

Wladimir Kaminer and Jewish identity in ‘Multikulti’ Germany

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Wladimir Kaminer has become something of a poster-boy for the ‘*Kontingentflüchtlinge* [Quota Refugees]’, the term applied to Jews from the former Soviet Union who immigrated to Germany between 1990 and 2006, as a result of a decision made first by the GDR and then adopted by the reunified Federal Republic. Kaminer writes little about his Jewishness in his work, but, in his first book, *Russendisko* (2000), he discusses the Jewish identity of Russian-speaking Jews living in Germany, viewed through the lens of *Multikulti* Berlin. Kaminer depicts them as just another of Germany’s ethnic minority groups and, as such, nothing special. Given both Germany’s past and the reasons offered by the German government for allowing these Jews to emigrate in the first place, Kaminer’s opinion is undoubtedly controversial. This article investigates how and why Kaminer adopts this position. It examines the pre-migration experiences of Jews from the former Soviet Union, which include: antisemitism, attitudes towards religion and discourse about the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, as well as the experiences (more unique to Kaminer) of Berlin in the 1990s, the heyday of multicultural optimism. Although Kaminer is an unusual case study who deliberately subverts the reader’s expectations of his identity politics, this article aims to show that his writings on Russian-speaking Jews, while highly subjective, have a wider application than might first appear.

Keywords: Kaminer, Jews, Germany, Soviet Union, antisemitism, immigration, multiculturalism



Im Sommer 1990 breitete sich in Moskau ein Gerücht aus: Honecker nimmt Juden aus der Sowjetunion auf, als eine Art Wiedergutmachung dafür, dass die DDR sich nie an den deutschen Zahlungen für Israel beteiligte. [...] Es sprach sich schnell herum, alle wussten Bescheid, außer Honecker vielleicht. (Kaminer 2000a: 9)

[*In the summer of 1990, a rumour was doing the rounds in Moscow: Honecker was taking Jews from the Soviet Union, by way of a kind of compensation for East Germany’s never having paid its share of the German payments to Israel. [...] Word got around quickly. Everyone knew, except maybe Honecker.* (Kaminer 2002b: 13)]

So begins Wladimir Kaminer's bestselling book *Russendisko* [Russian Disco], a collection of autofictional stories of Berlin life in the 1990s. The stories should not be read as historically accurate texts, nor are they intended as such. For instance, in the above quotation, the reference to Erich Honecker is factually incorrect. Honecker had been ousted as leader of the GDR in late 1989, and it was in fact Lothar de Mazière's government which enacted the policy Kaminer describes. But Kaminer is describing a 'rumour', and Honecker would have been a much more widely known figure in the Soviet Union. In typical style, Kaminer hints the inaccuracy to the reader — 'Everyone knew, except maybe Honecker'. 'Russien in Berlin [*Russians in Berlin*]', the opening chapter of *Russendisko* from which this extract is taken, relates Kaminer's personal migration story but also provides an introduction to an important development in the post-war history of Jews in Germany. Over 200,000 Jews have emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Germany since 1990 (Bundesministerium 2011: 109). After the first ministerial conference in the newly reunified Federal Republic of Germany in 1991, these immigrants were officially known as *Kontingentflüchtlinge* [Quota Refugees].¹ The migration of these Russian-speaking Jews fundamentally changed the composition and outlook of the Jewish population in Germany, on the one hand reviving many communities whose memberships were on the decline but, on the other hand, creating tensions and problems of coexistence with established Jews (known as the *Alteingesessenen* [Old-established]) living in Germany.²

Wladimir Kaminer was born in Moscow in 1967 to a Jewish family and emigrated in July 1990, one of the first of a cohort that has been called the 'fourth wave' of Jewish immigration to Germany from the USSR,³ a migration that began in 1990 and lasted (officially) until 2006, when the federal government passed new legislation ending the special status of the *Kontingentflüchtlinge*.⁴ Kaminer's biography appears to be a relatively straightforward, if idiosyncratic, success story. He studied dramaturgy and trained as a sound engineer in Russia, then, after moving to Germany, published stories in the German language in several newspapers

¹ I will use the terms 'Russian-speaking Jews', '*Kontingentflüchtlinge*' and 'Jews from the former Soviet Union' interchangeably. All appear in the literature on this topic, however the latter is most accurate, as these Jews were, in the main, not *Flüchtlinge* [refugees] and came from various ex-Soviet republics, particularly Ukraine and Russia, as well as Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, and others.

