
The Salad of Ideas: Beliefs about Health and Food among Immigrants from the Former USSR in Germany

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Abstract: This article will discuss ways in which migrants from the former USSR in Germany conceptualise the relationship between food, migration experience and health. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate heterogeneity of post-socialist health beliefs and to argue against over-generalisations about health-related passivity as an integral characteristic of Homo Sove-ticus. Instead, by comparing conceptualisations of health across groups of migrants distinct in their socio-economic and cultural origins, I will demonstrate that people socialised in different strata of Soviet society develop diverse strategies of navigating the capitalist consumer market and its abundant food supply. Better qualified individuals socialised in urban settings share highly proactive health beliefs and reflectively adapt to nutritional practices of their receiving country. In contrast, less educated people from agricultural backgrounds regard dietary choices as pre-determined by external circumstances and mostly rely on the cooking traditions in which they were socialised. The discussion presented in this paper sets out to contribute to understanding of post-socialist health cultures as structured along the lines of socio-economic and cultural differentiation, rather than as products of socialist ideology alone.

Key words: nutritional choices, migrant health, health beliefs, post-Soviet health

Introduction

Studying migrants from the former USSR provides a new angle on the transformation of socialist health cultures, in particular, on how people's ideas about health change through exposure to globalised discourse and developed capitalist markets. Existing research conducted in three major receiving countries, – USA (Aroian 2004), Israel (Remennick 1999, 2001, 2003) and Germany (Korenblum, et al. 2010; Kyobutungi, et al. 2006; Dreißig 2005; Ronellenfitsch, et al. 2006; Ronellenfitsch and Razum 2004; Wittig, et al. 2004), – has been mostly focussed so far on various aspects of healthcare utilisation and illness patterns among former Soviet citizens. It demonstrates that economic disadvantage and cultural boundaries often prevent people from entering local healthcare systems – similar to other groups of immigrants across the globe (Nazroo 2001; Smaje 1996; Borde 2003; Ahmad 1993). At the same time, some authors suggest that passivity and fatalism

resulting from socialisation in the former USSR aggravate ex-Soviet migrants' inability to overcome the structural disadvantages they face (Remennick 1999, 2003; Aroian 2004; Kirsch 2005; Wittig, et al. 2004; Korenblum, et al. 2010). This paper will, in contrast, demonstrate that beliefs about health as a product of external circumstances are only typical for individuals whose social mobility was severely limited throughout their lifetime, while others approach their health pro-actively. By engaging with the nutritional habits of immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Germany, I am setting out to shift the focus of research from the management of illness episodes to socially, economically and culturally conditioned everyday practises of sustaining health.

The objective of this article is to demonstrate that migrants' beliefs about nutrition and dietary practices are conditioned by socio-economic mobility throughout their lifetimes, by distinct cultural identities, generational differences and exposure to globalised discourses on health. This objective will be met by comparing early Jewish migrants of the 1970s wave, Jewish Kontingentflüchtlinge and Russian German Spätaussiedler, three major groups of former Soviet citizens residing in Germany, which are highly distinct in terms of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. In the opening section of this paper I will reflect on the migrants' own conceptualisations of shortages they experienced in Soviet times and the new opportunities they could enjoy upon migration. Thus, I will address common-sense interpretations of structural conditions determining nutritional choices. In the next two sections of the paper, I will address the differences that migrants face in managing the new plenty they encounter in Germany. I will demonstrate that Jewish migrants, most of whom are highly educated and have an urban background, regard nutritional choices as individual responsibility and conceptualize them as part of one's kultur'nost or "being cultured". As I will discuss in the final section of this paper, throughout the migratory process kul'turnost acquires the meaning of self-"westernisation": a concept which will be addressed in the migrants' own terms. In contrast to the nutritional practices of Jewish migrants, families of Russian German migrants with a lower-class, non-urban background are characterised by a reliance on cooking methods known for generations and the implementation of only familiar ingredients. In these households, where collectivisation and war famines make up a significant part of family history, individual choices on nutrition are often regarded as pre-determined and inflexible. Rather than adapting to a "western" diet, Russian-German interview participants seek means of food production similar to what they relied on in the Soviet agricultural setting from which they come.

Existing research and theoretical background

The health beliefs of former citizens of the USSR came under increasing attention in the 1990s (Cockerham 1997, 1999, 2000; Biloukha 2001; Steptoe 2001;

Rose 2000, 2003; Pietilä 2007, 2008), being theorised as the driving force behind the mortality and morbidity crisis observed by demographers and epidemiologists (Shkolnikov, et al. 1998a, 1998b, 2001). In that respect, works by William Cockerham (Cockerham 1997, 1999, 2000; Cockerham, et al., 2002) pointing out the paternalism of the socialist state and the fatalism of the Soviet people with respect to their health have become increasingly influential. Cockerham claims that “Soviet-style socialism had the potential to induce passivity on the part of many individuals toward health promotion” (Cockerham, et al. 2002: 43). He suggests that the Soviet totalitarian state has created a Homo Sovieticus (Cockerham’s spelling - P.A.), who, with respect to his or her health is likely to adopt “negative” lifestyles characterised by alcoholism, excessive smoking, non-utilisation of healthcare services and other health-endangering behaviours. The deterioration of health in post-Soviet society is, therefore, explained by the inability of Homo Sovieticus to adapt to a capitalist economy and embrace liberal values, in particular, the value of individual responsibility for health.

