At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences.¹

Jewish Experience or Why Bother About Space?

In the beginning of the 1980s the so-called ‘spatial turn’ entered the humanities and social sciences. This innovative view replaced an understanding of space as a mere container for people, things, and ideas that remains stable over time, with a concept of space as a fluid and permanently (re)constructed notion.² Thus, space itself became a focus for research and an analytical category in itself. Within Jewish Studies, the spatial approach has been neglected for a long time, and it was not until 2008 that the first anthology on Jewish space, entitled Jewish Topographies. Visions of Space. Traditions of Place,” appeared.³ Prior to that publication, time rather than space was what scholars analyzed within the framework of the Jewish experience. Time was regarded as the metaphorical eternal wandering of the displaced and thus placeless people, whose home – if they had one at all – was located within their evanescent spirituality.

However, when approaching Jewish experiences from the vantage point of anthropology, it becomes a touchstone for the changed meaning of the residence in the postmodern, globalized world we live in today.⁴ In the age of migration and mobility, characterized by such phrases and terms as ‘transnational culture

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² Döring, Jörg /Thielmann, Tristan (Eds.), Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften, Bielefeld 2008.
⁴ The following argumentation was published previously in German in the Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde, 1/2012, Basel.
flows⁵ and ‘global ethnoscapes’,⁶ the place where people live, their home, the (local) residence has acquired a new meaning. Today, the Jewish diaspora experience, which has been formative for Jews for millennia, stands prototypically for the deterritorialization of the world and for the relocation of culture.

Interestingly, the proverbial ‘homelessness’ of Jews is spatialized in the context of specific territorial units. The recent example of Jewish migration demonstrates this situation very well. The ‘exodus’ of Jews from the former Soviet Union, which began to occur en mass in the late 1980s to early 1990s, was deeply rooted in questions of territory. With the establishment of the state of Israel, the Soviet government began accusing Jews of having not just one homeland but two – the Soviet Union and Israel – which according to Soviet ideology was regarded as traitorous and Jews, therefore, were considered enemies of the Soviet people.⁷ After the parting of the iron curtain, the decision to stay in or to leave the former Soviet Union was strongly influenced by this territorial dichotomy.

Young Russian-Speaking Jews in Berlin: Background and Methodology

To a large extent, because of those territorial issues in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jews, as they had countless times before, became emblematic of a prototypical ethno-religious mass migration. Out of over 1.6 million Jews from Russia, Ukraine, and other Soviet successor states who have left their home country during the past twenty years, more than 200,000 (including Jews and their non-Jewish kin) have chosen Germany as their destination.⁸ And in terms of numbers, the influx into the German capital has been unrivaled. Whereas prior to

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the fall of the Wall Berlin had been home to only about 6,000 Jews and its Jewish life had largely been stagnating, the number of its Jewish residents quadrupled following the events of 1989, and has increased to approximately 25,000 residents today.⁹ Thus, thanks to the post-Soviet migration, Berlin took first place as the fastest growing Jewish community anywhere, not just in Europe.

In my ethnological research I am analyzing the 1.5 Generation of Russian-speaking Jews who live in Berlin and who are today between eighteen and thirty-five years old. The term 1.5 generation refers to those who were born in the Soviet Union or its successor states and left for Germany between 1990 and 2010, when they were school students or younger. These young Russian, Ukrainian, Baltic, and Caucasian migrants brought with them their different cultural identities as Jews and as post-Soviets, which they have had to renegotiate in the context of German and German-Jewish culture. Referring to the work of Gupta and Ferguson, who claim that the processes of ‘people-making’ and ‘place-making’ go hand in hand,¹⁰ I argue that for these young Jewish migrants the negotiation of their identity is closely tied with the construction and acquisition of the city space in which they live. For those who live in Berlin these processes are influenced by its decidedly urban nature, as well as by the specific history, sociopolitics, and topography of the city itself.