² By established Jews I mean those who had settled in Germany after the war, many of whom were Eastern European Jews who had survived the Holocaust, and their descendants.

³ According to Yfaat Weiss and Lena Gorelik (2012: 383–84), the first wave came after the Bolshevik revolution, the second during the Second World War and the Nazi occupation, and the third during the 1970s.

⁴ The new regulations made entry dependent on three criteria: linguistic (that immigrants could demonstrate a basic knowledge of the German language), religious (that they would be qualified to join a Jewish community), and economic (that they could prove that they would be able to support themselves financially in Germany). This reduced the number of immigrants to approximately 1000 per year (Weiss and Gorelik 2012: 418).

and magazines. At the same time, he co-founded the now famous *Russen Disko* at the Kaffee Burger in Berlin. He is married to a Russian, has two children and lives what he described in an interview (2000b: 23) as ‘ein ziemlich spießbürgerliches Leben [*a pretty dull middle-class life*]’.

This article will use Kaminer’s *Russendisko* as both a subjective, literary case study and as a springboard for broader discussion of the fourth wave of Russian-Jewish immigration to Germany. It will investigate how Kaminer’s particular take on the Jewish identity of the *Kontingentflüchtlinge* is determined partly by literary devices and also by their pre- and post-migration experiences. These include: antisemitism in the former Soviet Union, difficulties with integration into Germany’s Jewish communities, differences from established Jews in Germany concerning religious knowledge and attitudes towards the Holocaust, and some Russian-speaking Jews’ experiences of living side-by-side with other ethnic minority groups in an ostensibly multicultural society.

The first chapter of *Russendisko* is a rare exception for Kaminer in the sense that he writes explicitly about his Jewish identity, something that features hardly at all in the rest of his work. One of the few other examples where Kaminer discusses his Jewishness is in his contribution to *So einfach war das* [It was that simple], a collection of nonfictional accounts about growing up Jewish in Germany after 1945. Here, Kaminer focuses not on his experiences in Germany but on the day he received his Soviet passport at the age of sixteen:

Meine Klassenkameraden wollten unbedingt meinen Pass sehen. Ich drückte mich, weil darin gleich neben dem Foto unter der Rubrik Nationalität “Jude” stand. Ein solches Dokument konnte mir keine zusätzliche Autorität verschaffen. Aber die blöde Lehrerin bestand darauf, wir sollten unsere Pässe unbedingt einander zeigen. “Kaminer will sich nicht ausweisen, er hat einen Judenpass!” schrie einer der Schüler. Die ganze Klasse lachte, alle wollten auf einmal nur noch meinen Pass sehen. Die Lehrerin murmelte irgendetwas über den Internationalismus des sowjetischen Bürgers. Das war für mich ein schwacher Trost. [...] Eine wichtige Lebenslehre, die ich aus diesem Unterricht mit nach Hause nahm, war: Ich bin in einem Gastland aufgewachsen, gehöre nicht ganz hierher und muss meinen Pass nach Möglichkeit geheim halten. (Kaminer 2002a: 57–58).