Cockerham’s Homo Sovieticus approach indicates important structural problems related to attitudes to health, such as a lack of health education and a tendency to compensate for a permanent lack of resources by increased utilisation of medical care. Food shortages as determinants of nutritional choices are also discussed in the existing literature as a significant structural limitation determining “passive” nutritional beliefs in the former socialist bloc (Biloukha and Utermohlen 2001; Steptoe and Wardle 2001; Thiel and Heinemann 1996). At the same time, Cockerham’s approach has been criticised in the existing literature for its tendency to over-generalise the effects of planned economy and collectivist ideology on health beliefs in favour of other factors, in particular, socio-economic inequality and cultural variations within the former Soviet society. Research by Nina Rusinova, Julie Brown and Ludmila Panova demonstrates clearly that in Russia, similarly to other countries, “passive” health beliefs are a function of low socio-economic status and lack of social capital, whereas populations with a higher socio-economic status share a pro-active approach to health (Rusinova and Brown 2003; Brown and Rusinova 1997, 1999; Panova and Rusinova, 2005). Michele Rivkin-Fish (2005) also demonstrates that women with higher education and access to empowered social networks employed a variety of complex strategies to receive the best prenatal healthcare, while less educated women relied on “chance” access to the state healthcare system. At the same time, studies by Temkina (2008) and Pietilä and Rytönen (2008) suggest significant gender variations in health beliefs, with women being generally more pro-active and men tending to believe that “health is not a man’s domain”.

Whereas the Homo Sovieticus model has been criticised in research on post-communist Russia, it has remained fairly unchallenged in studies on migrants from the former USSR abroad. The few existing German studies tend to refer to

“socialist” culture as a static and homogenous phenomenon. Korenblum (2010) and Wittig (Wittig, et al. 2004) attribute migrants’ difficulties using the German healthcare system mostly to the effects of socialisation in the Soviet medical system. A “different culture” as an explanation of healthcare utilisation also appears in studies by Schnepf (2002), Beyer (2001) and Dreißig (2005). Studying migrants from the former USSR in the context of hospital care, Dreißig suggests that they are unable to make autonomous decisions about treatment that is expected of them by the German healthcare system. Schnepf and Beyer indicate low levels of nursing care utilisation by elderly Russian Germans and attribute it to a reliance on informal family care related to “traditional culture”: a finding which captures the important role of kin ties in Russian-German families, but fails to address the effects of socio-economic mobility.

Applied in the context of migration, the concept of *Homo Sovieticus* equally neglects socio-economic differentiation and effects of exposure to globalised discourses of health and transnational health cultures, whereby migrants are depicted as individuals confined to the unchanging “socialist” culture of their native countries. This paper, in contrast, sets out to capture the socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity of post-socialist health beliefs, in particular, beliefs about food. By examining migrants from the former USSR who came to Germany, I will discuss how exposure to capitalist Western discourses of health impact on the health beliefs of individuals socialised in various strata of former Soviet society.

In this paper, I will refrain from imposing pre-developed categories on migrants’ beliefs about healthy food. Instead, I will identify and analyse inductively derived categories, so as to treat nutrition beliefs as elements of common-sense knowledge shaped by medical discourses on health, socio-economic differentiation and cultural identities (Nettleton 2006; Blaxter 1990; Cornwell 1984).

The focus on beliefs about food in favour of other health beliefs can be explained by their primary significance to most people. The relationship between health, food and identity has been widely reflected upon in the existing literature (Caplan 1997; Lupton 2005; Fischler 1988; Minz 1996; Minz and Du Bois 2002). Given that nutrition is necessary to sustain life itself, food is central to the health beliefs of people across all cultures and socio-economic groups; in addition, producing and consuming food constitute practices of care and connectedness (Holloway and Kneafsey 2004). At the same time, as Caplan suggests, ideas about what needs to be considered healthy food (or food, altogether) are highly contextual:

“Food is never ‘just food’ and its significance can never be purely nutritional. Furthermore, it is intimately bound up with social relations, including those of power, of inclusion and exclusion, as well as with cultural ideas of classification (including the food and non-food, the edible and the inedible), the human body and the meaning of health“ (Caplan 1997: 3).

In this paper I will study narratives about healthy and unhealthy food as encodings of identity boundaries and functions of social class. I will demonstrate that the migratory process from the former USSR to Germany is interpreted by all migrants as a transition to “the world of plenty”. The responses to new opportunities and challenges of this world, however, vary significantly across groups of migrants. In particular, I will engage with three core concepts structuring migrants’ nutrition narratives along lines of socio-economic and cultural differentiation: *kul’turnost* or “being cultured”, *takaya zhizn* or “life itself”, and “westernisation”.

Methods

The exploratory objective of this research implies reliance on the inductive and constructivist approach associated with qualitative methodology (Bryman 2008). The benefits of qualitative research for studying the relationship between migrants’ identities, their socio-economic mobility and their health beliefs are outlined by Smaje:

“Ethnographic techniques can illuminate important questions such as the social meanings imputed to health in different populations and the nature of participation in family and community networks which help promote health and welfare” (Smaje 1996: 165-166).

