

Adiaphora:

The New Culture of Russians and Eastern Jews in Berlin

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(For *Nadja*, the indifferent one)

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That for all they care, I can go to hell,
But on earth indifference is the least
We have to dread from man or beast.
(W. H. Auden, "The More Loving One")

Indifference has a bad reputation these days. It is considered to be a passive and pessimistic attitude. Those who are indifferent or apathetic don't help others, they don't get involved—they don't care. The proverbial bane of indifference reappears in sociological studies of urban modernity in the guise of a seemingly nonchalant tolerance for the most heinous crimes of our last century. Indifference purportedly reflects the spiritual vacuum of urban man caught in the cogwheels of an ostensibly autonomous bureaucracy. It is the mirror image of the ethically degenerated and politically disenfranchised subject, able but unwilling to act, and incapable of expressing sympathy and solidarity. Thus the indifferent appear to be more than pliant subjects attempting to recede from the winds of time and the whims of social pressures. Pliant, they appear—for lack of opposition—to comply, to abet, to condone. In short, indifference is the crime of the century. When social critics and sociologists speak of urban indifference, the Holocaust and German history is not far off.¹

There are, of course, other forms of indifference. The antique Stoic tradition of indifference was one of the strongest and most productive ethical currents in philosophy; it commanded the respect of philosophers from the classical Greek age to the end of the Enlightenment and beyond. Clearly, indifference meant something else for them. The distinctions are indeed dramatic and the danger of misinterpretation is large, for it raises seminal questions: Is there an incontestably positive quality of a certain type of indifference? Does indifference play a role in urban culture? Can indifference appear in the form of patience and tolerance in difficult circumstances? Is indifference an ethically viable survival strategy allowing one to cope with and accept cultural ambivalence?

New cultural contexts can profit from new reflections on old categories. And there is something new happening (again) in Berlin. The Eastern (largely Russian and Ukrainian) Jews are returning. The Russians are



here again. And Berlin is now the European capital of Russian literature outside of Russia itself. It also has the fastest growing Jewish community on the globe thanks to the influx of Russian Jews. In no other city in the world is so much literature being translated from Russian into a European language. The literary public of the city with its well established traditions of public readings has been regaled with entertaining (often bilingual) readings of its new citizens and of the stars of the Russian scene who flock to Berlin, assured that a relatively large audience awaits them.

It's a small wonder. The Eastern Jews are back. The Russians are here in large numbers. The two populations of foreigners who in pre-war Germany were the focus of Nazi hatred and propaganda have, in the past decade, increasingly established their own forums for debate and cultural self-representation. They feel at home in the land that previously declared war against their nation and their race. Their circles are largely open to the general public, agnostic and multicultural, and they appear to embody a certain type of Stoic indifference and Cynic irony typical for those who have known already the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. These are hard times for the new immigrants. But they do well.

Our guide through the new cultural presence of Eastern Jews and Russians in Berlin will be Vladimir Kaminer, a Russian Jew from Moscow who embodies the benign indifference and ironic ambivalence of a modern Diogenes. Kaminer, born in 1967 in Moscow, can be held responsible for the success of the most popular Russian scene in Berlin: the "Russian disco" in Café Burger in Berlin's *Mitte*, where literary readings and Russian music form the heart of the disco's cultural programme. Kaminer's *Russian Disko*, a collection of memoirs of his life as a Russian Jewish émigré covering the period from 1990 to 2000, is a bestseller in Germany, and the audio book version is among the top ten audio books in Germany (thanks also to his wonderful readings, his command of the German idiom and his charming accent). Kaminer manifests the antique Cynic irony and Stoic indifference of an émigré amidst new cultural, economic and political tensions. Before we turn to him, however, a look at the antique tradition and the positive qualities of indifference is in order.

Adiaphora, apathy and ataraxy: emotional equanimity in the face of ambivalence

Before the antiques developed a philosophical notion of indifference, the sense of a very different 'cosmic' indifference was widespread (Geier 1997, 39). Inherent in the earliest antique cosmogonies was the concept of astrological predetermination. As in Auden's poem, the stars don't care. The inexorable origin (ἀρχή) of the cosmos contained and determined the present. Neither personal initiative nor free will could change the origin and therefore the outcome of one's fate. The relentless force of necessity

(ἀνάγκη) was tied to an absolute past from which eschewed the inevitable: a future that mocks the hopes, the efforts, and the expectations of humankind. This in essence is the temporal logic underlying mythic consciousness (see Cassirer 1992). If, in modern idealism, freedom and moral responsibility involved a dialectic of insight into necessity that is predicated upon the existence of a sphere of non-predetermined ethical self-determination and moral action located in the future, mythic consciousness lacked the concept of a future which, according to Hermann Cohen, is the very time of ethics: the future is the temporal form in which desire and the free act of the will can manifest itself while anticipating and working towards what ought to be in distinction to what was and what is (1907, 106, 399ff).

The passive acceptance of fate in Greek thought was dramatically reflected in the cult surrounding Tyche (τύχη), often personified as the goddess of chance. The decades between the battle of Issus (333 BC) and the battle of Ipsus (301 BC) witnessed cataclysmic changes “defying all calculation and expectation”; the glorious rise of nations and persons to power was often as abrupt as their downfall, and it increasingly appeared as if neither a God nor a law but rather blind chance was at work in the fortunes of men (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1955, 295). The more the events of history seemed unforeseeable, the more one’s own fate appeared to be dominated by a fickle Goddess whose haphazard influence could not be imputed to any rational plan or any balance between sin and atonement. Of course in Greek mythology the gods always ruled over the fates of humans. But the cult emerging around the Goddess Tyche during this period indicated a fundamental change in Greek religion. Tyche, and later the Roman Goddess Fortuna, is different from the older Gods of Greece in that she does not attend sacrifices and does not hear our prayers. Under the rule of Tyche man can no longer seek consolation in his belief. Tyche is all-powerful, but incalculable, and ultimately unappeasable, unassuageable—and thus not a moral power. Neither the good nor the evil can reckon with her support or retribution. One cannot speak of the ‘justice’ of Tyche even when she occasionally appears to strike down the wicked and blasphemous. And as Wilamowitz-Moellendorff noted: “that, of course, had most grievous consequences for the ethical behaviour of men” (1955, 302). It decimated the sense of morality. “If chance rules in man’s life, there is no divine justice, and if success alone is decisive, then there is no eternal moral law” (305).

