

Research Article

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“I’m Home”: “Russian” Houses in Germany and Their Objects

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Abstract: In this article, I will focus on the study of the living space in houses of Russian-speaking emigrants in 1990s–2000s in Germany. I will discuss the “home” in several aspects: in a wide sense as a place on Earth where people’s life goes on, as physically built environment where a family dwells, and as objectified everyday life in the interiors. The choice of objects and furnishings for a “Russian” house in Germany cannot be classified, but it is unique and is associated with the biographies of the owners, the history of each individual family, as well as the history of moving to Germany. The “Russian” house in Germany turns out to be a complex phenomenon: it can be seen as a safe space, escape from the outside world, and offering emotional comfort. It is a place for representation of family and personal values, the owners’ identity, and preferences. It is also a scene where scenarios of relationships between a person and objects unfold. The objects that a person places in his/her house appear as objectified memories of life events and other people, reflecting the importance of family and interpersonal relationships expressed in gifts, photos, children’s drawings, and crafts. In a new place, people are no longer limited to a set of typical furnishing patterns that were dictated by a shortage of goods and ideas in the country of origin. House owners show their personality, trying to make their home different from that in the place of origin and introduce a non-standard style of European interiors in their homes, yet unwittingly they often reproduce stereotypes and fragments from their previous houses where they lived before migrating.

Keywords: Germany, Russian Germans, interior elements, house construction, souvenirs from the past, integration into the welcoming society, specificity of the repatriate design, old and new homes

Introduction

Human space [*der erlebte/gelebte Raum* in German], the term introduced by Bollnow, denotes space in which people live their everyday life, move, and act. Significant qualities of space shape and are shaped by humans, and reflections about it give us a glimpse of identities and relationships between people and materiality, unveiling their essence, their “philosophical anthropology.” Bollnow points out that what makes the space where humans live special is that it enables even eternal refugees to find a place where they belong. Bollnow’s fundamental classical work finds a perfect confirmation in the present life of Russian speakers in Germany.

There are different sources of the Russian language presence in Germany. German Russophones include Russian Germans who are migrants from Kazakhstan, Ukraine and several regions of Russia, Jewish migrants, and Russian professional and business migrants. The historical background of the Russian Germans, their migration to Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and their life through the upheavals of the twentieth century are marked by dramas and losses, deportations and exile. Their return to Germany at the turn of the millennium was not always smooth either, as they had to overcome the difficulties of linguistic and

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cultural integration. Plurality of their cultural belonging and their reflections between the past and the future created challenges for the self-identity construction (Kiel; Kotzian; Kurilo; Denisova-Schmidt). The joys and traumas of their pre-emigration life still influence the attitudes of the older generations towards their regained German environment. They remember their past with sadness and nostalgia and aim to attain the comfort level that once was an unreachable dream (*Zuhause fremd: Russlanddeutsche zwischen Russland und Deutschland; Mein Herz blieb in Russland: Russlanddeutsche erzählen aus ihrem Leben*). The standards of living in Germany are much higher than in the former Soviet Union, especially in poor Kazakhstani villages where a lot of *Aussiedler* (migrants) come from. However, many of these migrants arrived after a decade or more of post-Soviet experience in the respective states.

Russophones form a large percentage of the foreign-born inhabitants of Germany, and besides ethnic Germans there are Jewish refugees (*Kontingentflüchtlinge*) and members of other ethnicities who used to live in the former Soviet Union and their descendants; many families are mixed (Lokshin and Lübke). So, speaking about material culture of the “Russian” homes in Germany, I refer to all Russophones, i.e., to people from the former Soviet Union who share a common cultural and everyday background, even though most of the interlocutors in my project were specifically Russian Germans. The concept of “synchronization of Soviet spaces” introduced by Lithuanian urbanist Nerijus Milerius (Milerius 53–54) allows me to unite different ethnic groups of migrants from the USSR into a single one: through regulation of everyday practices, rhythms, and materialities the process of Soviet urbanization led to unification of territories with different cultural traditions. Wherever they lived in the former Soviet Union before migration, the multifaceted Soviet legacy still remains strong and affects their everyday practices and material culture.

Big extended families, connected by strong ties, are typical of Russian Germans. They get together for festivities and funerals and maintain traditions that were part of their ancestors’ life, yet these practices keep transforming under the influence of their new environment. New circumstances, the growing distance from their previous life, and changes in the behavioural patterns of the younger generations who have socialized in Germany lead to the growing hybridization of the community (Isurin and Riehl), while some scholars question the existence of a unique Russian–German culture (Retterath). As time goes on, it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern what is inherited and what is borrowed, and what historical or family events shaped migrants’ allegiances, tastes, and habits.

Researchers often try to find out the origins of concepts *zu Hause/daheim* [at home] when investigating what it means to belong to a culture or to blend two or more cultures, creating a markedly new hybrid. It is at home that immigrants can fall back on their old habits when the newness of their life situation is too stressful. At the same time, it is in the privacy of their home that they can experiment with new ways, testing which practices of the host society fit their tastes and principles. The understanding of these practices is hardly possible without talking to people, observing their habits, studying their biographies, exploring their communication on- and offline, and analysing their discourses (Simon and Grabow; Menzel and Engel; Witzlack-Makarevich and Wulff). Russian Germans expect to be accepted by members of the host society as Germans (cf. Werner) but are often perceived as Russians.

Whether people converse in a private residence or in an office, in a restaurant or in a park, the conversation is “framed” by the place where it occurs, providing a non-verbal expression of the interlocutors’ beliefs, moods, and attitudes (cf. Cieraad; Armbruster; Hahn). In this article, I will discuss “home” from several perspectives: in a wide sense as a place on Earth where people’s life goes on; as physically built environment where a family dwells; and as objectified everyday life in the interiors (Ivanova-Buchatskaya; Buchatskaya).