The material analysed in this paper was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews conducted in Berlin between September 2009 and April 2011 (N=24)¹. Most interviews were conducted in Russian, with one exception when the interviewees requested to be spoken to in German. Taking into consideration the intricate relationship between collective and individual health beliefs developing in a family (e.g., see Cornwell 1984), fieldwork was carried out with households, rather than single informants. Research participants were asked to give their definition of a healthy person, to talk about what they thought made them healthy or ill and were prompted to discuss episodes of illness which they experienced in recent times or which they considered significant. Although the research questions did not focus on nutrition specifically, the relationship between food and health has proven to be of primary significance for all research participants.

The research sample included three major groups of immigrants from the former USSR to Germany, highly distinct in terms of socio-economic and cultural origin: the Russian German Spätaussiedler and Jewish Kontingentflüchtlinge who arrived to Germany in the 1990s, as well as early Jewish migrants of

1 This article is based on the material gathered in qualitative sociological research conducted for a PhD thesis titled ‘Health Beliefs and Help-Seeking Practices of Migrants from the Former USSR in Germany’ and defended by the author in the University of Warwick in 2012.

the 1970s. Russian-German migrants had been extremely limited in their social mobility throughout the Soviet era and suffered greatly from socio-economic and ethnic discrimination. First, Russian-German farmers sustained great human and economic losses due to the collectivisation policies and the famines of the 1930s. Second, with the onset of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), Russian-Germans were declared to be “enemies of the Soviet people” and were subjected to forced deportations from the Volga region, where they had traditionally settled, into labour camps and settlements in Siberia and Central Asia. Limited in their socio-economic and geographic mobility and deprived of the right to practise their culture, Russian-Germans remained severely disadvantaged in the post-war years, as well. As a result of continuous discrimination, the majority of Spätaussiedler migrants are trained in manual occupations or belonged to clerical professions. In contrast, early Jewish migrants in the 1970s and the later wave of 1990s Kontingentflüchtlinge mostly come from large urban centers in the Western part of the former USSR and tend to have high educational and professional qualifications: according to a survey conducted in Germany in the 1990s, 71% of Jewish Kontingentflüchtlinge had a university degree, with an overwhelming majority having worked in skilled or highly skilled white-collar jobs before migration (about 20% had held managerial positions) (Schoeps, et al. 1996: 42). No similar surveys have been conducted with the members of the earliest Jewish migration wave, however, some studies conducted in the former USSR suggest that at the time of migration (early 1970s) most of these people were well-educated and had an urban background (Gitelman 1997). While collecting and disseminating the material, I particularly focussed on establishing the native health vocabulary, a principle integral to qualitative sociology (Byrne 2012), and to the constructivist approach to health (Charmaz 1990)². All interviews conducted in the course of this project were analysed with the help of NVIVO 8. I started coding by looking for definitions of health and illness, and at a later stage was able to establish three central concepts of kul'turnost, “westernisation” and *takaya zhizn* (“that is how life is”, “life itself”), which will be consistently addressed in this article.

Transition to the World of Plenty

In spite of the internal differences across groups of migrants from the former USSR, none of the people I interviewed questioned the positive effects of migration on their nutritional choices. Only one male Jewish interviewee, who arrived

2 In my translation I was not following the principle of literal translation. Instead, I relied on the technique of “creative translation” which does not seek to translate each word by the most direct equivalent, but rather attempts to convey the meaning of the whole phrase, which existing research considers a suitable solution for sociological work that aims at being “readable” (Overing 1987; Temple 1997).

to Germany as a small child in the 1970s, did not conceptualise the difference between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ most likely because he had no distinct memories of food shopping in his country of origin. Even though some people criticised the quality of particular types of groceries, as I will discuss below, everyone I spoke to addressed the positive quantitative change. People cited the supply of groceries in German stores as significantly larger in scope as compared to the USSR and its successor states. Upon migration, people who had previously dealt with permanent shortages of foodstuffs and developed complex strategies for overcoming them, received access to groceries they previously had never seen, tried or even heard of. To people interviewed for this research, migration to Germany means, first and foremost, the removal of structural disadvantages and an increase in individual empowerment. Diner (2001) observes similar conceptualisations of America in interviews with Eastern European Jews who moved there in the course of the 20th century:

“They had felt entitled to eat well before migration, but the realities of scarcity made this impossible. In America satisfaction lay within their means, and they challenged anyone who stood in their way“ (Diner 2001: 180).

For example, Julia, a 51-year old Jewish Kontingentflüchtline, says:

“Of course, life itself was different in Moldova. Half of the stuff you can buy here, we did not even know about.”

In this short excerpt Julia addresses food in the context of the changes that migration brought to their lives in general. German food is a component of “life itself” – or, in Russian, *takaya zhishn*. “Life itself” refers to the theorisation of circumstances which seem to be objectively affecting one’s health. Changes in food supply are conceptualised as a component of *takaya zhishn* by most migrants interviewed in this research: in their interpretation, the sheer availability of groceries lies beyond individual agency. Migration to Germany meant the overall improvement of “life itself” and opened up new opportunities and new dietary choices, whereby migrants talk about the possibility of buying food they previously considered “luxury“ or “festive“ on an everyday basis. For example, 81-year old, Tamara (a Jewish Kontingentflüchtlinge), who was interviewed in her kitchen, insisted that I try her salad. “When we lived in Moscow, we could not even imagine having a ripe, fresh tomato in winter”, says Tamara as she fills our plates to the rim. Her words and her hospitality suggest than even after having spent almost twenty years in Germany, she does not take the everyday abundance of groceries in German shops as self-evident. In contrast, she consciously celebrates her ability to consume.