With the rise of the cult of Tyche, who progressively subjugated other celestial powers to her wilfulness, chance became the “genuine expression of a new feeling, a new *Weltanschauung* in which neither good luck nor one’s own deserts, but (in modern terms) capricious coincidence reigned. Tyche evolved into a deity with whom none of the earlier gods could vie.



Amidst unpredictability and chaos, faith itself subsided and “Tyche arose as the Goddess of man’s lot which had become so uncertain” (Misch 1907, 140).

As in the Greek romances where, according to Bakhtin, “the spaces of an alien world are filled with isolated curiosities and rarities that bear no connection to each other” (1984, 102), the uncertain world was reflected in the rise of a deity personifying instability and defying the sense of ethical action by dashing our hopes in the fruition of our deeds. “As the glory of the Olympians paled, this new deity appeared in an increasingly threatening manner. [...] Although she did not determine the thoughts and intentions of man in important decisions, one sensed all the more strongly that the external fate of man was ruled by an arbitrariness that could relentlessly foil all the plans and astute schemes of any mortal being.” At first a god among others, she came to represent in popular belief already in the fourth century BC, “the mistress of all human designs” (Rohde 1960, 297-298).

The philosophical currents known as Cynicism² and Stoicism formed their conceptions of indifference in this world of declining religious faith and social stability. As a philosophical movement the Cynics and Stoics resisted the temptation of fatalism by advancing a survival strategy for individuals who still believed that virtue is the highest good. Particularly one figure stands out here. A school in himself, Diogenes of Sinope (roughly 404–323 BC) was the prototypical Cynic. He was the first to espouse and practice many of the principles of Cynicism and Stoicism which were then systematized by later generations. Bated like a dog (Greek: *kynos*), he adopted the epithet with pride and was subsequently noted for his churlish (*kynikos*) tongue (Geier 1997, 88-96). He left no systematic philosophy and nothing we know about him is documented beyond doubt. What we know of him comes in the form of stories, anecdotes and colourful jokes. Like Kaminer in his art, Diogenes is a figure in the tales about him, a literary voice, and a mirror of his age. Both authors offer, through the prism of the ironic immigrant, a polychromatic picture of their contemporary world. The humour here is rather colourful.

While still a young intellectual Diogenes emigrated from Sinope, the capital of Paphlagonia, to Athens, the urban centre of the Greek world. In Athens Diogenes espoused an ascetic lifestyle liberating him from the whims of fate. As Diogenes Laertius reports in his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*: “On being asked what he gained from philosophy, he replied, “This at the very least, if nothing else—to be prepared for every fortune” (1966, 25). His ascetic lifestyle was opposed to conventions and manifested a gleeful indifference to social norms and class prejudices. It was his method of obtaining self-sufficiency in a new and unfamiliar metropolis. Purportedly while watching a mouse running about, neither

afraid of the dark nor seeking objects of luxury, “he discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances” (1966, 25; bk. 6, § 22). His coat was his bed and the proverbial tub served as his only lodging. But his home was the city and he was the first staunch advocate of cosmopolitan urban culture in Western philosophy. He declared that “without a city no benefit can be derived from that which is civilized” (75; bk. 6, § 72). Ideally, the city was for him the foundation of a just urban society. He believed that “there is no advantage in law without a city” (75; bk. 6, § 72). The city he spoke of was not an expression of a national culture; rather, it was a model of an open society. “The only true commonwealth was, he said, that which is as wide as the universe” (75; bk. 6, § 72). He held that the authority of “natural right” was superior to that of “convention” — that body of cultural practices differentiating national identities and ethnic minorities within them. If, for Aristotle, citizenship and nationality coincided and those without citizenship could be bought or traded as property, Diogenes and his school held that freedom itself was inalienable, irrespective of ethnicity and nationality. Not surprisingly, then, in his lifestyle Diogenes, despite his poverty, appeared godlike—like Hercules “he preferred liberty to everything” (73; bk. 6, § 71–72). And thus his dedication to the culture of the Athenian capital was scarcely an example of the (silent) assimilation of a minority into a host culture; it was a devotion to an ideal urban lifestyle tolerant of his anti-conventionalism and his outspokenness.

Diogenes was not only the prototypical Cynic, but also a prototypical *Weltbürger*: “asked where he came from, he said, ‘I am a citizen of the world’” (65; bk. 6, § 63). His national and ethnic roots were less important to him than the liberal urban culture in which he flourished. As a philosopher, teacher and writer he was an advocate of education: “Education, according to him, is a controlling grace to the young, consolation to the old, wealth to the poor, and ornament to the rich” (69–71; bk. 6, § 68). But education in his age was dependent upon an open marketplace (*agora*) for teachers and students, and thus upon discursive interaction in ideologically autonomous public space. Clearly Diogenes knew the value of this precious liberty: “Being asked what was the most beautiful thing in the world, he replied, ‘Freedom of speech (παρρησία)’” (71; bk. 6, § 69). From the end of the third century to the end of the Enlightenment Diogenes had a reputation for his politically engaged wit and his satirical liberty. As Fénelon noted early in the eighteenth century: “*Enfin, rien n’échappait à sa liberté satirique*” (1865, 307). But there is danger in overestimating Diogenes’ humoristic side to the detriment of his social thought. The satirical liberty he practiced was his claim upon cosmopolitan freedom.