[*My classmates really wanted to see my passport. But I couldn’t face it, because in it, right next to the photo, under the heading for nationality, stood the word ‘Jew’. Such a document wouldn’t give me any extra authority. But the stupid teacher insisted that we show our passports to each other. ‘Kaminer doesn’t want to identify himself — he’s got a Jew’s passport!’ shouted one of the students. The whole class laughed; now everybody wanted to see my passport. The teacher mumbled something about the internationalism of the Soviet citizen. That was little consolation for me. [...] An important life-lesson I took home from this class was: I’ve grown up in a host country, I don’t quite belong here, and I must keep my passport a secret if at all possible.*]⁵

Antisemitism in the former Soviet Union, which Kaminer touches on here, was a significant motivation for many Jews to emigrate in the early 1990s. A combination of political

⁵ Translations from German are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

upheaval and economic instability in the wake of communism's collapse led to a new wave of anti-Semitic sentiment in the media and in public opinion in the former Soviet states. Although violent attacks against Jews ultimately did not take place (the victims turned out to be African students, East Asians and nationals of the Asiatic republics (Weiss and Gorelik 2012: 390)), the threat of violence, a threat with a dense historical legacy incorporating pogroms and Stalin's persecution of the Jews, was keenly felt by Jews living in the former USSR. Kaminer does not mention this in the context of his, or anyone else's, motivations for leaving, but in 'Russians in Berlin' he offers a refracted, multivalent depiction of how antisemitism operated in the Soviet Union.

Kaminer's father, we are told, had been a candidate for membership of the Communist party four times, entry into which would have enabled him to progress to manager of his planning department, which, in turn, would have earned him an extra thirty-five roubles a year. However, every time his father made a fresh attempt to join the party, a process in which he 'trank mit den Aktivisten literweise Wodka [und] schwitzte sich mit ihnen in der Sauna zu Tode [*drank vodka by the litre together with Party activists [and] sweated to death with them in the sauna*]', he was told:

"Wir schätzen dich sehr, Viktor, du bist für immer unser dickster Freund [...] Wir hätten dich auch gerne in die Partei aufgenommen. Aber du weißt doch selbst, du bist Jude und kannst jederzeit nach Israel abhauen" (Kaminer 2000a: 10–11).

[*"We really like you, Viktor. You're our bosom pal for all time [...] We'd have liked to have you in the Party. But you know yourself that you're a Jew and might bugger off to Israel any moment"* (Kaminer 2002b: 14)].

Casual antisemitism appears to be at the root of this attitude, yet elsewhere in the story, Kaminer playfully subverts the reader's expectations of an anti-Semitic Soviet body politic and of Jewish victim status within it. He writes:

Normalerweise versuchten die meisten in der Sowjetunion ihre jüdischen Vorfahren zu verleugnen, nur mit einem sauberen Pass konnte man auf eine Karriere hoffen. Die Ursache dafür war nicht der Antisemitismus, sondern einfach die Tatsache, dass jeder mehr oder weniger verantwortungsvolle Posten mit einer Mitgliedschaft in der Kommunistischen Partei verbunden war. Und Juden hatte man ungern in der Partei (Kaminer 2000a: 9).

[*Normally most people in the Soviet Union tried to cover up any Jewish forebears they had, because you only had hopes of a career if your passport didn't give you away. The root of this lay not in anti-Semitism but simply in the fact that every position that carried any responsibility at all required membership of the Communist Party. And nobody really wanted Jews in the Party* (Kaminer 2002b: 13)].

Here Kaminer inserts a logical fallacy to disrupt the narrative. It was not antisemitism that thwarted Jews' career prospects in the Soviet Union but rather the fact that they were not members of the Communist party. The reader is still considering this possibility — did Jews

simply not wish to join the Communist party? — when Kaminer adds, as if by way of explanation: '[a]nd nobody really wanted Jews in the party'. This paradoxical formulation can be interpreted as Kaminer's attempt to introduce his German readership to the 'logic' of attitudes towards Jews in the anti-racist, internationalist Soviet Union.