Method of Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in 2008–2021, ethnographic observation, and documentation. I used the ethnographic method of research whose main objective is understanding the social meanings and activities of people in the studied settings. The ethnographic method enables social researchers to study communities and society from the point of view of their members. Ethnographers

become deeply acquainted with the experiences and views of their project participants, which helps them not to form and rely on preconceived framework in data gathering and analysis. It is through the interaction with the participants that the ethnographer creates an analytical framework for understanding the subject matter of his/her study. Thanks to the direct contact and intimate acquaintance with the empirical world, ethnographic method provides assurance that the data collected are grounded in the participants’ actual experience (Gold 399). It involves the researcher’s/observer’s close association with and participation in the setting. Ethnography gives us knowledge of the social world acquired from intimate familiarity with day-to-day meanings of the individuals and groups under study (Brewer 11). The ethnographic method is akin to bricolage because it utilizes multiple research strategies from case study to phenomenology, grounded theory, biographical, historical, and participatory inquiry (Denzin and Giardina 12). I combined the traditional ethnographic approach with the documentary approach by taking pictures in the interviewees’ homes and audio-recording my interviews (see Gobo 29). My photographs, as well as prosodic patterns, instances of laughter, and changes of the speech rhythm and pauses captured by the interview recordings helped me in the interpretative process. These were indicators of emotions: amusement and joy, irritation or embarrassment, sadness or anger. Sometimes pauses indicated that the interviewee was careful in formulating his/her ideas; on other occasions, these were signs of withdrawal from conversation into the inner world. Another important issue related to the method of the study is that the participants of the project spoke the same language as me and had the cultural background similar to mine. From this point of view, I had an insider status in our interactions. At the same time, I was analysing shifts in attitudes, habits, and speech of the interviewees stemming from their migration process and integration into the host society. First of all, these were instances of code-mixing, in particular when interviewees compared their pre- and post-migration life and reflected about changes in their everyday practices. Since I came to Germany as a guest researcher, but not as a migrant, my German experiences were quite different, which at least partially turned me into an outsider and made my approach to the material bi-focal; moreover, as I was getting more involved in the project, and as a result, with the participants, my focus was changing. The similarity and difference of our experience were a valuable resource for comparative comprehension. I agree with Okely who questions the appropriateness of the verb “conduct” when ethnographic fieldwork is discussed, because it implies that it is managed and pre-directed. The more satisfactory verb is to “experience” (Okely 5).

The first participants were found in the course of formal encounters, as well as a result of informal conversations (e.g., during a city event in which members of different immigrant communities presented their culture). The rest of the interviewees were found in a snowball fashion. The background of my interlocutors ranged from white-collar workers (teachers, doctors, and engineers in their Soviet past) to blue-collar workers (qualified workers and unskilled laborers). My interviews took place referred to in the participants’ homes which gave me access to the interviewees’ private spaces. The participants were informed about the goals of my project and were open to and even flattered by my interest in the specifics of their homes’ designs and stories behind the artefacts that were brought from “the old country.” All the participants are referred to under assumed names to keep them anonymous.

Since I was mostly interested to find out how immigrants’ identities of their everyday practices are reflected in their homes in Germany, I formulated my research questions as follows:

- What distinguishes the interiors of the houses and apartments of Russian-speaking immigrants to Germany?
- How is the choice of the decorative objects found in living rooms of “Russian” houses in Germany related to the biographies of their owners?
- What motivates people in a new dwelling to surround themselves with things from their former lives and homes?

Home(Land): Ethno-Cultural Identity, Integration, and the New Home

For migrants of today, the house as a physical space no longer serves as an anchor in a new territory. The home is nomadic and moves with the people making it in the host community while maintaining the migrants’

connection with the sending community (Brednikova and Tkach). The relocation of Russian-speaking migrants to the Federal Republic of Germany was mostly a unidirectional process and happened in one move. In their country of origin, many Russian Germans had their own houses, or lived in state-owned apartment houses which were de-facto their own,¹ and emigration to Germany was seen as moving to a new permanent place of residence. For my respondents, as well as for many Russian Germans, a solid private house has become an iconic object, which symbolizes property ownership (house) and functions as the focus of its owners' inner life (home) (Boll 158).

According to my interviewees, many Russian-speaking immigrants were eager to build or buy apartments or houses.

1. Michael: We have a lot of *Russlanddeutsche* [Russian Germans] here. And they are quite well off: they drive only Mercedes cars, and you know, they immediately build houses.

2. Natal'ia: Our relatives, everyone who is here, those who came in the 90s, all of them already live in their own houses. All my father's relatives are in Germany.

Homebuilding of the migrants often inspires interest of the local population. Thus, in 2008 there was an exhibit devoted to the culture and history of Russian Germans called "Das Russlanddeutsche Haus" [The Russian-German house] in the city of Bamberg. The curators sought to show that for an ethnic group whose fate was exile and wandering, "building a house" means "choosing a place to live where you can anticipate and build your future and fulfil the obligation to belong to an alien place," and "build a roof over your head and a shelter for your dreams." Despite this powerful yearning for a house of their own, only two families among my interlocutors could afford buying one, while others had to rent apartments.

The history of relocation to Germany determines ways of interaction with the homeland left behind and raises question about the relationship between the concepts of *homeland* (*Heimat*) and *home*. The attitude to the homeland as a place of origin, as well as the choice of one's identity, is usually determined by how successful the migrant's career is.

3. Elena: It's a very difficult question. I really don't know how to answer. Let's put it this way: I don't want to renounce Russia. I wasn't raised like that. It is still my homeland, home. Or, perhaps, it's easier to put it this way: when I hear or think that Germans speak of Russia in a disrespectful manner, it makes my blood boil. But in the same way I fume when I hear Russians speak offensively about Germans. During the European Championship, I feared that the Russians and the Germans would reach the finals. ...Therefore, it is very difficult to say how I feel. Let's just say, all this is at the level of feelings, but they are difficult to verbalise.

Elena is well-integrated into German society. She has a permanent job, similar to the one she left in the country of origin, and her command of the German language is pretty good. Elena was brought up on classical German culture and learned "national values" from her German father. She had obtained a German passport with a German family name before migration, although now she bears the Russian surname of her husband. Elena was not clear when defining the concept of "home" referring alternatively to her parents' home in Russia and to the present one in Germany.