The contrast between “here“ and “there“ is particularly pronounced in interviews with Russian-Germans from rural regions – individuals who have been especially disadvantaged throughout their lives. 79 year-old Kristine (Russian-

German Spätaussiedler), who survived the famines of collectivisation and war, remembers her childhood:

“Oh, my dear child, you don’t want to know what we went through. War, war is the worst, famine, we had nothing to eat. I had to gather grass in the fields to feed my younger siblings, and we were lucky if we could kill a squirrel ever-ly once in a while.”

In the course of the interview, Kristine speaks of the continuous food shortages she had to endure later in life and the difficulties of having to make ends meet in peaceful times. Having moved to Germany, Kristine, finally, became free of all her worries about food:

“We are very satisfied with our life. We can afford anything we want, even with our pensions. In the supermarket I can choose between this sort of cheese or the other, and if I don’t find it in this shop, I will go to a different one.”

For Kristine and other people her age, coming to Germany means a kind of compensation for previous losses: in the course of the interview she and other elderly Russian-Germans repeatedly express their gratitude to Germany for “accepting” them and for “not neglecting them” in their old age – in comparison to Russia or other sending countries of the former USSR which are described as places where old people inevitably die in poverty. The difference between life before and after migration is so acute that even mundane daily practices such as shopping for everyday food (Kristine mentions cheese), are not self-evident: in the interviews they are addressed and discussed as individual, important themes.

Only two people who came from very privileged backgrounds (as compared to other interviewees) questioned the effect of structural limitations on individual choices, and suggested that with enough effort, one could maintain a healthy diet in the USSR as well. One of them, Sonya (39, Jewish early migrant), whose father was a very famous TV presenter and who grew up in Moscow, says:

“I cannot understand it when people talk about being unable to buy fruit or vegetables during the Soviet era. In Moscow there were these frozen goods supermarkets, and you could buy anything there, all year around. And you could always buy herbs from babushkas (elderly female street vendors, - P.A.). Besides, there are always seasonal vegetables. It does not have to be complicated. In autumn my mother would buy mushrooms, in summer young potatoes. No one forced people to eat noodles every day.”

Sonya’s friend Misha (55, Jewish early migrant) also argued in the interview that his grandmother made “salads every day, while all these fat Soviet people could not get it and thought she was like a cow eating hay”. These two cases are a telling exception to other interviews, as Misha and Sonya are the only people who claimed

that their families had never experienced any shortages. Although Misha and Sonya come from the best supplied parts of the former USSR – Sonja is a Muscovite and Misha grew up in a big city in the Baltics where food shortages were less pronounced than in the other regions – neither of them reflects on access to food which their families had due to their status and place of residence. Instead, Sonya and Misha both attribute diets maintained in their families to smart individual decisions of adult female family members. They suggest that others were simply not savvy enough to pick the right food and, as I will demonstrate in the last section of this paper, attribute it to the “socialist” or “Soviet” approach to health. However, in criticising these “socialist” beliefs Misha refers to *takaya zhishn*, thus unconsciously addressing structural determinants of food choices:

“Life itself was harder, of course. And beliefs and values were more primitive, more simple because of that. But mainly, people were cut off from some very important Truth, that Western Truth we live with now.“

The word Misha uses for “truth” in the excerpt is somewhat old-fashioned, mostly employed in poetic or religious contexts: *istina*. This word means “enlightenment”, “insight”, the ultimate truth (which is the reason I capitalise the word in translation). By using it, Misha suggests the importance of what he believes to be a “western” lifestyle, and places it high above other ways of living. Besides, Misha categorises people who have been socialised in the USSR as altogether “different”, imprinted by socialist ideology – and unfamiliar with Truth.

Germany is thus clearly conceptualised as an antithesis to the limited, scarce Soviet past, and migration means a profound change in the structural circumstances of food supply on the one hand and in individual behaviour on the other. However, the new plenty does not only cause migrants to celebrate their lives every day by consuming food that previously was out of their reach, it also conditions new choices with respect to nutrition, choices meant to maintain a healthy diet. In the next two sections of this paper I will demonstrate how different groups of migrants elaborate their own strategies in navigating the new world of plenty: whereas better-educated, socially mobile groups stress the importance of innovation through “westernising” oneself, less privileged ones adhere to tradition.

Making our own sausage: Russian-Germans

Although elderly Russian-Germans constitute a group of interviewees who strongly stress the positive effect of migration particularly on their access to food, they are also the ones who question the quality of some types of food sold in German supermarkets. In particular, vegetables, meat and poultry are referred to as “unnatural”, “full of chemicals”, “plastic” and “unhealthy”. To a great extent this conceptualisation results from former peasants’ confrontation with the urban means

of food production. Although all elderly Russian-Germans described missing growing their own food, only one couple had been able to secure a garden plot in the vicinity of Berlin and plant their own vegetables. Albert (72) says:

“We made sure we got a garden plot very soon after we came here. So we can have our own potatoes, for example. I think what they sell here in the stores is totally unnatural. And it tastes so much better when you grow it yourself!”