Jews from the former Soviet Union were initially allowed to migrate to the GDR when the first freely-elected *Volkskammer* [People's Chamber] decided to initiate a partial reorientation of the GDR's relationship to the German past. Jews were therefore allowed to enter East Germany ostensibly as a form of belated *Wiedergutmachung* [compensation], both for the Nazi crimes and also for reparations that the GDR had never paid. However, it was no coincidence that the GDR granted this immigration right at the same time that it was trying to open its export markets to Israel and the US, not to mention its attempts to gain diplomatic recognition from the State of Israel, which it felt it could achieve due to Israel's fears of a reunited Germany. Following reunification, in October 1990, the Federal Republic at first halted the immigration process before reinstating it in January 1991 under new regulations. The policy was again touted as a form of ongoing *Wiedergutmachung* to Jews; however, this time the unstated motive was the desire to revive Jewish life in Germany — potentially even to re-establish a German Jewry comparable to the one that had existed before the Nazis came to power. However, it seemed that nobody had thought to consider who these Jews were, and whether they would be willing or even capable of carrying out the task that had been set for them.

It turned out that the Jewish immigrants had very little in common with the Jews who lived in Germany before 1933. This was due to the way they were socialised in the Soviet Union. For one thing, the Soviet Union defined Jewishness not as a religion but as a nationality, which was recorded on the fifth line of a person's passport. Soviet Jews therefore tended to view their Jewish identity in national or ethnic terms, which was reinforced by the Soviet Union's anti-religious policies. These policies meant that Russian-speaking Jews often knew very little about Jewish religious practice (Schoeps, Jasper & Vogt 1996: 146). And the 'national' or ethnic classification led to considerable problems when it came to the Russian-speaking Jews' integration into Germany's *Jüdische Gemeinden* [Jewish communities].

The Jewish communities, being fundamentally religious organisations, defined Jewishness according to the *halacha* (the part of the Talmud that contains rules of conduct for Jews) and the *halacha* stipulates that to be Jewish, one must be born to a Jewish mother. The Soviet classification system, however, ran as follows: if you were born to two Jewish parents, you had no choice regarding your 'national' categorisation; you were Jewish. However, if only one of

your parents was Jewish, you could choose which of their ‘nationalities’ to adopt as your own. The consequence was that some people with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent would take the Jewish ‘nationality’ of their father, making them Jewish in Soviet eyes but not under the *halacha*, while others with a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father would take their father’s ‘nationality’, meaning that, while halachically Jewish, they were not, or at least not officially, considered Jewish in the Soviet Union.

After arriving in Germany, Jews from the former Soviet Union were encouraged to register with their local Jewish community. Many of them discovered at this point that they were not considered Jewish enough to join, a scenario presented by Lena Gorelik (2005), another Russian-Jewish writer of the ‘fourth wave’, in her short story ‘Herr Grinblum, Sie sind kein Jude! [*Mr. Grinblum, you are not a Jew!*]’. A sad irony of this was that people who ‘only’ had Jewish fathers (and were thus not considered Jewish by the communities), nonetheless had Jewish last names, which meant that they often bore the brunt of Soviet antisemitism. The situation was complicated because the Jewish institutions in Germany, run under religious principles, had little interest in accommodating non-halachic Jews. In a 2001 interview with *Der Spiegel*, the then President of the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* [Central Council of Jews in Germany], Paul Spiegel, commented: ‘In den letzten Jahren sind 30 000 Menschen — gegen unseren Rat — hier aufgenommen worden, die nach unserem halachischen Religionsgesetz keine wirklichen Juden sind. [*In recent years, this country has accepted — against our advice — 30,000 people who are not real Jews according to our halachic religious law*]’ (Spiegel 2001: 19). Research into this phenomenon by Yinon Cohen and Irena Kogan suggests that as many as fifty percent of the *Kontingentflüchtlinge* were not halachically Jewish (2005: 255) — meaning that Paul Spiegel’s estimation was actually quite conservative.

