every year my father made a fresh attempt to join the Party. He drank vodka by the liter together with Party activists, he sweated to death with them in the sauna, but it was all in vain. Every year his schemes foundered on the same rock: 'We really like you, Viktor. You're our bosom pal for all time,' said the activists. 'We'd have liked to have you in the Party. But you know yourself that you're a Jew and might bugger off to Israel any moment' 'But I'll never do any such thing,' answered my father. 'Of course you won't, we all know that, but in theory it's possible, isn't it? Just think how stupid we'd all look.' And so my father never got past being a candidate for membership.

The new era dawned. Now the free ticket to the big wide world, the invitation to make a fresh start, was yours if you were Jewish. Jews who had formerly paid to have the word 'Jew' removed from their passports now started shelling out to have it put in. Suddenly every business wanted a Jewish world. Many people of various nationalities suddenly wanted to be Jews and emigrate to America, Canada or

Austria. East Germany joined the list a little later on, and was something of an insider tip.

I got the tip from the uncle of a friend who sold photocopiers he imported from West Berlin. On one occasion we visited him in his apartment, which was already completely empty because the entire family was shortly departing for Los Angeles. All that remained was a large, expensive TV set with integrated video recorder, which sat squarely on the floor in the middle of the room. The uncle was reclining on a mattress, watching porn movies.

‘Honecker is taking Jews in East Berlin. It’s too late for me to change course, I’ve already moved my millions to America,’ he told us. ‘But you’re still young, you don’t have anything, Germany’s just the job for you, it’s crawling with layabouts. They’ve got a stable welfare system. They won’t even notice a couple more lads.’

It was a spontaneous decision. In any case, it was far easier to emigrate to Germany than to America: the train ticket cost only 96 rubles, and for East Berlin you didn’t need a visa. My friend Mischa and I arrived in Lichtenberg station in the summer of 1990. In those days one was still given a most democratic reception. In view of our birth certificates, which bore in black and white the information that both of us had Jewish parents, we were issued special certifications by an office specially established for the purpose in Marienfelde, West Berlin. These stated that we were recognized by Germany as citizens of Jewish origin. With these papers we then proceeded to the East German police headquarters on Alexanderplatz, and there, being recognized Jews, we were given an East German identity card.

In Marienfelde and at the Berlin Mitte police headquarters we met like-minded Russians, the vanguard of the fifth wave of emigrants. The first wave was the White Guard during the Revolution and the Civil War; the second wave emigrated between 1941 and 1945; the third consisted of expatriated dissidents in the Sixties; and the fourth wave commenced with Jews who migrated via Vienna in the Seventies.

The Russian Jews of the fifth wave in the early Nineties were indistinguishable from the rest of the German population by their creed or by their appearance. They might be Christians or Muslims or even atheists; they might be blonde, red-heads or dark-haired; their noses might be snub or hooked. Their sole distinguishing feature was that, according to their passports, they were Jews. It was sufficient if a single member of the family was Jewish, or a half or quarter Jewish, and could prove as much in Marienfelde.

As with any game of chance, a good deal of cheating went on. Among the first hundred were people from every walk of life: a surgeon from the Ukraine with his wife and three daughters, an undertaker from Vilnius, an old professor who had done the calculations for the metal casings of the Russian sputniks and told anyone and everyone all about it, an opera singer with a funny voice, a former policeman, and a whole bunch of younger folk, ‘students’ such as ourselves.

A large aliens’ home was established for us in three prefab blocks in Marzahn that had once served East Germany’s security service, the Stasi, as some kind of leisure centre. There we could now enjoy our leisure till further notice. The first in line always get the best deal. Once Germany had definitively been reunified, the newly arrived Jews were evenly distributed around the federal states. From the Black Forest to the woods of Thuringia, from Rostock to Mannheim. Every state had its own rules governing their admission.

In our cozy home in Marzahn we heard the wildest stories. In Cologne, for instance, the rabbi at the synagogue was asked to assess just how Jewish these new Jews really were. Unless they got a signed testimonial from him, there was nothing doing. The rabbi asked one lady what Jews ate at Easter. ‘Gherkins,’ said the lady: ‘gherkins and Easter cake.’ ‘What makes you think they eat gherkins?’ demanded the rabbi, agitated. ‘Oh, right, now I know what you mean,’ returned the lady, beaming. ‘At Easter we Jews eat matzos.’ ‘Well, fair enough, the fact of the matter is that Jews eat matzos all year

round, and that means they eat them at Easter too. But tell me,' inquired the rabbi, 'do you actually know what matzos are?' 'Of course I do,' replied the lady, delighted, 'they're those biscuits baked to an ancient recipe, with the blood of little children.' The rabbi fainted clear away. There were men who circumcised themselves purely to avoid questions like these.