The core of Cynic and Stoic philosophy is the theory of indifference from which the practice of asceticism and all other precepts of moral conduct are derived. “Nothing in life,” claimed Diogenes, “has any chance of succeeding without strenuous practice (ἀσκησις);” asceticism is not acquiescence and passivity, but a method of moral exercise “capable of overcoming anything.” He suggested further: “Accordingly, instead of useless toils men should choose such as nature recommends, whereby they might live happily.” (73; bk. 6, § 71) The key to ascetic success is knowing what is useless or vain, knowing how to live in harmony with nature (*kata fusin*), and thus knowing what social, political and moral conventions may be ignored: knowing, in short what is indifferent. Indifferent things (*adiaphora*) are morally neither good nor bad. As Ariston (320–250 BC) declared, “the end of action” is “a life of perfect indifference to everything which is neither virtue nor vice” (Diogenes 1966, 263; bk. 7, § 160). Indifference to crime and injustice does not fall within the antique definition of *adiaphora*; in fact, it stands in direct contradiction to it.

The Cynics were the first school of philosophy to advance a practice of indifference. But the Stoics were “the first to give a word to Cynic indifference and to make of it a *terminus technicus*” (Geier 1997, 97). For the Stoics *adiaphora* were not merely “things morally neither good nor bad,” but also things beyond our control, as well as things that are unavoidable or insignificant insofar as they don’t necessarily lead to happiness or impede it. Recognition of what things in life are indifferent was the key to “peace of mind” or “unperturbability” (*ataraxia*) in a world where ethical action required a certain aloofness to convention, class, birth and chance. Indifference highlighted the virtues of apathy, *apatheia* being the ability to control one’s emotions and achieve dispassionateness while deliberating moral conflicts.

In short, indifferent things were obstacles or irrelevant matters that could not always be avoided but were not worth worrying about because they were of no moral import. They called for a subjective form of indifference in regard to one’s own emotions and personal risks or advantages. Indifference allowed one to save one’s energy for unselfish ethical action. And, indisputably, the heart of both Cynic and Stoic philosophy was ethics.

Contrary to modern expectations, antique indifference fosters altruism. For the Stoics and Cynics, moral action must be free of ulterior interests, and the moral subject must have the fortitude to bear the consequences of ethically correct but inopportune action. Kant’s reflection that the motivation for ethical action is not happiness itself, but being worthy of happiness, is essentially a Cynic and Stoic principle.³ It recognises, as the Stoics did, that the motivation for a truly ‘free’ ethical act is indifferent to the possible rewards it may entail—or to the punishment and ostracism it

may incur. Diogenes, for one, is hilariously indifferent to pragmatic success, buffoonishly incapable of flattering the world leaders or cajoling the hoi polloi. His humour is an entirely logical manifestation of moral conduct that refuses to take seriously what is not. It is the kind of humour one finds in Kaminer's stories.

The ascetic indifference Diogenes practiced was soon recognized as a manner of rising above the contingencies of one's own morally correct but impractical actions. Diogenes lifestyle, as Gomperz noted, illustrates "the self-sufficiency of the wise man, the unconditional freedom from the power of fate" (1996, 126). This moral autarky liberated the Cynic from the allures of political expediency, opportunism and conformism. Since neither fame nor fortune are of interest, neither wealth nor poverty a means to happiness, and since political power required too much compromise, the Cynic embraces a life without party, possessions and income as a life of intellectual and ethical autonomy. For that reason, historians have occasionally referred to the Cynic school as the "philosophy of the Greek proletariat" (116). Their sympathies lie with the non-nationals, with the impoverished masses and with slaves. And thanks to their bold indifference, the Cynic philosophers "did not shirk any risk" in their social and political criticism, and thus it was particularly the adherents of this school who "apostrophized the rulers in the theatre, who lent words to the more or less founded dissatisfaction of the masses—and at times they suffered the most severe punishment for it" (119). The Cynic school's famous irreverence and political satire took their example from the "practical founder" of their school. In this sense Diogenes was the acting founder of an important literary genre. Menippus himself was a follower of Diogenes, whose Cynic irony and life served as a model for the serio-comic Menippean satire, a genre which the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin considered to be the origin of the modern polyphonic novel (1984; ch. 4).

Diogenes of Sinope was the rhetorical Robin Hood of the antique world. An opponent of rituals masking the gluttony of the upper crust, he was "moved to anger that men should sacrifice to the gods to ensure health and in the midst of the sacrifice should feast to the detriment of health" (31; bk. 6, § 28). His ironic syllogism in defence of intellectual communism ran: "All things belong to the gods. The wise are the friends of the gods, and friends hold things in common. Therefore all things belong to the wise" (39; bk. 6, § 37). A "homeless exile," he "claimed that to fortune he could oppose courage, to convention nature, to passion reason," but in his lighter moments he was not above using grotesque humour to make his point. Hounded at a feast by people who kept throwing bones at him, he "he played a dog's trick and drenched them" (39–40, 49; bk. 6, § 38, 46). Clearly, humour and Cynic indifference were



forms of political engagement satirizing social hierarchies. Indifference itself was the price to be paid for the moral and intellectual freedom of a sharp wit.

In Stoic philosophy indifference was also wedded to emotional qualities, particularly “apathy”—scorned upon today, but lauded by the Stoics. Zeno, for example, believed that passion (i.e. strong emotion, particularly grief, pain, and envy) was an “irrational and unnatural movement of the soul” (Diogenes 1966, 217; bk. 7, § 110). There are, he posits, emotional states which are good (εὐπαθείας), namely “joy, caution, and wishing.” But the wise man is passionless (ἀπαθῆ) (221; bk. 7, § 116–117). He guards himself against the challenge to his autarky and his ataraxy, his self-sufficiency and equanimity, which are for the Stoic and Cynic philosophers freedom itself, “freedom being the power of independent action” unencumbered by passion and material need (227; bk. 7, § 121). This affirmative interpretation of apathy and equanimity was a stable category in European thought from classical antiquity to the modern age. But, as Kant noted, beginning in the early Enlightenment, apathy (the freedom from passion) and indifference acquired a bad reputation.⁴ For many contemporary sociologists apathy is often seen as an egotistical and solipsistic form of liberty. For the Stoics it is not: the wise and apathetic man is an ideal politician, and thus, “the Stoics say that the wise man will take part in politics” (225; bk. 7, § 121). Obviously antique apathy and Cynic and Stoic indifference are inherently misleading when judged by modern standards. Nevertheless, philosophically speaking, apathy, like indifference, is “the opposite of fanaticism,” it is inseparable from the “calmness, composure and equanimity,” and is in this sense a “call for moral veracity” (Geier 1997, 10, 12). *Apatheia* is not the modern indifference and misanthropic malaise we associate with selfishness or moral laziness.