There was also a *Fälschungsdebatte* [debate about forged documents] in the German press in the 1990s. This concerned non-Jewish Russians who had allegedly bought a Jewish ‘nationality’ in their passports in order to gain entry into Germany. Jeroen Doomernik estimated in a 1997 study that as many as twenty percent of the *Kontingentflüchtlinge* had fabricated their Jewish identity (Doomernik 1997: 83). However, in the absence of more recent studies, it is difficult to be certain of the accuracy of this figure. Kaminer considers this phenomenon only in terms of its ironic quality, noting that formerly people had used the same means to rid themselves of their stigmatised Jewish ‘nationality’: ‘Die Juden, die früher an die Miliz Geld zahlten, um das Wort Jude aus ihrem Pass entfernen zu lassen, fingen an, für das Gegenteil Geld auszugeben. [*Jews who had formerly paid [the police] to have the word “Jew” removed*

from their passports now started shelling out to have it put in]’ (Kaminer 2000a: 11; Kaminer 2002b: 14). In some cases, the incoming Russian-speaking Jews’ lack of religious and cultural knowledge was misinterpreted as an indication that they were not Jewish at all. In ‘Russians in Berlin’, Kaminer describes the following encounter:

In Köln, zum Beispiel, wurde der Rabbiner der Synagoge beauftragt, durch eine Prüfung festzustellen, wie jüdisch diese neuen Juden wirklich waren. [...] Der Rebbe befragte eine Dame, was Juden zu Ostern essen. “Gurken”, sagte die Dame, “Gurken und Osterkuchen”. “Wie kommen Sie denn auf Gurken?”, regte sich der Rebbe auf. “Ach ja, ich weiß jetzt, was Sie meinen”, strahlte die Dame, “wir Juden essen zu Ostern Matze”. “Na gut, wenn man es ganz genau nimmt, essen die Juden das ganze Jahr über Matze, und auch mal zu Ostern. Aber wissen Sie überhaupt, was Matze ist?”, fragte der Rebbe. “Aber sicher doch”, freute sich die Frau, “das sind doch diese Kekse, die nach altem Rezept aus dem Blut von Kleinkindern gebacken werden”. Der Rebbe fiel in Ohnmacht (Kaminer 2000a: 14).

[In Cologne, for example, the rabbi at the synagogue was asked to assess just how Jewish these new Jews really were. [...] The rabbi asked one lady what Jews ate at Easter. “Gherkins”, said the lady, “gherkins and Easter cake”. “What makes you think they eat gherkins?” demanded the rabbi, agitated. “Oh, right, now I know what you mean”, returned the lady, beaming. “At Easter we Jews eat matzos”. “Well, fair enough, the fact of the matter is that Jews eat matzos all year round, and that means they eat them at Easter too. But tell me”, enquired the rabbi, “do you actually know what matzos are?” “Of course I do”, replied the lady, delighted, ‘they’re those biscuits baked to an ancient recipe, with the blood of little children’. The rabbi fainted clear away (Kaminer 2002b: 17).]

Here, as elsewhere in his work, Kaminer relates a story which begins in historical reality (Jewish communities’ efforts to ‘screen’ incoming ex-Soviet Jews), mounts in ridiculousness, and ends with a punch line which escalates the story’s farcicality to its apex while *at the same time* bringing it back to a historical truth (the prevalence of a classic anti-Semitic trope, the blood libel, in the Soviet Union). Kaminer does not even provide a resolution to the story — i.e. was the woman actually Jewish? — not because she self-evidently wasn’t, but rather, in keeping with the theme of ambiguity running through his work and, indeed, with the findings of historical research, because it is entirely possible that even a person born to Jewish parents in the USSR could have so little knowledge of Jewish history, religion and culture that they would innocently repeat anti-Semitic rhetoric such as this.