Irina grew up in a German family in Kazakhstan, her parents and ancestors perceived themselves to be German. The family still communicates in the dialect of the Volga Germans. Irina failed to reintegrate professionally, because being a teacher she would need to be retrained and have high proficiency in standard German. A low degree of socio-economic integration, a lack of professional success, and a crisis of professional identity in the host society directly affect her cultural and linguistic self-identification. Like her other co-ethnics, she tends to insert German words denoting realities of everyday life in the host country.

¹ Once a person's residence registration was settled, a room or an apartment de-facto belonged to him/her. After the Soviet Union fell apart, Russian citizens received an opportunity to privatize their housing, which enabled selling and buying formerly state-owned housing.

4. Irina: I’m a nobody. It turns out that there [in the USSR], it was one way, and here, it’s different. I was used to speaking German to everybody in Kazakhstan. My grandma did not speak Russian. We felt German. ...I worked all the time, I worked as a teacher, I taught courses. Here, when we arrived, I went to *Arbeitsamt* [‘employment office’], and that’s all, but when people talk to you – and I have my husband’s surname – they immediately look at your surname and immediately think we are Russians. And they treat you with a certain disdain, especially *Arbeitsamt*... I have higher education. Nobody needs me here with my knowledge of the language. This is very disappointing. When you come to consult *Arbeitsberater* [‘employment advisor’], she says, ‘Go *putzen*’ [‘clean, wash’].

The relation between the ethnocultural self-identification and the attitude of the host society toward the individual was noted by Savoskul. Feeling indifference and at times hostility of the members of the receiving society may alienate newcomers and may adversely affect their motivation to integrate. Moreover, it strengthens affinity with the Russophone community perceived as a home in which one feels comfortable and increases the value of one’s home as a zone of emotional comfort and security.

5. Irina: Germany, well, yes, now I think that this is my home, this is all, especially it is home when in your apartment you feel like... but when you leave the apartment – and... But there [in Kazakhstan], there was no such thing. But you live there, and as they say: dry bread at home is better than roasted meat abroad.

A new house becomes one’s own space where daily routine practices take place and when it is peopled and associated with emotional relationships and family remembrances (Allerton). Migrants sometimes feel that they live in two worlds at the same time: in their home they feel protected by familiar objects and routines. The world outside their home poses numerous challenges: the language which is not yet mastered to understand nuances, different behavioural rules, and communication patterns. Ownership of a house or an apartment is a significant sign of successful integration, in particular for members of the older generations who have not forgotten housing shortages of the Soviet Union. In Germany, as elsewhere, the process of creating a suitable home takes time, effort, and considerable financial resources before it becomes a comfortable living space.

“Russian” House in Germany: Rooms and Objects

Mia and **Alik** moved to Germany from Odessa as Jewish refugees. Their three-room apartment was located on the fourth floor and had bright, white, or pastel wallpaper in all rooms. It was very clean, and the floor was covered with light-coloured laminate. Mia showed me to the living room, half of which also served as a study and had a balcony. A low metal rack with books separated the room into two functional parts. There was not much furniture in the whole apartment since the owners do not like crammed rooms and avoid accumulating unnecessary objects. The part of the living room used for leisure had a leather corner sofa, two low wooden tables, red and yellow, low painted wooden shelves with a TV set on them and some decorations, similar to what one finds in many German houses (Figure 1).

There were two computers on desks designed for digital devices, some other appliances, another desk for writing, disks, books, and a noticeboard with notes and memos. As always, visiting other people’s homes I looked at books. Bookshelves can give you an idea about their owners’ tastes and the scope of interests. The books that I saw in this family were mostly in Russian; some were trendy or cheap reading, others represented interests and occupation of the family members: design, lighting, massage, theatre, woodcarving. There were also albums devoted to the art of different European countries. Books in German were of three types: textbooks used for improving proficiency in German, dictionaries, and publications necessary for work and literature dealing with the owners’ hobbies. Other books in Russian were classics that no “decent Russian family” can do without: Alexander Pushkin, Boris Pasternak, and Jack London among them. This repertoire was quite typical of a selection found in the houses of Russian/Soviet intelligentsia; I remember, there were similar books in my parents’ house in Leningrad. As Mia said, they brought four suitcases of books from Odessa, which made most of their luggage, and the rest they gave away to a library in Odessa and to friends. This may indicate the value of books to Mia’s family and a sign of commitment to literacy for Soviet intelligentsia. On the other hand, it may have simply reflected the choice available in the bookshops of their home



Figure 1: The living room of M.&A.A.

country when they lived there. Books were hard to buy (“get hold of” as the Soviets used to say). There were queues to buy collected works and there was also a period, when one could get coupons for buying specific books after bringing 20 kg of waste paper for recycling. Even after that one had to spend hours queuing, but buying books was perceived as a worthwhile purchase even if one would never read them.

Mia and Alik have university degrees. Upon arrival they were ready to earn money by doing any kind of work, yet quite naturally they preferred occupations in which they could use their professional skills and creative abilities. Formally, at the time of the interview they were welfare recipients, yet Alik did odd jobs for a garage, and Mia was good at finding temporary jobs participating in art projects in which she could apply her skills. She had taken interior design courses in Odessa and was good at drawing. One of the walls in the living room was decorated with her pictures of a fish and a red snake. In the corridor there were four framed photographs (30x40), all close-ups taken by Alik, who had been doing amateur photography before migration and joined a photography club in Germany. During our conversation, we were sitting on the sofa, and in front of us, there was a table covered with a linen tea-towel with floral motifs and an inscription in Russian: “Tuesday.” In the traditional Russian fashion, the table was set for tea, not coffee.

Another episode of my fieldwork was a visit to the home of Russian Germans, **Ivan** and **Lisa**. They also came from Ukraine. A schoolteacher by profession in her hometown of Mariupol, in Germany Lisa found a job as a kindergarten teacher while her husband was on welfare. At the time of my visit, the family lived in a small three-room apartment. There were many Russophones in that apartment house and Lisa and Ivan referred to them as “*Rusaki*” or *nashi liudi* “our people.” These words clearly show that even after years of living in the host society Russian-speaking immigrants still view members of the majority as a distinctive *other* (Meng and

Protassova). This mental division is visible in other countries as well and implies commonality of experiences and practices (Yurchak; Kaurinkoski).