While a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the processes of integration, identity-formation, and the lifestyles of Russian Jews in Germany, these studies have dealt almost exclusively with the first generation.¹¹ We know hardly anything about the younger generation and nothing about the interaction of identity and urban surroundings in that context. It seems likely, that this is, first, because the older generation still constitutes the largest segment among Russian-Jewish migrants, and secondly, most of the analyses have been sociological in nature, drawing their information from Jewish official organizations. The sources of firsthand data have almost exclusively been generated from among members of these organizations. However, according to various surveys, the majority of young Russian-speaking Jews in Germany are not affiliated with

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any Jewish organization, instead using informal networks to keep in touch with their ethnic peer groups.¹²

In order to find out more about the interaction of the migrants’ practices and their urban environment, I have chosen a mental mapping approach, a methodology promulgated by Kevin Lynch. In his work *The Image of the City*, Lynch claims that in order to evoke the image of a city one has to ask the actual inhabitants how they perceive the city they live in. Lynch assumes that “[e]ach individual creates and bears his own image, but there seems to be substantial agreement among members of the same group.”¹³ According to Lynch, these ‘mental maps’ are located at a symbolic level and are the results of the interaction between the individual agents and their physical environment. Applied to the topic of my research, these images of the city reflect cultural representations and metaphorical states of belonging for these migrants, which are, in turn, influenced and codefined by the urban character of their personal metropolis. In order to gain access to such mental maps, I am using a mixture of data collecting methods, which include map drawing, participant observation, personal interviews, as well as so-called perception walks.

In what follows I will introduce some strategies related to specific urban features that I have found to be characteristic for young Russian-speaking Jews in Berlin.

“Ku’damm is the most beautiful tusovka”

Lynch speaks of image elements into which we conveniently divide the master image of our city. Around such elements we create various defining systems or grids in order to organize our world. One of these salient elements is, according to Lynch, a *district*. He describes districts as “relatively large city areas which the observer can mentally go inside of, and which have some common character. They can be recognized internally, and occasionally can be used as external reference as a person goes by or towards them.”¹⁴ In one mind-mapping session

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¹⁴ Ibid., 66.
Leonía, a 17-year-old migrant from Ukraine was asked to draw the places in Berlin that are relevant to his life. He starts with the western Berlin district of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf and uses the term ‘my district’ when describing it. His description coincides with recent statistical data that identify Charlottenburg as the place where most of the Russian-speaking Jews in Berlin live.¹⁵ In some studies Charlottenburg is nostalgically called “Charlottengrad” an allusion to this area having been the cultural center for the Eastern European Jews in Berlin in the 1920s.¹⁶ Then Leonía marks Kurfürstendamm (or Ku’damm), a street in Charlottenburg, as his most important place in the city:

Because this is for me Berlin. I live in this city and Ku’damm shows simply how beautiful it is, and I love meeting my friends there. And yes, I like to hang around there. It is just that there are always a lot of things going on, and it shows perfectly what a big city Berlin is, a center, a metropolis. It is nice there and you meet a large variety of people. It is just perfect to show somebody the city there. Because I just think that Ku’damm is the most beautiful and the loudest, how you say it in German, tusovka (uses a Russian word for ‘youth scene’).¹⁷

For Leonía, the variety of stimuli and attractions a metropolis has to offer what Georg Simmel calls the ‘tempo’ of a city,¹⁸ is concentrated along Ku’damm. The fact that he is looking for these attractions, rather than being concerned or repulsed by them, identifies him as an urbanite. When As Leonía goes on drawing his map of Berlin, it is becoming apparent that the Ku’damm he has in mind does not coincide precisely with the ‘real’ Ku’damm. When asked to draw places he goes to on Ku’damm, he draws a totally different street, Tauentzienstraße, which at its western end turns into Ku’damm. He also draws various side streets, the names of which names he does not remember but which he describes as also being Ku’damm. It is obvious that in his mind Ku’damm loses the character of a street. While Leonía draws, this street is literally extending and absorbing, one after another, the neighboring streets, alleys, and squares. It becomes a district – a relatively large city area that he can mentally enter, and which, for him, has common characteristics. Ku’damm becomes a synonym for Charlottenburg itself; it becomes his own ‘Kurfürstengrad.’

¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Interview and mental mapping session, 8 January 2010.
What does Leonia’s perception of Ku’damm tell us about his identity? For Leonia, Ku’damm is also the place where the Jewish Youth Center of a Jewish community is located, where he goes occasionally to meet his friends. When he is asked to give the directions to this Youth Center, he says immediately: “It is easy. It is on Ku’damm.” But then he explains where to turn and which street to cross in order to reach the Center if you actually come from Ku’damm. In reality, the Center is located on Joachimstaler Straße. He says that the Youth Center is located in the ‘synagogue’ where nearly everyone speaks Russian. For him, this is one of the places in Berlin where he can talk in his mother tongue and meet his Russian-speaking friends:

We were a group, a community of, let’s say, ten people, ten Jews, sometimes more. And we used to discuss different topics, sometimes we used to play, sometimes we used to talk about important political issues or anything like this.¹⁹

Leonia’s mental map shows us that, in order to deal with the complexity of his identities, he uses a coping strategy that I would like to call a ‘strategy of extending’: he is extending and projecting one street onto the entire district. In terms of identity, this strategy allows him to order his self-image, which consists of many parts, such as being Jewish, Russian, and German at the same time. In his mind he places Tauentzienstraße, where he hangs around with his German-born school friends, Joachimstaler Straße, where the Jewish Youth Center is located, and a synagogue where “everybody speaks Russian” at Ku’damm. Therefore, he unconsciously uses topographical conglomeration or extension to bring order into the chaotic plurality of choices for identity construction that Berlin offers him.