In the father of Cynic philosophy indifference and empathy were wedded. As Gomperz noted, during antiquity Diogenes was praised for his mildness and gentleness towards those in need; his followers manifested an unmistakable “willingness to help and to improve”: “warm empathy with all who suffer or who are oppressed speaks loudly and noticeably in the literary remains of this movement.” The empathy emerges here as a by-product of a warm yet dispassionate sense of justice: “In truth, friendliness to one’s fellow man is the persuasion typical of the Cynic” (Gomperz 1996, 131).

Historically the Cynic school developed around a (by birth or by choice) poor but learned group comprised predominantly of *foreigners* and *immigrants* to the capital of Greece (Crates of Thebes, Stilpon of Megara, Bion of Borysthenes, the Thracians Metrocles and Hipparchia as well as Diogenes himself); the older Stoic school was also predominantly

of foreign origin (Gomperz 1996, 116). Among the later Stoics were freed slaves, merchants who had lost all at sea, as well as the sons and daughters of wealthy families who opted for poverty. Paradoxically, the later Stoic apostles of indifference, ataraxy and apathy acquired considerable political power and enjoyed immense literary success. One thinks of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who rose to wealth and fame as Nero's advisor, or Epictetus, a slave from Phrygia who attended the lectures of the Stoics and followed in the path of Diogenes and the Cynics. Their literary success contrasts with their humble literary persona. As we shall see, Kaminer is most adept at achieving success by personifying Stoic humility.

In his history of Greek philosophy, Gomperz suggested that the general tenor of Cynic philosophy is still alive in northern Europe, where it manifests itself as a Russian sentiment. The hero of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is struck with "an ineffable, exclusively Russian feeling," a "feeling of disregard for everything conventional, [...] for everything that the majority of men consider the sovereign good of this world."⁵ There is indeed something inherently Russian in the Cynic and Stoic sense of indifference and apathy. Time and again, the history of the Russian intelligentsia has been narrated as a story of the ostracized heroes of Russian fiction and philosophy, the superfluous men and intellectual misfits at odds with Russian absolutism and the Soviet state, but filled with ironic tales about them.⁶ Time and again the life of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin has been narrated as one of Stoic indifference to the pressures of ideologies and the allures of academic recognition.⁷ Western visitors to the Soviet Union were often nonplussed by the patience and apathy of Soviet citizens waiting in lines for food products or in the antechambers of Soviet bureaucracies for documents. They appeared to lack the entrepreneurial ambitions and maverick individuality the Western economy rewards. Interestingly, the tranquil Stoic demeanour they acquired in a deficit economy with an elaborate (and mercurial) administration becomes a hindrance when they move to the West. In interviews conducted in Germany the immigrants from the East speak of their "lack of self-assertion," their "submissiveness" and their "gullibility." One interviewee remarked pointedly: "I think that our excessive humbleness is an impediment" (Schoeps, Jasper and Vogt 1996, 94-95). Of course humility (itself often an ironic poly) is also a convenient Stoic tactic for maintaining one's equanimity by anticipating setbacks and thus avoiding disillusionment. In any case, just such are the tactics and characteristics of Kaminer's works; the émigrés naïvely swallow preposterous advertising slogans, they experiment with esoteric teachings and alternative medicine—but they also mock the materialism and punctuality of German post-industrial society with Menippean brilliance. Materially they are poor, intellectually—very rich.



Kaminer's Russian Disco

Kaminer's *Russian Disco* is an anthology of short retrospective texts on "Russians in Berlin" (the title of the first chapter). Kaminer is not a historian, and rarely philosophical. He is a chronicler. He has been referred to as a "merry ethnologist of every day life" with a novelist's talent for heteroglossia and a Chekhovian penchant for laconic irony (Bielefeld 2000). Kaminer is well aware of the historical context within which his playful and irreverent narratives are situated. "In the summer of 1990, a rumour was spreading in Moscow: Honecker is taking in Jews from the Soviet Union as a sort of compensation for the fact that the GDR never participated in the German reparations to Israel" (2000, 9). The sentence is a fulcrum for Kaminer's twist on the German-Jewish question. The problem for Eastern Jews lies geographically in the Soviet Union, where the economy is a headache and the Communist party closed to Jews; Germany is the 'promised land' and Berlin is the centre of an urban universe reshuffling Russian and Jewish taxonomies while offering civil liberties. "Normally most people in the Soviet Union attempted to deny their Jewish ancestry; only with a clean passport could one hope to have success in one's career. The reason for this is not anti-Semitism, but the simple fact that every more or less decisive position was tied to a membership in the Communist party. And Jews were not welcome in the party" (2000, 9). If Jews had a hard time in the Soviet Union, they also—Kaminer suggests—had an easier time leaving it. For a short period following the fall of the iron curtain it was still possible to travel from Moscow to East Berlin and live anywhere in the capital without applying for a visa for West Germany, despite the fact that the border between East and West Germany no longer existed. "One did not need a visa for the city, not even a passport" (2000, 24). Upon arrival the Jews from Soviet Union only had to register with the East German authorities to acquire a resident's permit that retained its validity for those wishing to move on to West Berlin or West Germany. Thus, as Kaminer writes, "the free pass to the great new world, the invitation to a new beginning, consisted in being a Jew. The Jews who previously paid the police in order to have the word 'Jew' removed from their passports began to pay to have it put in. [...] Many people of various nationalities suddenly wanted to be Jews" (2000, 11). But what they wanted (like the antique Cynics) was access to a cosmopolitan community. The "great wide world" is a phrase Kaminer uses almost as a synonym for immigration to a multicultural metropolis outside the boundaries of the former Soviet Union (2000, 11, 51). Like America earlier, Berlin—more than Germany as a whole—became a dreamland for Kaminer's generation languishing during the end of the eighties in the Russian capital (2000, 50). Berlin was a cultural Zion for many of God's chosen people.