I was invited for tea in the kitchen, which is a sign of closeness and intimacy in the Soviet/Russian tradition. My hosts mentioned that they rarely drank coffee. As a sign of hospitality, Lisa baked “Napoleon,” a cake made of several layers of pastry with custard filling usually made for special occasions. With cupboards lining one of the walls, a refrigerator placed near the door, a soft corner sofa by the window, and a round table in front of it, the kitchen was rather cramped, but clearly, was a place much loved by the family. The table was covered with a bright red-orange wax cloth, adding cheerfulness to the kitchen.

Ivan talked emotionally about the history of his family and their life in Ukraine and in Germany. After tea, I was invited to the living room to continue the conversation and to observe how my hosts arranged the room where they could rest and receive guests. There was nothing unusual in it for me, but it would be for someone used to the German interior design. There was a wall unit in the room, a blue soft corner sofa with a cat curling up on a blanket, a plasma TV panel on a stand in the corner, an office chair, and a computer desk with a laptop in another corner by the window. On the floor, there was a carpet with a red and beige pattern, “made in GDR,” as Lisa remarked grinning. She drew my attention to the Czech crystal chandelier with many pendants, in the style much loved in the late Soviet period, and proudly said that all their guests were stunned by it. Both the chandelier and the carpet were Lisa’s dowry brought from Ukraine. Objects brought from old homes and produced in the countries of COMICON are valued by their owners for their beauty, elegance, or cosiness which they create. They bring back memories of buying things which were in short supply, so getting them was akin to successful hunting. These narratives are still popular among ex-Soviets and can be classified like trickster stories (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya).

I was curious to see what the wall unit was filled with. All books were in Russian: educational books and art albums, as well as fiction ranging from classics to pulp literature. In the glass cabinet, there were wine glasses and *matryoshkas*, painted wooden eggs on stands, and several framed photographs, one picturing their daughter in a Ukrainian headdress with ribbons. Newspapers and various household objects were scattered all around (Figure 2).

Ukrainian applied art has its own type of wooden *matryoshka* dolls and such dolls were in Lisa’s sideboard. Always speaking only Russian, she expressed her Ukrainian identity just once in our conversation, and at the time of my research (2009) the cultural differentiation between Russian and Ukrainian did not matter to her. I presume that *matryoshkas* reflect the relationship of the owners to the stereotype culture of the homeland they left. When migrants settled down and started inviting family and friends for visits, the latter would often bring their hosts traditional souvenirs. While some immigrants still keep them as decorative items, others use them in their original function as soup spoons, trays, tea pots, etc. There are also those who have changed the style of their homes and stopped displaying Russian souvenirs, just keeping them in closed cupboards, and yet they don’t throw them out. The motives differ: sometimes they are associated with the people who gave them, sometimes getting rid of them is viewed as rejection of one’s roots (see reflections about complex attitudes to iconic objects of ethnic crafts in Boym; Pechurina).

Although Lisa has a good job and has adapted well to life in Germany, she still considers herself to be an alien. Her husband Ivan moved to Germany with his grandmother, who was and considered herself a real German, spoke a dialect, lived in colony Wilhelmsdorf in Ukraine, and in 1941 was deported to the town of Novokuznetsk in Siberia to work at a factory. In conversation, he constantly asserts his Russianness and his alienation from German culture, customs, and language.

6. Ivan: I was brought up as a Russian – well, they have spoken Russian since I was born in Ukraine, but when they asked me, I said I was Russian. Speaking about what I feel, well, I was brought up on Russian literature, on films, etc. I did not feel ‘homesick’ at all. I moved to Germany because life got bad. Although, when you come here, they ask you: ‘Why did you come to Germany?’ And our people say: ‘We couldn’t be there anymore.’ No, no, no. You shouldn’t say that. You have to say that you felt you were German, as if this umbilical cord, so to speak, with the homeland of the ancestors hadn’t been cut and this place was calling you. Well, this sounds like bullshit, right? I cannot express my thoughts in German as well as I can in Russian.

Matryoshkas and painted wooden eggs in the glass sideboard of Lisa and Ivan’s living room are gifts from friends and souvenirs brought from Ukraine, and at the same time they mark ethnic and cultural identity,



Figure 2: The wall unit and some memory objects in the living room of L. & I. D.

telling visitors about the ties or relations of the owners with the Slavic world. I recall the same symbolic act by the friends of my own family: when my husband, my children, and I were leaving for Germany for a year and a half to work on a project financed by a grant, they gave us a matryoshka, saying “so that you don’t forget your roots.”

In my perception, the interiors I have described look completely different. Alik and Mia have chosen a style usual for European houses, displaying their own artwork and photographs to decorate the space. This served to express and emphasize their freedom and creativity. In the apartment belonging to Ivan and Lisa, my attention was drawn to the typical setting and design of Soviet apartments: the furniture forms a perimeter. The typical arrangement of space in Soviet living rooms uses the same pieces of furniture and objects – a wall unit, a large sofa, and a TV set. I saw these objects in most of the apartments I have visited, and they are placed in such a way as to leave the centre of the room free for a carpet. As an element of prestige, the wall unit is visually dominant. The living room environment in the second family house discussed reproduces a well-known “subsystem” of Soviet apartments with the “TV – couch axis,” organized in such a way that the space for watching TV as the most important form of Soviet leisure time is made free (see Utekhin 19, Boym, *Mythologies of Everyday Life...*), and the wall unit in which expensive porcelain, crystal glasses and vases, and everything valuable in the house are demonstrated gets a central position. Glazed modules of wall units in the apartments of Russian-speaking migrants in Germany obviously play the same role as sideboards in Soviet communal apartments.

