

Preface

When he was a child, Zinovi heard his grandmother recite an old Yiddish proverb: “A taker is not a giver; a giver is not a taker” [in Russian, *bratel' ne davatel'*, *davatel' ne bratel'*]. The meaning of the proverb, Zinovi explains, is that there should always be a balance between giving and receiving: people should receive and give back and there is no way to live only by taking. Now in his late sixties and a Russian Jewish immigrant living in a town in eastern Germany, Zinovi does not remember much about his grandmother. But somehow, those particular words have stayed with him. He has carried them with him and tried to live according to this simple piece of folk wisdom.

I met Zinovi one sunny spring morning in a park, one of his favorite places to go. We strolled around and then sat on “his bench” by the riverbank. Zinovi and his wife came to Germany in the early 2000s from a big Russian city, where for decades Zinovi worked as an engineer. In the post-perestroika period of crisis, Zinovi, although already retired, had to work in the private sector to provide for himself and his wife, since their pensions were not enough to survive on. In the late 1990s, they decided to emigrate; they were aging, and life in Russia was becoming more difficult for them. Their son was already in Germany, having emigrated five years earlier. The son and his family live in a big city in the western part of Germany. His wife has a job, but the son himself is still unemployed, moving from one requalification course to another, like many other middle-aged immigrants.

Recalling his pre-migration preparations and thoughts, Zinovi can't say he had no moral qualms about immigrating to Germany. He was a child

during World War II. His family was evacuated and lived through the war away from the front, and did not personally experience persecution. Still, the question remained: how could he, a Jew, choose to live in Germany? But feeling that he was no longer able to survive in Russia, he, like many others, came to Germany in search of a secure livelihood and good climate. As he puts it, he “blocked” himself, going into denial, as many others did. He pushed aside his misgivings, saying to himself that his move was just another cycle in the Jewish exodus. “Jews are always on the move, they wander from place to place, from country to country. The exodus is an inevitable part of Jewish history. Now it is time to come here. As with all the previous moves, this is only a temporary stay, one of the moves in the cycle of movements,” Zinovi told himself.

He knows that many people, those of the older generation and those born after the war, could not overcome their reservations about moving to Germany, and so moved to Israel or stayed where they were. As for Zinovi, he was able to break the barrier by telling himself that he was returning to the place from which his German surname originates, to the place where his ancestors left their trace, where the roots of his grandmother’s language, Yiddish, lay.

From their first steps in the country—the moment of arrival at the railway station of the eastern German town where their immigrant hotel was situated—until this day, they have nothing to complain about regarding the attitude with which they have been met by the Germans. But when he thinks about the relations between them, the immigrants and their host country, a disturbing thought crawls into his mind: “We receive a lot here, but what do we give back?”

Looking at the immigrants around him, he regards their migration as “a very unsuccessful one”: the resurrection of Jewish life in Germany—the goal for which Germany undertook this whole immigration project—can hardly be said to have happened. More than two hundred thousand people came to the country; fewer than half of them are registered with the Jewish community. Many are not even Jews, according to Jewish religious law (*Halacha*), and therefore, according to the rules of the local Jewish communities, cannot be members. His son is one of these. There are many others who are recognized as Jews by Jewish religious law but who prefer nonetheless to distance themselves from the Jewish communities.

To Zinovi, the whole picture of their immigration looks rather sad: making the rounds of the shops, chasing after sales and discounts, visiting doctors—that is how he sees the life of most of his acquaintances of his own age and much younger. A difficult thought of being mostly a “taker” disturbs him “Germany supplied us with everything, but we are *nakhlebniki* [spongers] here. I am very concerned about this. The others just do not care.”

Not wanting to be just a taker, Zinovi started volunteering with the local Jewish community—helping to organize events and visiting elderly and sick congregation members. All that began one day when, bored and with nowhere else to go, he came to the town's Jewish community center. He came because his non-Jewish wife often reproached him about speaking so much about his grandmother while knowing so little about Jewish tradition. He came also because he wanted to ask people in the synagogue about the origins of the proverb his grandmother had told him.

On that first visit, Zinovi did not find the answer to his question. What did happen, however, was that when a community worker approached him and asked whether he would agree to join the minyan (the quorum of at least ten men necessary for Jewish prayer according to the Orthodox tradition), Zinovi, who was never a religious person, agreed to participate. Why? Of about three hundred male members of the congregation, it was difficult to find the ten necessary for the service to take place. Seeing this situation, Zinovi agreed to help. He also felt “that it is not nice to come, to ask for some help and then just go away and disappear.” Besides, he hoped that with time, he would discover in religious texts the source of his grandmother's wise words.

As would later become apparent to me, Zinovi was not alone in his anxiety and contemplation about the precarious “taker” position in which he found himself. The motif of “taking and giving” would emerge in other immigrants' stories as well. Touching upon questions of entitlement and reciprocity, social engagement and participation, the “takers and givers” trope colors the immigrants' questioning of their moral economy and civic culture—on both the individual and collective levels and in relation to both the present and the past.