Kaminer refers to the influx of the intelligentsia into Berlin from the former Soviet Union as “the avant-garde of the fifth wave of emigration” (2000, 12). The first wave crossed the border during the Russian civil war following the revolution. The second wave hit Germany during World War II. The third was comprised of dissidents expelled during the sixties. And the fourth began with the controlled emigration of Soviet Jews in the seventies. What distinguishes the fifth wave from those previous to it is its rather unorthodox Jewish quality and its quantity. The Jewish identity fulfilled a function that attracted other minorities. As Kaminer noted: “They might be Christians or Moslems or even atheists, with blond, red or black hair, with a pug or a hooked nose. Their only common characteristic was the fact that according to their passports they were Jews” (2000, 13). Kaminer once compared the Soviet immigration to Germany with a game of chance. It was a battle with capricious Tyche in which personal initiative transpired under the table: “like any game of chance, here too there was much cheating” (2000, 13). Soon after the fall of the Berlin wall the Russian Jewish and Russian speaking population in the capital grew dramatically. But the swift current was soon blocked. “Within six months the admission of immigrants was no longer permitted within Germany. One had to hand in an application in Moscow and then wait for a couple of years. Thereafter, quotas were introduced. At the same time a decree was passed stipulating that all Jews who had entered Germany prior to the 31st of December 1991⁸ would be recognized as refugees and enjoy all the rights of a citizen—with the exception of the right to vote” (2000, 17). The Jews and Russians arriving in Berlin between 1989 and 1991 make up the fifth and largest wave of Russian and Jewish immigrants Germany has ever seen since the twenties. Kaminer suggests that presently all other groups of his countrymen account for less than one percent of the Soviet Jewish and Russian population now living in Germany. They are now Berlin’s second largest minority.⁹ The editor of one Russian newspaper in Berlin believes that there are about one hundred and forty thousand Russians in the German capital. Conservative figures lie around eighty thousand. In any case, “it is true that the Russians are everywhere” (2000, 18).

Russian? Jews? Unorthodox Russian Jews? Refugees from the former Soviet Union? Who are these new urban citizens? How can one define their nationality and identity? And why are they so present in the literary and philosophical culture of the capital?¹⁰

What Kaminer describes in the opening chapters of his *Russian Disco* has since become a subject of numerous sociological studies and debates within Germany. The so-called *Kontingentflüchtlinge* (quota refugees) acquired a unique status in post-war Germany. Already in 1987 Eastern Germany tolerated the covert immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union;



since the 11th of July 1990 the de Maizière government of the GDR automatically granted a resident permit to the Soviet Jews, a status that was recognized in Bonn in January 1991. The Jews from the Soviet Union who had entered Germany prior to the 15th of February 1991 received not only an unlimited resident's permit, but also an unlimited work permit and the right to social benefits such as health care, child benefits, student grants and scores of integration programmes (Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 38–39). In this sense the 'Jewish Russians' are a very privileged group of refugees. But from the perspective of their cultural activities the Jewish Russians and Russians are also unique as immigrants for entirely different reasons and they are exceptions as Jews within Germany. They certainly have a different cultural identity and they think differently about Germany. The distinctions are worth noting.

First of all, anti-Semitism in Russia and the Ukraine (and *not* in Germany) was one of the predominant motives for immigration to Germany.¹¹ Today Jews from Russia are aware of a dramatic difference between Russia and Germany in the approach to Judaism. Since the Holocaust, the astronomical growth of German literature concerning the prominent role of Jews in German culture has fostered "the widely spread hope among the circles of immigrants that Jews in democratic Germany are highly esteemed" (Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 59). In addition, the Holocaust plays a rather contradictory role among Eastern Jews in contemporary Germany. Only 9.3% feel their relationship to Germany has been affected permanently and negatively by the memory of the Shoah, despite the fact that 85.2% speak of losses within their own family (Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 67–68, 151). Soviet Jews in particular are less apt to foster a cult of memory focused upon the victims of the Holocaust, and their influence has been changing the Judaic memorial traditions—even in Israel. Thanks to the freedom of movement and the prospering Russian culture in Israel, the anniversary of Soviet "victory day" was celebrated for the first time in the Synagogue in Jerusalem in 1994. Similar changes are taking place in the Jewish community in Germany. Soviet veterans of the great war mourn the two hundred and fifty thousand Jewish comrades in Stalin's army who fell during the war; but these victims stood on the side of those who eventually won the battle against fascism. They associate their role in the war with—as Michail Ryklin observed—an "extremely mythologized event of Soviet history: the conquest of Berlin" (2001, 91). And thus with characteristic pride they proclaim: "together we defeated Hitler." Understandably, the Jews from the Soviet Union now living in Berlin "have a very peculiar view of Germany. The Russians conquered the Nazis and can thus look back upon this epoch with less anxiety than other Diaspora Jews" (Dachs and Thumann 1999). Under their influence the "enthusiasm for dead Jews culti-

vated by the German establishment,” but uncharacteristic for Eastern Jews, is now yielding to a active interest in Jewish culture now *alive* in Berlin (Stein 1998).¹²