In this account of growing one's own, similar to accounts of other interviewees, the health properties of food are attributed to personal control over the production cycle: in contrast to grocery stores where one does not know “where the food comes from” and “what was put in it”, self-grown food is produced with one's “own hands” and with the “soul”. The health effects of growing one's own food are, however, addressed in an ambiguous way. On the one hand, Albert complains about back pain from working on his plot and taking care of the crops, and other research participants also speak of their health as being destroyed by years of hard work in the field. On the other hand, planting and gathering his own potatoes gives Albert a feeling of satisfaction, in fact, it re-creates the feeling of connectedness to his own past and identity. In contrast, those interviewees who had no garden plots spoke of missing “digging in the soil”, as they put it. Working in the field as a whole family – and later consuming the fruits of their own labour as a family, too – is a production cycle that used to structure Albert's life as well as the lives of other Russian Germans, and great importance is attributed to restoring this cycle in their receiving country. Some interview participants spoke of visiting relatives in rural areas, gathering crops together and making preserves which were distributed among all family members: Heinrich (81) and Kristine (79) went to visit a nephew in southern Germany, and Albert and Nina (both 72) regularly travel back to Russia. Hard work and family ties are concepts which strongly determine knowledge about healthy food, whereby great effort is put into preparing one's own meals “from scratch” at home and sharing them with others. Kristine says:

“The sausage in the shop, who knows what they put in there. We do not buy it. To make a good, healthy sausage, I buy a good piece of meat and make the mince myself. The mince in the supermarket is too fatty, it is not good. And then, I make my own sausage, it is much better in quality, much healthier.”

By making her own sausage, Kristine establishes her competence, her knowledge of what is good for her family. In fact, this is the only competence her husband trusts: 81-year-old Heinrich says he could not eat anything in a German hospital, when he was taken there with a heart attack. He summarises his refusal in a brief “I can't. I only eat what my wife makes”. Kristine comments:

“He only eats what I cook. What comes from the family. He will never eat anything that is made by a stranger.”

In these families, shopping for food and cooking is mostly done by women: one of the interviewees claimed that her husband does not even know how to warm up a plate in the microwave, so she must always be home at his meal times. Even in families with broken family relationships, the production and consumption of food in accordance with generation and gender roles remain important practices. For example, two elderly Russian-German women I interviewed complained about violent treatment by their adult sons. Still, as we were talking, both of them were cooking meals for them, explaining it by the men's "inability to take care of themselves". In one instance, the son of one woman showed up earlier than expected and was severely drunk. In my presence, he abused his mother verbally and threatened to hit her. Although the old woman cursed her son in response, she still set the table for him and poured him a plate of borscht (traditional Russian beet-root soup, usually based on meat broth). Offering food and consuming food was a practice untouched by other negative transformations in this family.

Unlike in the case of younger Russian-Germans and most Jewish migrants (as will be discussed further), elderly Russian-Germans conceptualise health in functional terms: being healthy means being able to carry on with one's daily workload, and the causes of illness are outside one's reach. It is "life as it is", with its poverty, hard work and hereditary illness which determines one's condition. In this model of health, individual effort is unnecessary and superficial. Hence, elderly Russian-Germans did not talk about trying to change their own diets or the diet of their family members in accordance with their transforming health needs. Instead, food choices were regarded as prescribed: great importance was attributed to cooking food in accordance with familiar recipes and using familiar ingredients. Most elderly Russian-German women I spoke to shopped in the large Russian supermarket selling groceries typical of the former USSR, such as tvorog (curd), a variety of pickles, cereals and sweets. The supermarket is located in the middle of a Berlin neighbourhood densely populated by Russian-Germans and is within short distance from most people's homes.

Severely disadvantaged throughout their lifetimes, limited in their social mobility and used to relying on family as the only protective mechanism in a world hostile to them, elderly Russian-Germans appear to maintain the same nutritional habits they acquired in their sending countries. Production, distribution and consumption of food are structured along the lines of traditional generation and gender roles and are an integral part of "life itself" or "taking life how it is" – they are pre-determined by life-long experience of "surviving" rather than "living".

At the same time, a few Russian-Germans I interviewed actively re-conceptualise the nutritional traditions determined by "life itself". The differences between the traditionalist and innovative households are structured along socio-economic and generational lines: younger people and people with educated or urban backgrounds are the ones who question nutritional choices based on tradition. For Ma-

rina (46) and Ludmila (48), two women with higher education coming from poor, rural regions of Kazakhstan and Russia, growing their own food is simply a subsidiary strategy, a practice of food production that cannot substitute for a healthier choice. They do not identify themselves with agricultural labour the way the older and less educated generation of Russian-Germans does. Ludmila says:

“For example, I spoke with my father on the phone recently. And he says, well, we worked in the greenhouse, got our tomatoes, very nice tomatoes this year! And then, I think, right, that means they will not see a single fresh tomato till next summer. People have much, much lower expectations. They are only used to surviving.”

Irina (27) suggests:

“All these babushkas selling their potatoes along the roads in Kazakhstan – no thanks. Who knows where these vegetables were grown and how much radiation or acid rain they have absorbed?”

Irina is confronting what she considers to be an uncivilised Russian-German tradition, attributing it to babushkas, old uneducated females in rural Kazakhstan. She conceptualises her refusal to consume self-grown food by making references to environmental pollution and thus establishes herself as an informed individualistic consumer, rather than a member of a community united by agricultural tradition.