“We live in a Jewish district, and you in a Russian-German one”

While talking about ‘his district,’ Leonia uses the word ‘border’ several times. When pointing out the location of his school on the blank map of Berlin, he says: “I am not sure whether my school is located in Charlottenburg or in Spandau. It is on the border between these two.” What Leonia describes as border, Lynch calls the edge. In addition to district, Lynch recognizes the edge as another image element that individuals use in order to apprehend their city. He defines edges as “linear elements not considered as paths: they are usually, but not quite always,

¹⁹ Interview and mental mapping session, 8 January 2010.
the boundaries between two kinds of areas.”²⁰ This definition is a relevant one for Diana, a 29-year-old migrant from Ukraine. For her, the boundary between the two districts, Charlottenburg and Spandau, plays a central role in her perception of Berlin. As she is showing me her Berlin, on the way to her flat we catch the Underground train that goes in the direction of Spandau:

Actually I live in Charlottenburg, not in Spandau, directly on the border between the two districts. My house is the last house in Charlottenburg. Behind this house Spandau begins. Also in my passport it says: Berlin-Charlottenburg. When I came to the central district council in order to register my place of residence, a man who worked there asked for my street. Goebel Street, I answered. And then he said to me: “So what are you doing here? You should go to a district council of Spandau.” Then he looked it up in the computer and said: “Oh, indeed, your house is still in Charlottenburg.” My husband has a big family and all of them live in Spandau. And sometimes I say to them, we live in a Jewish district and you live in a Russian-German one. And then they are offended.²¹

The fact that Diana’s house is ‘still in Charlottenburg’ clearly has a symbolic meaning for her. Compared to Spandau and its residents, Charlottenburg, has somehow attained a higher status, and so has Diana because she now lives there. This becomes clear in her last sentence: Her husband’s family is offended when she tells them that they live in a Russian-German district, and not in a Jewish one. At this point, Diana’s image of Berlin’s topography is strongly interwoven with an ethnic, topographic inscription. The borderline dividing two ethnic groups turns out to be the borderline between two districts.

In order to understand the dynamics of this division, we need to know Diana’s biographical background and explain the formation of the Russian-speaking minority within German society. Diana’s husband is, like herself, a migrant from the former Soviet Union, but is not Jewish. While Diana arrived in Germany under the special law for Jewish refugees, the so-called ‘Contingency Refugee Act.’ her husband belongs to the group of ethnic German repatriates (Aussiedler), who were invited to come to Germany from the Soviet Union after the Second World War. Although the members of both migrant groups speak Russian and have the same country of origin, Jews and ethnic Germans carry, in many respects, different cultural and religious values. The fact that they entered Germany through two different migratory gates, which assigns them different legal status within German society, emotionally charges their awareness of each, including reciprocal prejudices and sometimes open hostility.²²
Although married to an ethnic German, which necessarily results in shared values, Diana still perceives her husband’s family as proponents of values starkly different from those she and her own ethnic group hold. According to Bourdieu’s distinction theory, youth and young adults in particular find it necessary to put up or use existing lines of demarcation between themselves and other groups in order to enhance their own sense of belonging.²³ Diana describes her city using a strategy of distinction. This even takes a physical form when we are on the way to her flat. In order to get there we have to negotiate a pedestrian tunnel underneath the house, about which Diana says:

Do you see this tunnel? It divides the house into two parts. On the right side is Charlottenburg, on the left side is Spandau. You see, here it is even written ‘SD’ for ‘Siemensdamm,’ a synonym for the Siemens factory in Spandau. The other side is already Charlottenburg.²⁴

So, every time Diana comes home, she is reassured of her Jewishness by literally diving deep into the architecture of her own house. A physical experience of identity becomes possible through the material structure of the city.