Secondly, the distinguishing characteristic of Jews arriving in Germany from the former Soviet Union is the state's definition of their national identity and not that of other Jewish communities in the Diaspora. According to a poll conducted in the Soviet Union in the eighties, only 7% of the Soviet Jews referred to themselves as religious. What defined Jews in the Soviet Union was the passport, not the Halachah (Schoeps Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 214). The discrepancy between their self-perception of their ethnic identity and the manner in which they are perceived and treated as Jews by others is a tension well known to Jews. It is a tension that grew as the Jews from the former Soviet Union moved to a Jewish community more concerned with Jewish religious law. In Russia, the Ukraine and other Soviet states Jews often had first hand experience with anti-Semitism and they clung to their identity despite its repercussions. It is an undeniable fact that many agnostic Soviet Jews are still very proud of their Jewish literary and cultural traditions. In Germany, within the established Jewish community, they were measured by other criteria and classified by those who, since the Holocaust, have had far less direct experience with anti-Semitism. As the chairman of one Jewish community in Germany put it: “These people come to us and claim they are Jews. They are Jews according to their passports. [...] All the people who have the word Jew in their passport were Jews in those days. But not for us” (Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 15). Thus although about “seventy percent of the Jews now living in Berlin are Russians” (Lackmann 1999), their own Jewish identity stands in contrast to their affiliation with and recognition within the Jewish community. The tensions here are enormous.

Finally, Jewish culture has always been associated with modernity: with literacy, with high standards of education and with cosmopolitan culture. The multi-ethnic metropolis is not only the best employment market for the Jewish intellectual and tradesman, it is also (ideally) a copacetic environment for the integration of literate, often polyglot intellectual minorities from other urban environments. The purported rootlessness of the Diaspora Jew is also a reflection of cosmopolitan urban experience, and not just one of exodus or expulsion. Today German sociologists speak of the “extremely high level of urbanisation” of the Jewish population entering Germany from the former Soviet Union, where 98% of them lived in cities (Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 137). By comparison with other ethnic immigrants to Germany the Jewish Russians also have an atypical professional status. Highly acculturated in the USSR and in possession of an above average education, this group of immigrants from the east contains an “over-proportional quantity of representatives of the intelli-



gentsia” from the sciences, the arts and from academic professions (Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 19, 90 (cit.), 137). “Eighty percent of the immigrants are highly qualified academics, genetic scientists, leading doctors and acclaimed actors,” as one study noted; and yet, lamentably, “two thirds of the elite from Russia is unemployed” (Emmerich and Menge 1997). The job market in Berlin appears to be more advantageous to them than that of any other province in Germany despite the higher unemployment among the German population here.¹³ But the professional qualifications of the Soviet immigrants often do not coincide with German standards, even if the language barrier is successfully overcome. In total only 5.3% of these immigrants have been able to establish themselves in the professions they studied (Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt 1996, 89). Here the Russian acculturation and literacy of these cosmopolitans erupt in cultural activities as they struggle to find new careers—and write in their (ample) spare time. The former professors, scientists, and anthropologists described in Kaminer’s stories are truly indicative of the compensatory role of literacy for Soviet Jews living Berlin. Graphomania is the most common ailment among their kin.

The paradoxes of this cultural climate are fascinating in themselves. Jewish culture in Berlin is now statistically dominated by Russian-speaking Eastern Jews: about 70% of Jews here are Russians. Journalists in Berlin are only recently beginning to treat with good-natured humour the spectacles to which this leads. Witness “Germany’s only Jewish orchestra” performing music in the heart of the capital: the local prominence is invited to pay reverent homage to Jewish culture and the German-Jewish community—represented by “24 Russians and a cellist from Israel” (Lackmann 1999).

Most consider the memory of the Holocaust a normal part of German culture. But they don’t feel threatened in Berlin. “I feel rather comfortable here,” writes the cultural philosopher Michail Ryklin, and his recently published comparison of the two capitals, Moscow and Berlin, explain why. The “contradictions between post-industrialism and a socialism that have been declared dead but are long from being dead” persist in Berlin in a “softer, more mediate form.” In this disjunctive unity of economies and mentalities Ryklin notes the reemergence of a pan-European dream. “Berlin is not just a city that faces to the east; the east builds an essential part of it. For that reason Berlin has the best chance of becoming in time the centre of a greater Europe that includes Russia” (2001, 93). This pan-European urban ideal, at odds with the European union because it already includes Eastern Europe, is a polis in which the “irrational emotion” fear has little purchase upon Eastern Jews. “We have no fear,” says one musical therapist and mother of a thriving post-Soviet Jewish family; and she sums up the contrast between then and now: “why do the Ger-

mans say that they didn't know what was going on back then? If that began to happen to us now, our neighbours wouldn't let it happen" (Lackmann 1999). The threat of (negative) indifference is gone. But the Cynic and Stoic indifference of these intellectual immigrants remains.

The sociological origins of Kaminer's cosmopolitan graphomaniacs and actors

In the first story of *Russian Disco*, "Russians in Berlin," Kaminer cites the case of his father, who never managed to become director of the department he worked in. For ten years he remained the deputy director because he was not a member of the Communist party. Year after year he attempted to join the party, but without avail. "We would like to have you join the party," he was told. "But you yourself know well that you are a Jew and you can leave at any time for Israel" (Kaminer 2000, 10-11). The purported rootlessness and political unreliability of Jews in post-revolutionary Russia has always been an envious mirror of their urban success and mobility. Kaminer's tale subtly recalls a moment in Soviet history when this skewed reflection turned against them.