Larissa (65) and Mikhail (71), a couple from a large Ukrainian city, mostly adhere to tradition when it comes to cooking and distributing food. All the cooking is done by Larissa, and most meals are based on traditional Russian cuisine, with lunch always being a three-course affair. However, even though Larissa carries on cooking borscht, schi (cabbage soup), kasha (buckwheat) and pork roasts, she claims she has altogether ceased shopping in the Russian supermarket:

“Last year I went there to buy a bottle of champagne. It was for the New Year’s fest, so it was important that it was good. But when we opened it, what do you think was in there? Cheap soda! Soda! That’s it, I said then. Enough of these Russian quirks. We are Germans, and we will shop like Germans. I only go to normal supermarkets now.”

The incident of being cheated over an integral component of the most festive meal of the year makes Larissa re-think her identity altogether. When it comes to consumer practices, she is willing to transform herself fully into a “German”: she believes that this change of behaviour may guarantee her better security in food choices. Conscious adaptation of eating habits identified as “German” or “Western” accompanied by a desire to depart from habits identified as “Russian” or “Soviet” are major themes in interviews with people with a similar or higher social status

than Larissa. Unlike Larissa, however, these people – most of whom are highly educated urban Jews – do not simply cease shopping in Russian supermarkets. Instead, they set out to overhaul their diet in general. If they were to be invited to a lunch in Larissa’s house and offered a *kotleta s kartoshkoi* (cutlet with fried potatoes), they would, probably, consider her a person stuck in a “backward” socialist past. In the next section I will discuss how a “westernisation” of diet encodes the identity boundaries and status aspirations of the most upwardly socially mobile migrants.

Kul’turnost, “westernisation” and eating salad

As we sit in a restaurant not far from Misha’s workplace (Misha is a 55-year old Jewish man who came to Germany in the early 1970s, who continuously claimed throughout the interview that healthy nutrition choices are determined by individual will only), my voice recorder on the table, Misha critically investigates a garlic baguette which arrives as a starter and takes a piece after what seems to be a minute’s hesitation: “I usually don’t eat stuff like that!”. I ask him why, and he continues, passionately:

“I watch out for what is healthy. One should not be like an animal, like all those uncivilized [dikie] Soviet people who have no idea about their health.”

Throughout the rest of the interview, Misha characterises people remaining in his motherland and other migrants as “Soviet” people and attributes to them all sorts of behaviours he considers unhealthy: unbalanced nutrition, alcoholism, smoking, abuse of antibiotics and violence. Misha believes it is their culture, or, rather the lack of it, which makes them into unhealthy people:

“They get ill quicker, fall to pieces, eat trash. Our guys drink far too much alcohol which destroys them. And women do the same. Those are the kind of bad habits they have. They do not know how to eat well, they do not exercise as young people, then they start deteriorating and by fifty years old, in fact, they are ready to die.”

As the quotes above suggest, Misha describes his former countrymen with little compassion and attributes their poor health to their individual choices. Structural limitations do not exist for Misha, instead, he believes that it is one’s own responsibility to circumvent the difficulties and make the right decisions. Later in the interview, he claims that his family was able to develop autonomy from the socialist reality already prior to migration to the “world of plenty”:

“Of course, in the USSR books about alternative healing or healthy nutrition were hard to get. But the intelligentsia had their ways. My former mother-in-law had a whole library, books would be copied, photographed, I don’t know

what! (...) If you want to learn something, you will, it is a matter of desire, of your kul'turnost."

This account contains another key concept that better educated urban migrants use to address health – that is, the concept of kul'turnost or "being cultured". On the one hand, this interview excerpt states the major function of kultur'nost as a proactive pursuit and implementation of knowledge about health, against all odds. On the other hand, it clearly treats kul'turnost as a characteristic of a particular social class: the intelligentsia. Indeed, Vera Dunham argues that kultur'nost is a highly important class-differentiating notion coined by socialist culture and adopted by middle-class urban populations as a key concept of their identity (Dunham 1990). Recently, Michele Rivkin-Fish (2005) had analyzed the meaning of kul'turnost in her research of post-Soviet discourses of health. Rivkin-Fish demonstrates that kul'turnost is a native category implemented by Russians themselves in their definitions of pro-active healthy behaviors. At the same time, she suggests that kul'turnost also encodes identity boundaries and class differentiation:

"Despite (...) positive associations, kul'turnost also has been used to signify class, race and cultural difference, serving as a weapon of power and exclusion" (Rivkin-Fish 2005: 12).

Indeed, implying a clearly individualistic approach to health, the kul'turnost narrative with respect to nutrition is most pronounced among better educated, urban Jewish migrants and among younger Russian Germans who treat health as an important marker of achieved status, a token of upward social mobility. The German "world of plenty" supplies them with the necessary food to act upon their beliefs on health. This transformation does not occur immediately, as the interview with 27-year-old, Russian-German Irina may illustrate:

"Of course, first, when we came, we probably behaved like some wild people, as if we came from a starvation zone [s golodnogo ostrova] . I remember how mad I was about all these pizzas and cokes, all that stuff. (...) But then you start thinking, what is good for you? I do not even touch that stuff anymore."