The living rooms are usually arranged so as to serve the family time together and to receive guests, and so they are often designed with the intention of representing one’s status (Mitscherlich 133, 138, Tränkle). Bourdieu views every material thing as a social construct, a result of “objectification” and a product of social relations (Bourdieu). Thus, the interior design and decoration of the living room should be seen as the owners’ demonstration of their level of well-being, conformity with fashion, and adherence to a certain style and individual preferences. Therefore, it is an objectification of identity, a projection of the self (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 123). According to my observations, rooms with a representation function (living rooms, hallways, sometimes kitchens) have most objects of particular importance and value for the owners. They are placed where they are best seen and, in this way, they are optimally demonstrated to the visitors.

The owners of the described living rooms declared different types of ethnocultural identity. The Russian Germans stick to the norms and values learned in the country of origin. In the main room of the house, they

display objects that indicate their level of well-being, and which are considered “prestigious” in their society of origin, be it a fancy aquarium, an expensive TV set, or a luxurious crystal chandelier. It is notable that even a wall unit can be an element of prestige and even a subject of envy and competition.

7. Ivan: What do “ours” do? They save, save, save money, and then, all of a sudden, they buy a cool wall unit. Because their neighbour has one.

At the same time, the owners explain their choice by following the fashion as they understand it.

8. Tatiana: I furnish my apartment according to the fashion, I furnish it fashionably. I like it this way. It was different at home. There was multi-coloured wallpaper, polished tables, and beds with polished headboards. And here I buy everything modern, fashionable.

Clearly, Tatiana is eager to follow the European fashion and the room arrangement and decorations typical of the late Soviet period are no more than an anachronism for her. Nevertheless, Tatiana’s living room furnishings are the same: a wall unit, a sofa, a TV set, and a carpet in the middle of the floor.

A carpet, a sofa, a wall unit, and a large TV set are in the same “Soviet-like” spatial configuration in the living room of the elderly couple **Alevtina** and **Eduard** who are quite affluent. They migrated in 1989, they live in their own home and identify themselves as “true Germans” as opposed to the immigrants of the late 1990s and 2000s. Neufeld (38) noted that Russian Germans like carpets as an element of the living space design, pointing out a change in localization as a pattern of its development: the wall carpets in German houses in Russia and Kazakhstan are replaced by floor carpets in their apartments in Germany.

Since the construction of home is a representational act, then migrants from the USSR configure differently the reference frames of such construction. My materials show that they depend on the social environment of the owner and the values shared in this environment. It finally brings us back to the aforementioned thesis about the degree of successful integration into the host society. If social network, and as a result, communication is largely conducted within the circle of relatives and friends from the old country, the framework of references for homemaking prevails: you have to be similar to your neighbour (cf., “[...] they buy a cool wall unit. Because their neighbour has one”).

There are reverberations between different houses that a person inhabits in the course of life: an old house somehow forms a new one, type and configuration of furniture, utilitarian and decorative objects from an old house are unconsciously borrowed and transferred into each new house. Different living places co-penetrate and keep the treasures of earlier days, and the new residences bring back recollections of former habitation, although the first one remains the most important (Bachelard; Joyce 84; Carsten 107; 114).

Living Rooms and Visible Objects of Russian House

The space of a “Russian” house is marked with specific attributes. They are wall decorations and various decorative items placed in cabinets or on shelves. Among the most common wall decorations are framed photographs: portraits of children, grandchildren, wedding photos, or pictures of grandparents. In the apartment of **Inessa**, photographs of family members and relatives hang on the wall in the living room above the sofa fixed to a panel made of wooden planks. Photo-portraits of her son hang on the walls in the living room of **Irina**; a huge, framed photograph of her sons are in the living room of **Tatjana**; large colour photographs of the family of their youngest son Georg – weddings, granddaughters, the young couple – can be seen on the walls of the dining room in **Alevtina** and **Eduard’s** house.

Photographs and portraits turn out to be the most common wall objects in the interior of the living rooms of Russian Germans (Neufeld; Buchatskaya) and have a special significance. They can be interpreted in different ways. Exploring professions and jobs, Shchepanskaya (24) comes to the conclusion that portraits and photos serve as personifications of space. Photos of living family members are usually snapshots of some

festive events, trips, and moments of achievement, such as receiving university degrees. They serve as confirmation of what the family members have achieved in their new home country.

When portraits of absent or deceased colleagues or teachers are placed in the professional space, they are symbolically introduced into the circle of living co-workers. The same can be projected onto family photos in the living space. They symbolically bring together absent family members – the late parents, children who grew up and moved out, and grandchildren who live separately. The photos denote the connection between living people and their deceased ancestors, forming a line of succession of generations; i.e., being an aspect of the culture of remembrance, they are instrumental in building identities. In this context, portraits of the older generation or deceased ancestors in the houses of Russian Germans serve as anchors and emphasize continuity of the family links. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (69) argue that photos above other things at home contribute to preservation of personal memories about the relatives who passed away. It is important that they provide an identity and a context of belongingness when this is needed by the next generations.

In the house of a Russian–Polish family with two children living in Berlin, the interior does not resemble what we have discussed so far. The furniture, wall decorations, and decorative objects are chosen by the Polish spouse according to her taste and financial circumstances, while the Russian spouse does not participate in the decoration, nor are his preferences taken into account. However, the photographs displayed on an old chest of drawers in their bedroom portray their children, the parents of both spouses, those who live in Poland and Russia, as well as their own photos as children. This photo gallery is the visual centre of the bedroom (Figure 3).

Their living room is furnished with antique German pieces of the early twentieth century which the spouses “inherited”: they rented a place in an old house in Berlin Wannsee from 1999 to 2009, sharing the house with an elderly and fragile owner and providing daily and hygienic care for her. After the death of “grandma Erna,” the family had to leave the house, but her heirs allowed them to take all the furniture. **Anna** is very attached to this furniture: it is heavy and solid, made of dark wood and has a “typically burgher style.” This style is dominant in her apartment and, therefore, a bright painted samovar in the Russian style and five matryoshkas next to the family photos look like a visual oxymoron. Asked about the samovar, the owner of the house replied the following:

9. Konstantin: This is one of Anna’s decorative fantasies. No one remembers where we got the *matryoshkas* from. Probably someone gave them to us. I would never buy such things. As for the samovar, a few years ago our aunt Olga moved to a new apartment, and I helped her. She threw out a lot of unnecessary things. First, she wanted to get rid of this samovar, but then she gave it to me. It’s beautiful.