The Russian revolution brought with it positive changes for Jews. The laws restricting their mobility, their access to higher education and to careers in the army, the government and the universities were repealed. But if the Jews gained considerably from the policies of the young Soviet State, things changed rapidly during the Zhdanov era (1946-1953). In 1946 the Communist party secretary Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov (1896-1948) began his attack upon 'bourgeois' western currents in Soviet Culture. The attack soon evolved into a full-scale campaign against cosmopolitanism that outlived its instigator. Already in 1934 the dogma of Socialist Realism, introduced by Zhdanov, extolled the moral fabric of simple proletarian workers while calling into question the political loyalty of the educated (Westwood 1987, 351, 371ff). The campaign against cosmopolitanism went further: it vilified polyglots, academics, intellectuals and writers. While Zhdanov's critique of bourgeois aesthetic autonomy decimated the quality of literature, film and theatre, his anti-cosmopolitanism evolved into outright anti-Semitism: his victims were overwhelmingly Jews. Whether writers or literary critics, philosophers or scientists, the stigmatism of 'rootlessness' was translated into political accusations: a lack of identification with national traditions and with the working proletariat, petit bourgeois individualism and subjectivism, idealism, adulation of foreign cultures—in a word: cosmopolitanism (Hildemeier 1998, 716, 720-723). This episode in Soviet history contributed more than any other to the Jewish Soviet nostalgia for a cosmopolitan urban environment with concomitant liberties for literate intellectuals. Again, as Diogenes, the citizen of the world, believed: the most beautiful thing in the



world is “freedom of speech” (71; bk. 6, § 69). The nostalgia was of course shared by many non-Jewish Soviet intellectuals. But as we learned from Kaminer, some of those who followed the call to cosmopolitanism in Berlin converted *pro forma* to Judaism in order to get here. In a curious twist of circumstances, the anti-Semitic campaign against cosmopolitanism reinforced the connection between the Russian intelligentsia and Judaism, between real or assumed Jewish identity and the cultural aspirations of expatriate Russians in Berlin. The Russians and Jews generally get along well here. They are often inseparable.

Kaminer offers a large panorama of Russians in Berlin who are caught between educated ambitions and the scourge of economic necessity. Many of the Muscovites residing in Berlin’s east (Prenzlauer Berg) are sculptors, musicians or poets Kaminer knew in Russia. “In tatters, but still in good spirits, they gather in the kitchen of one of their apartments and spend the entire night drinking and telling stories just like in the good old days” (2000, 175). Such stories—Russians excel in the art of anecdotes—are characterized by a private dialogic context (the kitchen) and the predominance of speech genres. Rhetorically they fall within the tradition of many Russian literary classics. (The formalists’ treatment of *skaz* in Russian literature reflects the prevalence of speech genres in classical Russian prose {see Erlich 1955, ch. 13; Hansen-Löve 1978, 296–303}). Their content is entirely contemporary. They resemble journalistic slices of life thanks to their unwavering naturalism. They differ, however, from the forensic vantage offered by the press in Berlin. The newspapers report that Russian pimps have established themselves in the capital (see Spann 1994). That may well be true, and indeed one of Kaminer’s stories is set in a Russian mafia brothel (2000, 103–105). But only Kaminer would know that the Russian women offering telephone sex for Russians in Berlin “are largely university-trained actresses” (2000, 76). Acting is one of the venues for literate intellectuals with a sense of humour for their strapped situation. Kaminer’s own father, who finally left Russia in 1993, now plays the ‘foreigner’ in a cabaret for seniors that satirizes heartily the “problems of our age” (2000, 32). And Kaminer himself describes in another story how he found employment as an actor thanks to his Russian accent and his Russian citizenship.¹⁴ But writing, more than acting, is the activity in which countless figures throughout Kaminer’s work find consolation. Numerically, the prostitutes take a back seat to the graphomaniacs—although some are both.

The story of “The writing Countess” is a case in point. Lena, a Russian prostitute from Moscow, winds up marrying into Italian nobility. As the Countess de Carli she comes into conflict with the family of her husband following his death. The family hired a bodyguard to keep men away from the widow. Neither *eros* nor *agon*—she had no work and no fun.

“Frustrated, Lena dedicated herself to literature, and worked for over half a year on an erotic novel in which she discussed the experiences of her life” (Kaminer 2000, 173). Here the medium of literature is not only a rather traditional receptacle for the erotic experiences of a former *Intourist*-Hotel prostitute; it is also a consolation for the unsatisfied and unemployed.

In another story Kaminer illustrates the existence of graphomania in Moscow as a compensatory outlet for “a life unfit to be lived.” The unending stress of life in the oversized city Moscow, the megalopolitan blues, leads to an addiction to unwieldy self-expression: “one writes a novel, realizes on page two thousand that the whole thing has grown beyond confusion, and begins once again from the beginning” (Kaminer 2000, 127). The higher the education, and the more useless that education appears to be on the Western market, the larger the urge to write. Kaminer’s story “The Professor” tells the tale of a “professor for the education of youth in socialist society.” The professor’s study of “The significance of the goat in the consciousness of the Russian people” open the doors to an academic career in Russia, but his position at a pedagogic institute in Moscow expired with the dawn of post-Soviet liberalism: “no one had any use for such an education” (2000, 114-115). Like Kaminer, he immigrated to Germany. In the ads in a Russian newspaper in Berlin he found a job in a Russian kindergarten paying miserable wages. In the evening he discussed his problems with his neighbour, a tailor who was once an archaeologist in Russia. “At first the archaeologist listened with interest, but at some point he noticed that the professor often repeated himself and irritated him so much that he could no longer sew. ‘Do you know what, my friend,’ said he to the professor, ‘these are such wonderful stories, you must write them down. The could make up a wonderful novel. I know someone who publishes books here in Russian and I would recommend you to him’” (2000, 116-117). That got rid of the professor for months. Sadly, the novel, once completed, is never read. The tailor throws the manuscript in the garbage. But the message of the work (an important one on the uses of literacy) lies in the solace of an otherwise harmless neurosis.

Which is not to say that the texts of the Russian graphomaniacs (there are many) are without interesting content. Like the Cynics in antiquity, these intellectuals take to the streets in search of a public. Kaminer’s spoof on the Ladies’ Club of the Jewish community in Potsdam illustrates the point. The Ladies’ Club is invited to stage their spring festival in the local Evangelical Church. The programme begins with a fashion show exhibiting the works of one of its members. “The clothes were all cut according to one principle: topless. The designer had used considerable fantasy, but not much material.” Later a choir of Jewish and Russian-Ger-



man¹⁵ singers perform their own satirical poetry (*chastuska*), “a popular Russian tradition. The *chastushki* had immense socio-critical significance in Russia because they lent expression to the voice of the people. In their *chastushki* the choir criticized a number of the counsellors of the Potsdamer Unemployment Office and Immigration Office, and called upon the Jewish immigrants and Russian-Germans to stick more closely together and to strengthen their friendship. Both groups had a common past—the Soviet Union” (Kaminer 2000, 152-153).