While the relationship between Russian-speaking Jews and the Jewish communities in Germany was undoubtedly fractious, it was only one aspect of their overall integration into German society. The Russian-Jewish population in Germany is dwarfed by that of the so-called *Spätaussiedler* [literally: late emigrant], ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union who were also allowed to immigrate following the *Wende* (the ‘change’ post-1989), and who number approximately two million people. As one might expect for such a large community, certain alternative networks and institutional structures have developed. Therefore, if *Kontingentflüchtlinge* were unable to register with their local Jewish community, it would not

be surprising if they ‘fell back’ into the alternative structures of the wider Russian community. Even those who were able to register with a Jewish community did not necessarily find the integration process any easier. As Judith Kessler, who worked with the Jewish community in Berlin, has described, Russian-speaking Jews often had unrealistic expectations of what the Jewish communities could do for them, in terms of financial support and finding them jobs. This she attributed to the continuation of a ‘Soviet mentality’, characterised by a dependence on authority, indifference to public affairs, and reliance on informal networks (2008: 137). Add this to the fact that qualifications from the former Soviet Union are of little value in Germany’s advanced capitalist society, plus the difficulties entailed in language acquisition,⁶ and it is hardly surprising that, despite the high proportion of Russian-speaking Jews with a university-level education (Schoeps, Jasper & Vogt 1996: 42), a micro census from the year 2000 estimated that 50.3 percent of them were unemployed (Cohen & Kogan 2005: 261–62). However, this statistic is a little misleading when one considers that, at this point in time, 27 percent of the immigrants were over sixty years of age (Gorelik 2007: 21).

As previously stated, Kaminer mentions his Jewishness only rarely in his writing, and when he does it is usually for comical effect and/or ostensibly to downplay the significance of Russian-speaking Jews in Germany. Take this quote from ‘Russians in Berlin’:

‘Die russischen Juden der fünften⁷ Welle zu Beginn der Neunzigerjahre konnte man weder durch ihren Glauben noch durch ihr Aussehen von der restlichen Bevölkerung unterscheiden. Sie konnten Christen oder Moslems oder gar Atheisten sein, blond, rot oder schwarz, mit Stups- oder Hakennase. Ihr einziges Merkmal bestand darin, dass sie laut ihres Passes Juden hießen (Kaminer 2000a: 13).

[The Russian Jews of the fifth wave in the early Nineties were indistinguishable from the rest of the German population by their creed or by their appearance. They might be Christians or Muslims or even atheists; they might be blond, red-heads or dark-haired; their noses might be snub or hooked. Their sole distinguishing feature was that, according to their passports, they were Jews.] (Kaminer 2002b: 16.)

Kaminer is stating here that Russian-speaking Jews are essentially no different from any other ethnic minority group or even from the rest of the German population. This becomes a subversive position only when one considers the recent history of Jews in Germany, which determined the German government’s decision to invite them in, officially as a form of compensation and unofficially in order to fill an absence. Either way, the Russian-speaking Jews are viewed by the ‘host’ society as highly significant. So why does Kaminer take this

⁶ In 1998, only fifteen percent of Jewish quota refugees reported ‘good’ or ‘very good’ knowledge of German language (Dietz 2000: 648).

⁷ Kaminer’s calculation of the ‘waves’ of Jewish emigration is slightly different from the one I am following. Specifically, he inserts dissident migration of the 1960s as a separate cohort.

position? There are two possible explanations;⁸ the first has to do with differing attitudes towards the Holocaust between Russian-speaking and established Jews in Germany and the second with the more recent phenomenon of multiculturalism, experienced first-hand by Kaminer in 1990s Berlin.