Anna does not only have her own vision of what a cosy and beautiful home should look like, but also her own specific attitude to Russian culture and symbols of Russia. Working in a clinic in Berlin and communicating with different clients, she criticizes “typically German” qualities, rules, and customs and actively opposes them in her own and her family’s lifestyle. While the main marker of “Polishness” for her is her native language, she emphasizes the “Russianness” of the family through various non-verbal statements. During the years of escalation of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, she wore a red–blue–white bracelet on her wrist and made it visible specifically for patients from Ukraine. She also showed off her knowledge of the Russian language in conversations.

Matryoshkas, pysanka eggs (traditional decorated Ukrainian Easter eggs), samovars, and similar objects belong to the established ethnic stereotypes and are explicitly correlated with Russians. As a token of gratitude, I often gave my German interviewees matryoshkas, a “typically Russian” souvenir. In my own house in Russia, I do not have any examples of ethnic crafts. But in “Russian” houses in Germany, I saw such objects that have turned into clichés exhibited in the living room. Why are there such stereotypical signs of Russian and Slavic cultures in the houses of people who moved to Germany as Germans? Furthermore, these objects are so numerous that it is safe to assert that they are the first choice for demonstration. As mentioned earlier, many of them are gifts from relatives and friends left behind (see the role of matryoshkas and other objects of ethnic crafts in immigrants’ homes in Yelenevskaya and Protassova).



Figure 3: Objects on representative places of living rooms: Berlin (top left), Vastorf bei Lüneburg (top right and bottom).

Matryoshkas and other pieces of Russian folk crafts can also be found in the house of early German immigrants from Kazakhstan, the family **S.** in Vastorf: a whole compartment of the wall unit in the living room on the first floor is allocated to *matryoshkas* and *Khokhloma* items. In the kitchen, along with various vases, jugs, and souvenir plates, there is a samovar sitting on top of a cabinet. In the hall on the second floor, there are modest and peculiar decorations: a spinning wheel with a skein of wool, two framed portraits on a small table, and a lace napkin. There is a small shelf stand next to the stairs with an old-fashioned telephone, a figurine of a Ukrainian woman, and many books in Russian, all Soviet and Russian classics. In the bedroom, on a chest of drawers next to a night light, there is a black and white photograph of birches in the spring snow. These items are connected to the owners’ trips to Russia to visit their family. **Alevtina S.** bought a landscape with a birch tree during a visit to her sister in Barnaul.

According to Neufeld (42), many decorative items in immigrants’ homes in Germany have changed their function from decoration to remembrance. **Alevtina** and her husband have lived in Germany for over 25 years, and they emphatically distance themselves from Russians and immigrants who migrated later, stating that they adhere to the German culture and language. Their narratives about some of the objects of traditional Russian crafts displayed in the house suggest that *matryoshkas* and *khokhloma* do not serve to express Russian identity, but they belong to biographical objects (Hoskins) that are valuable due to certain memories and events such as trips or gifts from relatives and friends. This supports the idea that the choice of things that surround people in their daily life is associated not only with their identity but also make up for their certain psychological needs: non-functional things are signs of relationships, connections with other people, or their personal history (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 58; 164).

Visible and Invisible Things: The Relationship with the Host

In all “Russian” houses there are things that owners brought from their homeland. This is rather remarkable in the case of later immigrants, Russian Germans from Kazakhstan and Russia, since they often mentioned that they were allowed to take just a limited number of things and left “with just one suitcase.” Nevertheless, among valuable things there were those that do not qualify as valuables – they have a zero cost or usefulness but have an emotional value and carry a special meaning for their owners.

Some interviewees spoke about the dilemma of what to take with them and how to bypass customs regulations related to valuables and big sums of money. Thus, **Helga’s** family emigrated from Almaty, Kazakhstan, to Germany in 1994, and this move was dramatic for the family of five. They sold almost everything they had in Almaty and converted the money into hard currency; still, they brought an old and heavy Singer sewing machine because their grandmother insisted they would need it in Germany. Some immigrants brought sewing or knitting machines intending to use them to earn money; others sent pianos and other music instruments in the hope to sell them and use the money in the difficult process of resettling.

In a Russian-speaking house in Munich owned by **Maria P.** who came to Germany with her Russian husband when he got a job there, many decorative details are used in the interior arrangement: vases made of clay, glass, porcelain and crystal, figurines of animals and children, shells, etc.

10. Maria: I brought something from Russia, bought something, but mostly these are gifts. I especially love three of them: a clay vase I brought from home, I remember buying it for the New Year, and that year was full of good events. Then there is this elephant with a crystal ball in its trunk, I do not know its story, so my husband and I tried to imagine who it belonged to before and how we got it. And a figurine of a girl with geese... I always wanted a daughter, and during my pregnancy my husband gave me this tiny figurine, but the geese apparently are not the same as storks: they brought only boys.

My interviewee **Larissa** reflected on the question about the differences between her present home in Germany and the interior design typical of her country of origin. It is important for her to emphasize her Germanness in relation to her social circle – Russian Germans.

11. Larissa: In my house there is nothing of what one could usually find in Kazakh *yurts*, but the fact is that I have never lived in Kazakh *yurts* [a portable tent covered with animal skins and used as a home by some nomads of Central Asia.] My mother is a Russian German, and therefore the German culture was dominant in our everyday life. In the hall there is a favourite picture of my beloved husband, more precisely, it is a printed poster of “Hamburger Bahnhof” from Berlin, and there is also a leaflet brought by my husband from Scotland in 1970.

