

Tamar Rapoport, Edna Lomsky-Feder and Angelika Heider, Recollection and Relocation in Immigration: Russian-Jewish Immigrants „Normalize“ Their Anti-Semitic Experiences.

Comment by Victoria Hegner

The paper by Tamar Rapoport, Edna Lomsky-Feder and Angelika Heider focuses on Russian Jewish immigrants' representations of the past as a way to resist anticipated ideas of the legitimate newcomers' self understanding and to thus open the scope of grand narratives that structure Jewish identity as well as the political self-allocation of the country of residence. The three authors concentrate on the grand narrative of anti-Semitism and the immigrants' strategy to "normalize" their experiences of discriminations against them as Jews. By analyzing a sample of interviews with immigrants who either settled down in Israel or Germany in the early 1990s, the sociological study provides an illuminating comparative perspective on biographical narratives through which immigrants not least establish the legitimacy of their own life history and cultural capital. In this context the study portrays the *resourcefulness* and *flexibility* of the cultural schemes and interpretative models that immigrants bring into play when finding their way into the new society.

To bring about the openness to as well as the dynamics of social, political and moral formula of immigrants, the researchers used a interview method which was rather unstructured and in-depth and thus in itself flexible enough to provide time and space for spontaneous, sometimes by the interviewer unexpected thoughts or narratives. Hence, interviewees never specifically asked to recall anti-Semitic experiences – the interviewees themselves provided those stories while telling their biography.

In the first part of the paper, Tamar Rapoport, Edna Lomsky-Feder and Angelika Heider define four key stories through which Russian Jewish immigrants tell their anti-Semitic experiences. There, the authors emphasize, that re-collections of discriminations against oneself as a Jew are not core narratives and do not shape the personal immigration history in all respects.

The *first* typified *key story* complies with the grand narrative of anti-Semitism. Hence, the interviewee describes and outlines how the anti-Semitic experiences in Russia changed his life and made him want to leave the country. The three other key stories rather deconstruct and even refuse the grand narrative of anti-Semitism and portray experiences of discrimination as a Jew as secondary in life and certainly not as something that made oneself suffer or wish to immigrate. By defining only *one* key story that reproduces the grand narrative, but *three* which refuse the latter in one way or the other, the authors point to the fact, that the majority of Russian Jewish newcomers resist the normativity to conceptualize anti-Semitic experiences in the past as something traumatizing and humiliating and thus as a decisive element of Jewish self understanding. Within the analysis of those key stories the reader is giving the chance to listen extensively to the interviewees' own voices. Through this kind of refreshing balance between the narratives of Russian Jewish immigrants and the researchers' analytical comments one gains a very personalized and vividly detailed insight into the migration process.

The second part of the paper draws attention to the tactics of "normalization". There, Tamar Rapoport, Edna Lomsky-Feder and Angelika Heider describe four ways of Russian Jewish immigrants in Israel and Germany to neutralize and deactivate the importance of anti-Semitism within their own life history.

The first way of normalization is defined as *obscuring*. It describes the attempt to disguise and doubt the occurrence of anti-Semitism. There, Russian Jewish immigrants provide a rather contradictory tale on personal experiences of discrimination against them as a Jew or express a general sense of danger but do not reflect upon it as an outcome of the social and cultural context they were living in. Sometimes interviewees "normalize" their anti-Semitic experiences by saying that is difficult to say whether discrimination derived from anti-Semitic sentiments or simply antipathy. The authors define the other forms to neutralize anti-Semitism geared against oneself as *self-exclusion* ("It happened to others and not to me"), *vindication* ("They did not know any better") and *essentializing stigma* ("I carry my face with me"). Especially with the analysis of the last tactic, which includes forms of self-hatred, the researchers show clearly that "normalizing" and devaluing the importance of anti-Semitism do not coincide with no or hardly any Jewish self-understanding. On the contrary, Ela, who never wished to be a Jew but sees herself never pass as a non-Jew because the stigma symbol is engraved in her body, developed a strong Jewish self-understanding and became a member of a

national-religious group in Israel. There, she separates her anti-Semitic experiences strictly from her understanding of Judaism.

The study fascinates by the way it portrays Russian Jewish immigrants as politicized members of the “new” society who challenge collective memory and national identity and thus contribute intensively to the discourse on Jewishness within the new societal context. There, the study differs decisively from other researches on Russian Jewish immigration which describe newcomers of the 1990s in terms of their “little Jewish self-understanding” and “difficulties of acculturation” and which are often written in a style of “handbook” for “finding a way to successful integration” and do not go beyond that kind of socio-political rhetoric. Hence, the sociological study by Tamar Rapoport, Edna Lomsky-Feder and Angelika Heider is an important contribution to the still underdeveloped discourse on Russian Jewish immigration.

By focusing in their research on two countries, which differ immensely in their history as a land of immigration and in their relationship towards Jewish people, the authors break a still new ground of systematic comparison in the field of *qualitative* and very time consuming social research. However, in this particular study, one gains the impression of an imbalance between voices from Russian Jewish immigrants in Israel and Germany. When defining the *four key stories* on anti-Semitic experiences *three* immigrants in Israel but only *one* from Germany are portrayed. Ofer, a Russian Jewish immigrant, who now resides in Israel, has lived in Germany. Still, the transition must have shaped his narrative, personal stories and re-collections – is he a voice from Israel or Germany, or both ... In the second part, which analyzes the tactics of “normalization”, it is sometimes not clear, whether the reader is listening to a voice from Germany or Israel (Mark, Sasha, Maja). If there would have been more clarification the reader could easier follow the final conclusion that there are hardly any differences between the country when it comes to the way Russian Jews re-formulate and thus challenge the grand narrative of anti-Semitism.

All in all “Recollection and Relocation in Immigration: Russian-Jewish Immigrants „Normalize“ Their Anti-Semitic Experiences” is a solid qualitative study which challenges ideas on immigration and Jewishness and fosters further discussions in this field of study.