

Rachel Greenwald on Victoria Hegner

“Russian Jewish Migrants in Berlin and in Chicago: A Comparative Study”

Victoria Hegner’s prospectus presents important research on the experiences of Russian-Jewish émigrés in Germany and the United States. Her work proposes that different legal and cultural ideas of citizenship and integration in Germany and the United States produce diverging forms of acculturation. In general, Hegner argues, “cultural homogenization” is not governed by processes that are easily categorized universally; rather, acculturation varies instead according to the social and political context of the site of immigration.

In Germany, memories of the Shoah, as well local conceptions of ethnicity and nationality have a strong effect on the Russian-Jewish immigrant experience. Migration laws passed in the 1990s granted Soviet Jews the right to permanent residence in Germany and therefore served both as a form of reparation and a symbol of the “*new* Germany.” Accordingly, this immigration policy is designed to create a new, distinctly Jewish community. The *Einheitsgemeinde*, the first German-Jewish organization created after the Second World War, expects these immigrants to be Jews according to *Halacha*, orthodox religious law. Immigrants who do not fit this definition are not served by the new migration laws of the 1990s. Although the *Einheitsgemeinde* attempts to represent the German-Jewish community with one voice, many Russian immigrants have formed dissenting associations that oppose the *Einheitsgemeinde*’s emphasis on complete

assimilation into *its* definition of German-Jewish culture. While these organizations do emphasize a standardized definition of Jewishness, Hegner's research indicates they prefer to base this definition on an eastern European or Russian Jewish culture that is, in theory, not tainted by a direct relationship to the Shoah.

Unlike the Russian-Jewish community in Berlin, its Chicago counterpart is decentralized and recognizes multiple definitions of Jewishness. The more than 120 self-identified Jewish communities there reflect the American discourse of equality within diversity: it is possible to identify oneself as religiously or ethnically Jewish without the approval of American orthodox congregations. In addition to the wide-ranging definitions of Jewishness, Chicago's Jewish population itself is heterogeneous in its origins. While eighty-five to ninety-five percent of Berlin's Jews are Russian émigrés, only ten to fifteen percent of Chicago's are from the former Soviet Union. Thus, although the legal basis for Russian-Jewish immigration to the United States is similar to Germany's — memory of the Shoah and the exigencies of the Cold War — the process of acculturation in the States offers a wider range of possibilities for creating a new identity. For example, there is less pressure in Chicago than in Berlin to shed previous identities and conform to halachic practice. While some immigrants join Hasidic congregations and make a concerted effort to distance themselves from American society, others make an equally strong effort to find their own niche as new Americans. Hegner suggests that there is less need in the American Russian-Jewish community to distinguish Jewish culture from the host culture.

“Soviet Jewish Migrants in Berlin and Chicago” is a good beginning to an important book-length manuscript, but I do have some suggestions: In addition to moving

her description of her research parameters toward the beginning of the paper, I would also like Hegner to focus more on the different roles she played as anthropologist in Berlin and Chicago. She makes a point of noting that immigrants in Berlin projected their fears of Jewish life in Germany onto her as they tried to negotiate their own individual identities in the face of socially prescribed roles; in addition, she recognizes that there is an inherent hierarchy in her relationship to the Berlin immigrants since Hegner has citizenship, while Russian-Jewish immigrants have only residency status. U.S. citizens in Chicago, on the other hand, identified Hegner as a representative of the “land of the persecutor” that was changing for the better and thus allowing for foreign redefinitions of German identity. Although Hegner begins to address the different responses of her subjects to her over the course of her field work, I would like to her to reflect more on how her position as German citizen influences the data she gathered. How does the relationship of Russian-Jewish immigrants to their guest reflect or perhaps even influence their ideas about the immigration experience and their definition of citizenship, nationality, and religious identity?