Larissa distances herself from her Kazakh environment in a rather peculiar way. Non-Kazakh residents of Kazakhstan did not live in *yurts*, neither did Kazakhs who largely became urbanized in the Soviet period. Presenting herself as someone who chooses the style and content of her home according to fashion trends and the “second life” principle, she combines minimalist modern furniture from IKEA with antique or markedly rustic objects, often emphasizing the atypical nature of her “Russian” house and indifference to decorative objects (“shoved in the corners to collect dust”).

However, contradicting herself, the next thing she mentions after the *yurts* is “two pieces of saxaul.” These pieces of the shrub had no function, neither did they look decorative. At first glance, they were devoid of any meaning, yet Larissa is emotionally attached to them: “In my room there are two very valuable items that are very dear to me: two pieces of saxaul that Kira [her daughter] and I brought from Alma-Ata², I don’t even remember what year it was.” Apart from these, there are other non-functional things in the most prominent places of Larissa’s house, in stylish glass cabinets: an old soft zebra toy which belonged to her husband when he was a child; a blue cardboard box that her daughter painted when she was five; a whole collection of Russian birch bark souvenirs, including fairly large birch bark baskets with lids (*postavtsy*), a gift sent from Kemerovo; and a *matryoshka* bought in St. Petersburg.

² Note that she is using the Soviet version of her native city’s name. Alma Ata was renamed Almaty after the collapse of the Soviet Union.



Figure 4: Toys and other objects from Konstantin M.’s house brought from Russia to his new German home.

Things of the past having emotional value may be related to people and events, and also to hobbies (Figure 4). When I asked **Anna** and **Konstantin** about the things they brought from their homeland to the house in Berlin, the most valuable ones were revealed only in narratives:

12. Konstantin: The most unusual thing in our Berlin house is a pot. When my parents were around 20 years old, they bought this pot and took it to their hikes. When I grew up, I also brought it to my kayaking trips. Once, it was quite a while, I came to St. Petersburg by car. I was looking for something to warm up food on a kerosene stove while on the way. I found this old pot and took it with me. Since then, it has lived in Berlin. We even took it to our bike trips a few times. At campsites, Germans were so surprised and fascinated by the sight of such a historic pot. Now we have modern titanium pots, and my parents’ old pot lives in the kitchen closet. It is perhaps the most memorable and valuable thing for us. Then a *pelmeni* maker, I really do not remember where we got it from. Anna says that we bought it in St. Petersburg a long time ago. It cost 3 roubles 90 kopecks then. I think it was made back in the USSR. We still use it as intended to make proper *pelmeni*. The *Luch* [Russian for a “ray”, a trademark of a Soviet watch-producing factory] watch was made in Belarus, perhaps a few months after the collapse of the USSR. I used to wear this watch in Germany, but not for a long time because it is inconvenient for me to work with a watch on my wrist. ‘Elektronika 53’, my dad used to wear it. That is why, despite the cracked face, it is very dear to us. Now Dan [their son] wears both of them. Also, some soft toys. When I was around five or six years old, my mother and my grandmother bought two absolutely identical toy dogs for me and for my cousin. We enjoyed playing with them, put them to bed and carried them everywhere. I do not know if my cousin still has that dog, but my Bim [the toy dog’s name] is still in the family. And this polar bear cub is a reminder of the time when my parents met. This was the first toy my dad gave to my mom. Again, when Dan and Ana were little, my mother gave them these toys. Now they live on the shelf in the living room.

Objects related to childhood and youth, beloved people, and happy events accumulate positive emotions that are important for harmonious living. These objects and even their names serve as a source of psychic activity creating “a home inside the house” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 133). Biographies of these things intertwine with biographies of their owners. Behind the connection between a person and a material object, there is an important and symbolic connection between the owner of the object and a person or people depicted in the photos or between the owner and those who gave him/her that item as a material object. This connection turns out to be important for emotional comfort, self-identification, and self-representation.

A material object, being included in a certain narrative and obtaining support in the world of social ideas, becomes more of a social object than a thing (Kopytoff 153; Van Norden). The biography of an object is understood as “its movement in the space of social ideas” (Vakhshayn 18). For example, the Soviet aluminium pot from Konstantin’s house has been in the family for over 60 years. Its biography began when it was bought by a young couple, typical “people of the sixties,” and this reveals a whole cultural layer in the history of Soviet society in general and this family in particular. Young intellectuals liked hiking, and they cultivated love for this type of leisure activities in their son. When they stopped hiking, the pot was inherited by their son, who moved from Russia to Poland in 1990s, and then settled in Berlin, a place where various high-quality pots made for cooking over campfire are available to suit any taste and budget. In this stage of its life, the pot served as a representation of its owner’s unique hiking experience rather than for the exclusively pragmatic function. The same fate awaited the Soviet electronic watch that is valuable to the owner because it evokes the memory of his late father, to whom he was very attached. As a memorable object associated with the history of the family, as well as a material rarity from a bygone era and a non-existent country, the watch is now worn by its first owner’s grandson, a young man who grew up amid German youth culture, but who posts in social networks selfies with popular symbols of the USSR, emphasizing his “exotic” origin which lets him stand out in his Berlin environment.

Conclusion

Russian speakers in Germany are a very heterogeneous group differing in ethnicity, the place of origin, education, reasons for emigrating to Germany, and degree of integration into the German mainstream culture. I have shown the history of resettlement of the participants of my project. Although they differ in terms of their age, socio-economic status, and place of origin, we can single out commonalities too. It is problematic to attribute them solely to their ethnicity. All of them are urbanites, and all of them have formal education. So, on the one hand, these elements of identity should prevail; however, in order to obtain permission to immigrate to Germany, it was the ethnicity that counted. As a result, it was ethno-cultural dimensions of identity that came to the foreground when people decided to migrate. But some experienced reverse ethnic shift due to the discriminatory discourse and actions: while in the Soviet Union, ethnic Germans were often labelled as “fascists,” after migration they were perceived by many members of the majority as “Russians,” and so they were again seen as alien “others.” The fact that Germans who migrated from Kazakhstan and had preserved some elements of German culture and language throughout the Soviet period use matryoshkas to decorate their houses in the newly obtained homeland is puzzling and raises new questions about stereotypes.