Regarding the first explanation, it is possible that Kaminer is presenting the views of a cohort which did not perceive the Holocaust in such stark terms as did established Jews in Germany, many of whom are, or are descended from, former concentration camp inmates, and who as such view the Holocaust as a great trauma. Jews who lived in the Soviet Union, on the other hand, tended to view the Holocaust in quite a different light, based partly on experience and partly on the particular narrative propagated by the Soviet authorities. According to an empirical study conducted in 1993, only 9.3 percent of the Russian-speaking Jews questioned said that the Holocaust had affected their attitude towards Germany and the Germans (Schoeps, Jasper & Vogt 1996: 67–68). Such a statistic cannot be explained by experience alone, because while the losses suffered by Soviet Jews in the Holocaust were proportionately less than for other European Jews, their losses were nonetheless substantial. Therefore, the most important factor in determining their attitude towards the Holocaust was the way in which the Soviet government taught (or rather, did not teach) its citizens to think about it. The government line was simply that the Holocaust was not a significant event, at least compared to the ‘Great Patriotic War’ (the term for the conflict that the Soviet Union fought against Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945). While the central discursive assumption in the Western world is that the Holocaust was a singular event, the deaths in which have a particular meaning and as such differ from other wartime deaths, this was not the case under Soviet communism. The Soviet government from Stalin to Gorbachev did not consider deaths in the Holocaust to be qualitatively different from civilian deaths, or soldiers’ deaths on the Eastern Front. So while the Holocaust only affected Soviet Jews slightly less than it did other European Jews, the survivors and children of the survivors who lived in the Soviet Union did not see their suffering or losses in the Holocaust as historically significant. And while Kaminer is probably well aware of Soviet reluctance to confront the Holocaust, this does not change the fact that he does not

⁸ Aside from literary motivations: Kaminer might be presenting a narrator who maintains an ironic distance from the prevailing identity discourse in Germany.

write about it at all in his work,⁹ which would imply that it did not play a significant role in shaping his Jewish identity.

However, perhaps the more prominent reason for Kaminer downplaying the significance of Russian-speaking Jews in Germany is his experience of Berlin in the 1990s — the heyday of *Multikulti* [multicultural] optimism. In the story ‘Geschäftstarnungen [*Business Camouflage*]’, for example, Kaminer discovers that the ‘Turks’ running the Turkish restaurant are in fact Bulgarians, the ‘Italians’ in the Italian restaurant are Greek, the ‘Chinese’ in the Chinese restaurant are really Vietnamese, the ‘Indians’ are Tunisian, and the African-American bar is run by a Belgian. Kaminer remarks that: ‘Nichts ist hier echt, jeder ist er selbst und gleichzeitig ein anderer. [*Nothing is the real thing here, everyone is at the same time himself and someone else.*]’ (Kaminer 2000a: 98; Kaminer 2002b: 89). Kaminer’s narrator therefore rejects the idea of ‘authentic’ or fixed identities, instead seeing them as transient and constantly in flux. This places him in proximity to the theories of postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and Stuart Hall (1990). But whereas these two theorists are writing in a classic postcolonial context (migration from former British colonies), Kaminer writes from the standpoint of a Russian-Jewish immigrant to Germany, which has little in the way of theoretical discussion surrounding it. Oliver Lubrich (2003) has devoted a whole article to the question of whether Russian-speaking Jews can be considered ‘postcolonial’. But while the concepts of hybridity and multiple identities were originally developed to deal with the phenomenon of postcolonial displacement, they are not necessarily confined to that context. Kaminer’s writings make clear that all immigrants in Germany inhabit some sort of ‘third space’, between ‘home’ and ‘host’ cultures, even though in most cases their immigration has nothing to do with colonial experience. Moreover, Kaminer rejects the specificity of any form of ethnic identification in Germany, as demonstrated in the final sentence to his story ‘Suleyman und Salieri [*Suleyman and Salieri*]’:

So gibt eine Mediendebatte ganz nebenbei vielen Menschen die Chance, sich neu zu sehen, nicht als Türke oder Russe oder Äthiopier, sondern als ein Teil der großen Ausländergemeinschaft in Deutschland, und das ist irgendwie toll (Kaminer 2000a: 74).