Irina suggests that simply being admitted to Germany does not mean an automatic change in individual behaviour: it is one's personal achievement and merit to maintain a healthy diet and to change old habits. These achievements become an issue in the binary opposition between the past and the present, whereby "socialist", "wild" habits are opposed to the healthy, "civilised" West. When describing the nutritional practices he considers typical for the ex-Soviet migrant community in Germany, Misha, the early Jewish migrant, says:

"There are people here who moved, like, thirty years ago, but they still live like in the Soviet Union. They eat all this heavy food, you know, meat and borscht

every day, and drink vodka, and nothing changes for them. They are like dinosaurs.”

By using derogatory comparisons, such as “dinosaurs” and by stressing the incompetence of “Soviet” people, Misha, as well as other interviewees, make it clear that self-“westernisation” is a status marker. Adapting to the nutritional practices of the West is a part of *kul'turnost*, of the pursuit for individual control over health. This conflation of “westernisation” and upward social mobility is likely to be related to modes of socialisation in the former USSR and with inequalities involved in the consumption and reproduction of globalised health discourses. First the Iron Curtain and then the unsteady economic transition of the 1990s had strong selective effects on who could communicate with contacts abroad and how. The “westernisation” of nutritional habits among Soviet Jews was determined by a variety of socio-economic and cultural factors. Already prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Diner suggests (Diner 2001: 149) that “Eastern European Jewish life fostered culinary cosmopolitanism”, whereby Jews “adapted local food and adopted it to their laws” (Diner 2001: 148). Due to the centrifugal movement of Jews throughout Eastern Europe and the pre-Revolutionary Pale of Settlement, Soviet Jewish cuisine was a melting pot of many traditions, embracing Romanian, Polish, German, Ukrainian and Baltic influences. Due to forced secularisation, however, the centuries-long tradition of *kashrut* (Jewish dietary law) had, however, been almost fully abandoned in most Jewish households and the influences of other cuisines were increasingly adopted. Even during the Iron Curtain era, Jews remained a globalised group. This is due in part to the fact that the professional occupations of many urban Jews often permitted them at least some travelling, even if only within the Warsaw block. In addition, from the 1970s onwards Jews grew increasingly involved in chain migration to Israel and the West, so that even those who remained home often managed to maintain at least loose contact with friends and relatives abroad. At the same time, because in Eastern Europe access to products of the capitalist West – material and non-material alike – was severely limited on ideological grounds, the desire to imitate Western consumerist standards was interpreted as status aspiration and political revolt (Bren and Neuburger 2012). Hence, “westernisation” of nutrition was a token of adherence to non-Soviet, if not openly anti-Soviet values and, at the same time, a marker of status aspirations. To urban, in particular, Jewish, intelligentsia, immigration to Germany is the final and most important step on the way to self-“westernisation”. Changing one’s nutritional practices is meant to symbolise and encode the transformation into a “Westerner”. Tamara (81, *Kontingentflüchtlinge*) says:

“I do not put chicken in the salad any longer. That was our Soviet habit, when there was nothing to eat, and the purpose of every meal was to simply stuff our-

selves. Now we are older, we have to take care of cholesterol, and I mostly use fresh vegetables.“

The main motivation of the nutritional change that Tamara mentions is her understanding of the family's changing health needs. By swapping chicken for greens, Tamara consciously innovates her diet. At the same time, she suggests that it was immigration to Germany which made the implementation of such change possible in the first place. The “Soviet” past is associated with unreflexive consumption determined by external circumstances, whereas life in the West fosters choice and liberty, opportunities one must seize in order to become healthier. The increase in fresh vegetable intake that Tamara mentions is, in fact, a key theme in how migrants operationalize “westernisation”: in their own terms, they speak of “eating more salad” or, in Russian, “est salat”.

In Russia and the former Soviet republics, salad is usually a mix of different vegetables, dressed with mayonnaise, creme fraiche or oil. Some kinds of salads popular in the former USSR include meat or cheese, such as the famous “Russian salad”, where potatoes are mixed with veal, sweet corn, peas, boiled carrots, and whatever else a Soviet housewife could manage to buy in a grocery store, and often, mayonnaise. Several interviewees among those who stress *kul'turnost* have spoken of “eating a lot more salad“ since their arrival to Germany, meaning, however, not the latter type of salad, but a mix of fresh vegetables. In fact, Russian salad (which is called “Olivier” in the former USSR, as it is attributed to a French cook of Count Stroganov) has become a symbol of Soviet nutrition: in the interviews migrants mention it when casting their new, Western habits against the old Soviet ones. Irina says:

“I do not make all these Soviet salads, this Olivier, God forbid! Just a bit of fresh vegetables with oil, that is it.“

Although “salad” was mentioned by everyone who spoke of changing their eating habits, the new practice was approached in quantitative, rather than qualitative terms: interviewees mostly spoke of a mean increase in vegetable intake, rather than about the nutritional qualities of these vegetables. By highlighting the sheer quantities of “salad” they eat, migrants, in fact, stress their ability to consume food previously unavailable to the majority of the Soviet population. Misha says:

“I eat very little meat, almost no meat at all. Mostly fish, and a lot of fresh vegetables. Lots of salad! The way I eat, only very rich people in Russia can afford. Not because the groceries are so expensive, but because they pay a cook, who thinks for them and knows what's good for them.“