Writing about “Russianness” of people who migrated from such different contexts as the Soviet Union or post-Soviet countries, I seek to show the general cultural background of the Soviet everyday life and the commonality of patterns that spread across the Soviet space and defined the lifestyle of Soviet cities, where all my interviewees come from and where Russian was the language of official communication and education. My project confirms that Russianness may be a broader concept than Russian, in particular when we discuss émigrés who managed to leave precisely because they were not ethnic Russians. In my view, it is a complex phenomenon in which Russianness as belonging to Russian culture via the language, literature, and even folk crafts interacts with Russianness as the dominant culture of the Soviet Union. This culture was shaped by the same principles of education that ruled on the entire territory of the USSR and by the behaviour of several

generations of Russian-speaking elites and Russian-speaking civil servants. As a result, several generations of Russian speakers became exponents of this culture rather than of the titular culture of their republics. The reverse cultural and linguistic shift occurred in the post-Soviet times, but as my material showed, it hardly affected those who had migrated still in the Soviet times or slightly later than the demise of the Soviet Union.

Home-making practices are closely associated with the biographies of the owners, the history of each individual family, as well as the history of moving to Germany. The “Russian” house in Germany emerges as a complex phenomenon: it is perceived as a safe space, a shelter from the outside world and problems of adaptation and, therefore, a place of emotional comfort. It is a place for representation of family and personal values, the owners’ identity, and preferences. It is also a scene where relations between a person and objects unfold. The objects that a person places in his/her house appear as objectified memories of life events and other people, reflecting the importance of family and interpersonal relationships expressed in gifts, photos, children’s drawings, and crafts. In a new place, people are no longer limited to a set of typical furnishing patterns that were dictated by a shortage of goods and resources in the country of origin, yet many intuitively reproduce familiar patterns. Others try to shed the homemaking tradition of their country of origin, adapting to the European style and trying to follow the latest fashion in home design, yet unwittingly they often reproduce stereotypes and fragments from their previous houses where they lived before migrating. The furnishings of Russian living rooms differ from those of German ones: they reproduce the typical set of furniture and the order of organizing space in Soviet apartments. The reference frame for homemaking depends on the owner’s social environment, which is used as a guide and a benchmark.

Among the decorative objects in “Russian” houses, some things function as souvenirs important for the owners and believed to be worthy of display in the most visible places of the house, primarily in living rooms, where they can be easily noticed. Objects can serve as tokens of memory, and they have their own biographies linked to their owners.

The distinctive and displayed furnishings of a “Russian” house in Germany are quite typical and comparable with Russian houses in other countries: I can list standard objects which a Russian house is “made of” – first and foremost books by Russian classics and objects of folk crafts.

Several times in this article I mentioned Matryoshkas in émigré’s homes. It evolved into a complex phenomenon generating a variety of meanings which interact and clash as they embody both Russian and Soviet cultures. In the first post-Soviet years, besides traditional wooden matryoshkas, one could see a multitude of matryoshka-type dolls representing politicians in souvenir stores in Moscow and St. Petersburg. One could see the country’s leaders ranging from Gorbachev to Lenin, from Lenin to Stalin, and later from Khrushchev to Putin. The size of each politician doll was akin to the barometer of popularity and importance of the politicians in the eyes of the populace. In contemporary art, matryoshka has become an object of re-evaluating traditional stereotypes of Russians and at the same time artists put matryoshka into the context of Soviet past and post-Soviet present.

Thus the art object by Evgeniy Kondrat’iev exhibited in the Erarta museum in St. Petersburg is called “Welcome to Russia.” Created in 2014, it is also known as “All the truth about matryoshka.” Colourful and smiling on the outside, this doll conceals a medieval torture tool, the “Iron girl.” It reveals a sinister contrast between the bright and glamorous cover which uses a tourist slogan to invite visitors to hospitable Russia and the black insides of the doll all covered with deadly spikes piercing those who are inside it. Another art object “Levitation. A leader’s dream” by Sergey Chernov (2017) presents a group of faceless matryoshkas coloured black and terracotta. They are on a fragment of the Red square which looks as if it were uprooted from its original place. Above it hovers another piece of the Red square with Lenin’s mausoleum and Spasskaya Tower of the Kremlin. The composition evokes the image of masses devoid of any human individuality and worshipping the dead leader in the mausoleum and the live one in the government residence. What do these matryoshka’s symbolize: rootless people, Ivans, oblivious of their kinship? The questioning of the matryoshka traditional symbolism is just one example of the changes of values we witness both in the metropolis and in the Russian-speaking diaspora today. Therefore, the matryoshka has become more than a folklorically vivid, stereotypical folkloric symbol of Russian culture recognizable all over the world thanks to souvenirs brought from Russia.

Shifting the perspective of observation to objects hidden from sight shows a variety of things which are hard to classify because they reflect biographical differences and individual emotional attachments of their hosts, which are linked to the history of each family and their move to Germany. Massive and forced mobility imposed on Russian Germans in the twentieth century did not give them much opportunity to keep material objects, including those that had passed on from generation to generation. Some valuable family objects were expropriated in the 1920s, and war time evacuation was also responsible for the loss of inherited artefacts. Memories of lost relics are particularly strong among the elderly and are less relevant for the younger people who had had neither time nor money to gather many objects before they left. The things people put in their homes appear as objectified memories of life events and other people, signalling the importance of family and interpersonal relationships, expressed in gifts, photos, drawings, and handicrafts of children. The relationship between people and things is temporal. Over the course of a thing's physical existence, it moves through the space of social meanings.

After migration, they were eager to start a new life with new belongings. There are families that failed to preserve family documents, photo-archives, and other souvenirs of the old times, but there are memories and stories which help preserve family history. The structure of the Russophones' homes, whether they are ethnic Germans or members of other ethnicities, largely depends on the goals of migration and desire and ability to adapt. With time, even in the families which try to preserve their pre-immigration lifestyle, the culture of the host country inevitably penetrates everyday practices and is reflected in the home design. The blending of the two takes different shapes in different families. Creating a new home which would reflect one's personality is a chance for self-realization.

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