⁹ With one small exception. In the story ‘Alltag eines Kunstwerks [*The Everyday Life of a Work of Art*]’, Kaminer describes how his artist friend, Sergei N., creates a sculpture which he unsuccessfully enters into ‘dem großen Wettbewerb für das Holocaust-Denkmal [*the big competition for a Holocaust memorial*]’. It ‘sollte den konzentrierten Schmerz der Menschheit symbolisieren [*was supposed to symbolise all the pain of humanity in concentrated form*]’ (Kaminer 2000a: 47; Kaminer 2002b: 45–46). After being rejected, it goes through several incarnations, being exhibited at an erotica fair before ending up at a children’s adventure playground. This story could be read as a metaphor for the necessarily arbitrary and constructed nature of any attempt to represent the unrepresentable, but it is more likely that Kaminer is simply making comedy out of the vagueness of his friend’s modern artwork.

[And so a debate in the media can afford a great many people the opportunity to see each other in a new light, not as Turks or Russians or Ethiopians but as part of the larger community of foreigners in Germany. There is something wonderful about this (Kaminer 2002b: 69).]

There has, as yet, been little scholarly discussion of Kaminer's work. This may be due to a perception that it is 'popular' literature, which, whether true or not, does not detract from its cultural importance. One of the few scholars to engage with, and perhaps the only one to criticise, Kaminer's writerly persona, is Sander Gilman, who, in his book *Multiculturalism and the Jews* (2006: 216), argues that Kaminer downplays his Jewishness and plays up his Russianness because: 'His German audience wants happy memories of the Russian past', and, we are led to assume, not unhappy memories of the Jewish past. 'Happy memories of the Russian past' is a curious choice of phrase given what happened in the Second World War, but Gilman is nonetheless correct to assert that Kaminer writes far more about his Russian identity than about his Jewish identity. However, the argument that he does this to appease or pander to his German audience is more contentious and based, I believe, on a misreading of Kaminer's authorial intentions. His purpose is not to appease but rather to reclaim and refashion a space for Russian-Jewish identity that is not determined solely by German or (ex-)Soviet perceptions.

Wladimir Kaminer has become the poster-boy for the Jewish *Kontingentflüchtlinge*, although his experiences, or at least the way he recounts them, are not representative of his cohort. This is perhaps a deliberate strategy on Kaminer's part: he takes the collective memory of the Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora (concerning the Holocaust, for example) and disrupts it by taking a facet of it to a ludicrous extreme, or by portraying the exact opposite of what the reader expects. In doing this he makes the experience of being (ex-Soviet) Jewish in Germany a performative act. Kaminer is not beholden to the (post-)Soviet nor to the German narrative about him and his fellow immigrants but rather creates his own, which draws on both but subverts them in startling and often humorous ways. There is something unburdened about his self-positioning as a Russian Jew (emphasis on Russian) in *Multikulti* Germany, which has been countered indirectly by other writers of Russian-Jewish descent who live in Germany. Lena Gorelik (2004) and Olga Grjasnowa (2012), both of whom immigrated to Germany at a younger age than Kaminer, present formative struggles with Russian-Jewish-German identity in their fiction. Their writing demonstrates that being female also contributes to different, often more conflicted, conceptions of this identity triangle. Nonetheless, Kaminer's writings on Jewishness, scant as they are, provide a useful lens, albeit highly subjective and deliberately contradictory, through which one can think about what being Jewish in Germany means today, how myriad its forms are, and how the situation now differs from the pre-migration status quo.

On the one hand, the *Kontingentflüchtlinge* have prevented the Jewish population's terminal decline, but, on the other hand, some would argue that this has been more than counteracted by problems of integration. It is undeniable that a new chapter in the history of Jews in Germany has begun, but what this actually means, in qualitative terms, for the Jewish population in Germany, not to mention Jews outside of Germany, and for the non-Jewish world still coming to terms with the legacy of the Nazi genocide, is a difficult question to answer. It is perhaps even too early to say.

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