The exception to quantity over quality trend are migrants who buy bio - or organic - groceries. The German organic food market is the biggest in Europe (Baker, et al. 2004), and existing market research suggests that preference for organic

food is characteristic of a German social stratum referred to in public discourse as *Bildungsbourgeoisie*, the educated upper middle-class; Faltins (2010: 50) demonstrates that education and income are the strongest predictors for organic food preferences in Germany, with size of household, gender or age playing a less decisive role in food choices. Organic consumerism is a practice embedded in the general context of social, political and environmental engagement typical of educated Germans (Baker, et al. 2004). In migrant households, consuming organic food acquires a very different meaning. Bio shopping is primarily a consumerist practice employed, on a practical level, strictly for improving one's individual health, and, on a social level, to maintain identity boundaries and signify social mobility. A fragment from an interview with Natasha (41, early Jewish migrant) illustrates the ambition to distinguish herself from other migrants:

“You will never meet our people in a bio-shop. They are ignorant. They just do not understand, I think. (They go) across the road, to a supermarket. I peek in the baskets sometimes, you know, out of pure interest: *kolbasa* [sausage] of all sorts, that is it. No bio-food. (...) Germans are a lot more civilized. It is understandable, they are very rich, it is a generation thing. (...) So, they are a lot more used to taking care of themselves. Before buying something in the shop, they will think twice, do I really need it? Will it do me good?”

Natasha is attributing preference for *kolbasa*, - sausage, - to a Soviet lifestyle as opposed to the “civilized” German habit of “taking care of themselves”. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that *kolbasa* is a concept used in Russia not only to describe a particular meat product, but also as a derogatory word for all things material and mundane. At some instances, members of the earliest, 1970s Jewish migration wave to Germany referred to later migrants as “sausage emigration” (*kolbasnaya emigratsia*), that is, composed of people motivated by economic considerations only and attracted to Germany by the abundance of “sausage”. In this excerpt, Natasha in fact stigmatises other migrants as both greedy for material pleasures and passive at the same time. The “German” shopping for organic food is almost literally opposed to shopping for *kolbasa* (it occurs “on the other side of the street”).

Shopping for organic food, however, does not always mean full trust in organic brands. In fact, a few interviewees questioned the quality of organic food. Instead, with a degree of self-humour, they continued shopping and hoping that they were still contributing to their health. For example, an interview with Julia and Joseph (51 and 55, Kontingentföchtlinge) demonstrates the internal conflict migrants feel when investing in expensive organic products, hoping they are healthier:

Joseph: I think the whole bio thing is just a spoof, just to make money. It is all poured from the same bucket, and then some different stickers are attached. It is all done to make you pay more.

P: So, you do not shop for bio?

Julia: I do!

Joseph: Yes, my wife does. She believes in this nonsense, well, I cannot stop her.

P: Why do you prefer bio?

Julia: Because with these brands you can at least hope there will be less chemicals, that they will be fresh. And I just see where rich Germans go. I can't shop like them, all bio, including meat, but at least some vegetables. They are not enemies to themselves, right? If they buy there it does them good, so, it will do us good, too!

Julia mimics “rich” German practices, because she believes they are healthier than the ones she knows from her sending country. She feels the pressure to be like a German woman in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The health qualities of food are not attributed to ingredients or production methods, instead, they are directly associated with the status of consumers. For Julia, Natasha, Misha and other “Westernised” interviewees, “rich” and “healthy” are co-dependent concepts; they shop for organic food not because – or not only because – of their environmental awareness, like “local” Germans do, but because of their status aspirations.

Conclusions

This article was about ways in which migrants from the former USSR in Germany conceptualise the relationship between food, migration experience and health. This paper sought to provide a new angle on the transformation of socialist health cultures, in particular, on how people's ideas about health change through exposure to globalised discourse and developed capitalist markets. The material discussed in this paper contributes to research which demonstrates that the desire to control, understand and choose what to put on one's plate is universal to people from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. It is differences in what is considered to be good or healthy food that are so vital to an understanding of social order and cultural differentiation.

Although the effects of migration on nutritional possibilities are equally recognised by all interviewed migrants as beneficial, the individual choices people make are conditioned by socio-economic mobility throughout their lifetimes, distinct cultural identities, generational differences and exposure to globalised discourses of health. Elderly Russian-Germans with low levels of education and with an agricultural background conceptualise health as a result of external circumstances, and their individual food choices are determined by tradition, family ties and a life-long experience of poverty. In contrast, better educated and younger Russian-Germans speak of health in more pro-active terms and set out to change their diet, using the new opportunities the German “world of plenty” offers them. The

most pro-active approach to health and nutrition choices is observed among the highly educated Jewish migrants from urban areas of the former USSR. These individuals regard health as a marker of achieved status and conceptualise it as an integral part of one's kul'turnost, or being cultured. In the context of the migratory process, kul'turnost acquires the meaning of "westernisation", and an adaptation to eating habits attributed to the "civilised" West becomes a key theme in individual nutritional behaviour.

The findings presented in this paper contribute to our understanding of the heterogeneity of post-socialist attitudes to health and of the effects the transition to capitalism has on individual behaviours. This paper suggests that migrants' ideas about healthy nutrition should not be only regarded as products of Soviet paternalism and fatalism, as some literatures cited in this paper suggest and as some of the people interviewed in this research claim. Instead, the discussion in this article should contribute to our understanding of "passivity" as a function of social status, and not a specific characteristic of Homo Sovieticus.

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