We, being the first arrivals in Berlin, didn't have to undergo any of this. Only one prick in our home came to grief, and that was Mischa's. Berlin's Jewish community discovered our settlement in Marzahn and invited us to dinner every Saturday. Their attentions were lavished on the younger emigrants in particular. Cut off from the outside world, and lacking a knowledge of the language, we led a fairly isolated life in those days. The local Jews were the only people who took any interest in us. Mischa, my new friend Ilya and I went every week. A large table was always set, with a couple of bottles of vodka waiting for us. There was not much to eat, but everything had been prepared for the occasion with loving care.

The principal of the community liked us. Every now and then he'd want to give us 100 marks, and insisted we visit him at home. I didn't accept the money, because I realized that what was involved was not friendship pure and simple, though I found him and the other members of the community likeable. But they were a religious community in quest of new members. Once you enter into a relationship of that kind, sooner or later you are expected to give something in return. So on Saturdays I stayed in the home, roasting chestnuts in the gas oven and playing cards with the pensioners. My two friends, however, kept on going to the community gatherings and delighting in the presents they were given. They became friends with the principal and lunched at his home on several occasions. One day he said to them: 'You have shown yourselves to be good Jews, so now you have only to be circumcised and everything will be perfect.' 'Forget it,' Ilya shot back, and was gone. Mischa, who was of a more thoughtful disposition, stayed. He was tormented by his conscience on account of the cash he had accepted and the friendship of the principal, so now it was he who atoned for all our sins in the Jewish hospital in Berlin. Later he told us it hadn't hurt at all and even claimed it heightened his sexual prowess.

For two weeks he was going about with a little tube peeping out of a surgical dressing. At the end of the third week, half the male residents in the home assembled in the washroom, hardly able to contain their curiosity. Mischa presented his prick to our view – as smooth as a sausage. With pride he expounded the nature of the operation: the foreskin was removed by laser, absolutely painless. But his prick left most of those present disappointed. They had expected something more, and their advice to Mischa was to let this Jewish business alone, advice he subsequently took. Some of the residents in the home were uneasy about the future and returned to Russia.

At that time, no one could understand why the Germans were choosing to accept us, of all people. In the case of the Vietnamese, say, whose home was also in Marzahn, not far from our own, it was perfectly understandable: they were the migrant workers of the East. But Russians? Perhaps police headquarters on Alexanderplatz had misunderstood something when they processed the first Jews, got it wrong, and ever since the worthy officers had been carrying on regardless, rather than admit their mistake? Much as they did when the Wall came down? But, like all dreams, this one was soon over. Just six months later, no more admissions were being made on the spot. Applications now had to be made in Moscow, and then you'd have a year or so to wait. Then quotas were introduced. At the same time, all Jews who had immigrated up to 31 December 1991 were granted refugee status and all the rights of citizenship except the right to vote.

These Jews and the Russian Germans constituted the fifth wave, though the Russian Germans are another story entirely. All the other groups taken together – Russian wives or husbands, Russian scientists, Russian prostitutes, students or scholarships – don't add up to a single per cent of my countrymen living here.

How many Russians are there in Germany? The editor-in-chief of Berlin's biggest Russian newspaper puts it at three million. And 140,000 in Berlin alone. But he is never quite sober, so I give no credence to what he says. After all, three years ago he was already putting the figure at three million. Or was it four? But it's true that the Russians are everywhere. The old editor is right, there are a lot of us, especially in Berlin. Every day I see Russians in the street, in the underground, in the bars, everywhere. One of the women who works on the tills at the supermarket where I do my shopping is Russian.

There's another at the hairdresser's. The salesgirl at the florist's is Russian too. Grossman the lawyer, though you would hardly believe it, originally came from the Soviet Union, just as I did ten years ago.

Yesterday in a tram two youths were having a loud conversation in Russian, thinking that no one could understand what they were saying. 'I'll never do it with a 200mm. There are always lots of people around him.' 'Then use a 500.' 'But I've never worked with a 500.' 'Fine, I'll call the boss tomorrow and ask for the instruction manual for a 500. But I don't know how he'll react. You'd better be trying with the 200. You can always try again.' Right.

NOTES

[1] Former SED leader Erich Honecker was no longer in power in the summer of 1990. Kaminer seems to use his name as a general reference to the GDR – eds.

Source: Wladimir Kaminer, *Russendisko* (orig. 2000). München: Goldmann, 2003, pp. 9–18.

Translation: *Russian Disco, Tales of Everyday Lunacy in the Streets of Berlin*, translated by Michael Huise. Ebury Press, UK, 2002.

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