How to Become a “Real” Berliner

The story of Charlottenburg continues when I call Fabian, a 29-year-old Russian migrant to ask him for an interview. He agrees immediately, gives me his address, and invites me to his place for the next evening. I get off the train in the heart of the old borough in the west of Berlin, Charlottenburg. In Fabian’s flat, I feel like I am in a palace: four-meter-high ceilings covered with fine stucco, huge airy rooms, lit brightly through wide windows. In the middle of a bookshelf an Israeli flag and a silver menorah mark the place unmistakably as Jewish. I put a white sheet of paper in front of Fabian and ask him to draw Berlin with the places that belong to his everyday life. He doesn’t even need a minute to think about the task, grabs a pencil, and the first thing comes out: “Well, here in the middle there was a wall. It divides Berlin into two parts, Eastern and Western.” He uses the line where the wall used to be as the grid for his drawing.

(Eds.), Zuhause fremd. Russlanddeutsche zwischen Russland und Deutschland, Bielefeld 2006, 173-196.


²⁴ Perception walk, 11 November 2009.
The idea that many Germans are still aware of that line, that replaces the Berlin wall, is not new. For those who grew up in the divided city, the division of Berlin is still stored in their memory. It is interesting that for many young migrants who, like Fabian, came to Germany after the wall came down, the East-West dichotomy also influences strongly their perception of the city. Marta, a 30-year-old migrant from Lithuania, starts her story with the sentence:

When I lived in Düsseldorf and used to come to Berlin to visit my friends, my Berlin used to be the western part. I liked this part very much. When I first came to Berlin, I arrived at the Zoo station. Then I knew the Zoo area very well, I know Ku’damm and so forth. But by now, after I moved to Berlin [...], I started loving the East more than the West – everything that starts at Hackescher Markt and goes in the direction of Alexander Platz. For me, this is real Berlin.²⁵

The fact that young migrants use the nonexistent wall as a grid for their perception of the city’s space is remarkable. It demonstrates that a space does not exist *per se* but is produced by people in cultural and social interaction, and, as Bernd Hamm correctly observes, exists in the first instance in people’s interpretation.²⁶ In this context, Michael Mayerfeld Bell talks about ‘the ghosts of place’.²⁷ By which he means that people or artifacts that are not physically present anymore constitute an inextricable aspect of the phenomenology of the place that is reflected in the experience of this place.

For most of my interviewees, the awareness of West or East Berlin does not loom large but is rather projected onto specific districts within the city. It is striking that many Russian-speaking Jews live in a western borough of Berlin – Charlottenburg – as Fabian does. While there are statistics that show that the majority of the elderly members of the Jewish community live in this area²⁸ there is no information on another aspect: Where do their children go when they move out of their parents’ home? Based on my experience, a large number of them stay in the same area. It seems that one of the reasons for choosing Charlottenburg as a place of residence is a strong identification with the ‘real’ Berlin and its citizens. As a matter of fact, Charlottenburg is often described as an old Berlin borough. As one of my informants, Alex, says about Charlottenburg:

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²⁵ Interview, 19 March 2010.
The kind of people who live here is really classical West Berlin. [...] It is an area where people know each other and have lived together for a very long time. It is rather unspectacular, though. There is hardly anything here that catches your eye, but you have everything you need – a good infrastructure and great public transport connections.²⁹

Fabian, whom I mentioned earlier, spoke similarly about Charlottenburg:

You can live here very well although there is nothing to do in this area. It’s a boring, respectable quarter. I am really sorry for you if you grew up in Charlottenburg or Wilmersdorf. It is great to live here, it has a healthy infrastructure, no youth gangs who create problems, it is quiet and you don’t have a number of other conflicts. But if you want to go out for dinner, you need to go to Prenzlauer Berg or Mitte.³⁰

So, it is solid infrastructure, good transportation, and peace and quiet that are valued in Charlottenburg by young Russian-speaking Jews. When one reads the above descriptions, it resonates with what Gerhard Schulze, who analyzed milieu specific structures used in cities, calls ‘high level milieu.’³¹ In contrast to the category of ‘harmony milieu,’ whose members prefer to stay in the area they live in all the time, those classified as ‘high level milieu’ value good transportion connections because those connections allow them to use the whole city area and to get quickly from one place to another.

However, the description above could apply to any group of people and is therefore only one part of the story. So I turn to Jewish religious life in Charlottenburg to look for a specific cultural and ethnic context. Most of my Charlottenburg-based interviewees would put the community center of Chabad Lubawitsch, a Hasidic branch of ultraorthodox Judaism, on their Berlin map. Chabad Lubawitsch opened its synagogue and community center in 2007 in Berlin-Charlottenburg and soon became the favorite destination for many Russian-speaking Jews.³² While it is obvious that Chabad chose their location on Münstersche Straße because of the large number of Jews who live in that area, only a few Russian Jews would claim that they moved to Charlottenburg in order to be closer to the Center. However, since Chabad is located there, and its services and lectures attract a lot of young people, it plays a large role in the construction of Jewish space in Berlin-Charlottenburg.

²⁹ Interview, 31 July 2010.
³⁰ Interview, 28 June 2010.
For most Chabad visitors, the community center is not so much a place of religious inspiration as a place where they meet other Jews. It is also a place where Jews from the former Soviet Union can talk in Russian with each other. As one can hear at Chabad center, the Russian language dominates this space. Chabad also runs an extensive internet presence in Russian advertising the youth club, kindergarten, and religious learning center.

When I ask Fabian where he meets other Jews in Berlin, he says:

At Chabad of course. For people like me, who are not particularly religious, a Kabbalat Shabbat is a cultural activity. The idea here is tradition and a certain rite. When I go to Kabbalat Shabbat at Chabad it is as if you went together with your German friends out of politeness to listen to the Gospel of Matthew in their church. Besides, in this case the liturgy has a different meaning for me than to my friends. Chabad gives me a Jewish tradition which I can pass on to my children in the future.”

Chabad, of course, is just one religious Jewish sect out of many that exist in Berlin. Many of the commentators on the Jewish religious landscape in Germany stress that Berlin is home to an incomparable plethora of orthodox, ultraorthodox, and progressive Jewish movements, which is only possible because of the specifically metropolitan character of the capital city. Hartmut Bomhoff, one of the organizers of the progressive rabbinical seminary Abraham-Geiger-Kolleg, recently noted that the activity of Jewish religious organizations in Berlin is strongly defined by the rivalry for new members. “In Berlin,” Bomhoff observed, “we have a conflicting situation which you won’t find in such a strong form in other German cities.” And concerning Chabad: “Chabad gives people a warm and welcoming atmosphere, Chabad meets people in person, gives them a family. Russians also go to Chabad because they look for immediate answers. No easy answers but immediate ones.”

One of the reasons that many young singles and young families from the former Soviet Union choose Chabad when it comes to religious services is that Chabad is often the only Jewish religious movement they know from their experience in the Soviet Union. With the Iron Curtain’s fall, it was the Chabad Lubawitsch movement that became very active in that vast territory of the former united Soviet republics. Another Jewish organization that arrived in the Soviet Union very quickly was the Jewish Agency for Israel, which was of course Zionist and explicitly secular. That is why for those young Jews, who left the Soviet Union when they were in their teens, Chabad often soon became familiar and intimate,

33 Interview, 28 June 2010.
a place from back home. Growing up in an atmosphere of financial hardships, having both parents working full time, for the Soviet Jewish teenagers Chabad frequently became a place where they could get extra food, and a warm welcome, and enjoy the safe family atmosphere for which Chabad is well-known (and often criticized as an obvious strategy of inter-Jewish proselytizing. Thus, young ex-Soviet Jews construct their Jewish Charlottenburg by using childhood memories and experiences they had as children and teenagers prior to migrating.

Conclusion

Young Russian-speaking Jewish migrants in Berlin use their spatial environment in order to structure and form their identity. For Leonia, Ku’damm has become a symbol for the unification of his Jewish, Russian and German allegiances. Extending one street to the status of a whole district, he has succeeded to surround bits and pieces of his identity with one circumference and weave it into a single garment. For Diana, the border between Charlottenburg and Spandau is symbolic for the border between two ethnic groups, Jews and Russian-Germans. In setting the boundaries between these two districts and distinguishing her home district from the one of her husband’s family, she reassures herself of her own group integration. Both Leonia and Diana are creating ‘their’ places and using topographical features in order to cope with the diversity, flexibility, and chaos that Berlin offers.

The construction of space is strongly dominated by personal and collective memory and perception. In the case of the East-West dichotomy, the memory at work is based on social communication and interpretation. Such a divided perception of the city goes hand in hand with the strong desire of young Russian-speaking Jews to perceive themselves as ‘real’ Berliners – a desire motivated by their migration experience and a specific German-Jewish context. In the case of the Chabad Community Center, the construction of space is defined by personal memories of preimmigration life and childhood. The Chabad center is associated with a family atmosphere. As such, it contributes significantly to the construction of Jewish Charlottenburg as a home and family district. My assumption is that in the space-constructing processes of young Russian-speaking Jews, different Berlin boroughs are assigned other functions, e.g., providing party life or places in which to spend leisure time. However, this topic provides the basis for another story.
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