In short, Kaminer himself and Kaminer’s characters, the Eastern Jews of his first collection of stories, share with the Cynic tradition both the (Menippean) speech genres of satirical social critique and the perspective of solidarity with the underdogs. The misfits, the immigrants and minorities all heed the call to camaraderie. And for good reason. The Soviet immigrants often obtain their first accommodations in areas with a high percentage of foreigners. “The first Berliners we got to know were Gypsies and Vietnamese. We quickly became friends” (Kaminer 2000, 25). The cultural scenes that attract them also prove to be inherently multicultural, like the casino in the European Centre, in which there are “more nations represented than in a regular meeting of the United Nations” (Kaminer 2000, 81). Kaminer describes how the public discussion concerning animosity towards foreigners in Germany has created a “feeling of togetherness among many who otherwise do not belong together,” such as the “Arabs, Jews, Chinese, Turks,” simply “because they are the foreigners” (2000, 73). He illustrates his point with the story of a unsuccessful actor from Smolensk working in the Russian theatre *Nostalgia*. Drunk and caught in the confusion between the role he plays and his own identity, he drives off in his wife’s car; speeding down a one way street in the wrong direction (he has no driver’s licence) he tears the mirror off of a Mercedes. The Mercedes takes up the pursuit, catches him, and at that moment a police cruiser enters the street. “What’s your name,” the driver of the Mercedes, a Turk, asks. Upon hearing the Russian name he responds: “Just as I thought. A foreigner.” Instead of signalling the police, the Turk drives the Russian home: the beginning of a friendship that soon became the subject of a film. Here, art appears to orbit the experiences of the social underdogs, and the solidarity they sense towards one another is a function of public discussion surrounding them: “Thus the debate in the media offers many the chance to see themselves anew, not as a Turk or Russian or Ethiopian, but as a part of a larger community of foreigners in Germany, and in a way that is wonderful” (Kaminer 2000, 74).

Kaminer introduces himself at public readings as a German author. And that is not merely an indication of the language he uses. The linguistic medium is also a reflection of the large audience interested in his material and it pinpoints the ambivalence Kaminer senses in his own and in

any other national identity. As for the Cynics, for Kaminer cosmopolitan citizenship with roots in contemporary culture is more important than national identity. Although he does not avoid caricature of Russians and Jews in Berlin (too much alcohol, a humorously weak work ethic, the occasional Russian vamp and opportunistic circumcisions), Kaminer is more interested in tracing the contradictions of being and illusion, of identity from without and identity from within. National identity is itself duplicitous because it is implicated in corporate images, in marketing strategies and in disguises. In Kaminer's works the Turks in a fast food kiosk are really Bulgarians, the Italians in the Italian restaurant next door are really Greeks, the waiters in the Greek restaurant are Arabs. The sushi-bar is run by Jews from America. The Chinese are Vietnamese, the Indian Restaurant is run by a Tunisian from Carthage (a suburb of Tunis). And the manager of an Afro-American bar with voodoo kitsch on the walls is a Belgian. "Berlin is a city of secrets. Nothing here is as it appears to be at first glance. [...] Nothing is genuine here, everyone is himself and yet at the same time an other" (Kaminer 2000, 98). Even the chinchilla that Kaminer found through an advertisement in one of Berlin's Russian newspapers turns out to be a Russian squirrel. In short, Kaminer is immensely sceptical of the value of ethnic taxonomies and benignly indifferent to their comic or economic misuse.

The comic laughter is also Kaminer's method of displacing tragic history with an increasingly ironic present. In his inversions of historical events he engages his reader in the dialogue of epochs that Bakhtin considered seminal to the liberating function of humour (see Poole 1998, 537-578). In a series of stories on Stalingrad, Kaminer recasts a horrific historical moment in the ironic light of its contemporary market value. The battle for Stalingrad was the largest battle of the Second World War and a decisive turning point in the German-Soviet conflict. It raged for over seven months during which at least eight hundred thousand people lost their lives. The occasion for Kaminer's ironic take on Stalingrad was the production of the Film *Duell—Enemy at the Gates*. The film by Jean-Jacques Annaud cost one hundred and eighty million German Marks and was the most expensive European film to date. If that is an indication of the market value of a war flick, it was in no way reflected in the wages paid to the Russian actors in it. As Kaminer wrote during the production of the film: "For some time now many of the Russians living in Berlin—otherwise perfect candidates for long term unemployment—have once again a job. The magic word is Stalingrad. Now a film." Kaminer assures us that Annaud pays the lowest wages to his extras, a meagre thirteen German Marks an hour, "but at least everyone has a full-time job for a while. They have to take Stalingrad, temporarily reconstructed in Krampnitz, just outside of Potsdam, by storm" (2000, 136). According to



Kaminer, the news of Annaud's film soon reached Moscow and spawned a similar profit-oriented project: "The Russian film giant Nikita Michalkov is toying with the idea of creating the most expensive Russian war film of all time: *The Conquest of Berlin*. Presently contacts are being made between the government and the army in order to obtain money and authorizations. The decimated Berlin will be reconstructed in the capital city Grozny and all the war veterans will be allowed to play in it at no cost to themselves. Of course the Russian film cannot be too expensive; but then again the Russians have real canons and a genuine civilian population that they can mow down—they have the genuine realism on their side. In Russia Michalkov has a set about which Annaud can only dream" (2000, 137).

Kaminer's dark humour is a reflection upon the cynical exploitation of tragedy. The wisecracks on the extravagance of film productions are also a reaction to German prejudices reflected in the use of clichés—above all, the proverbial poor Russian table manners. The scene "Russian officers at breakfast" portrays the high command in a background of culinary opulence and boorishness. Countless kilograms of caviar at four thousand German Marks per kilo fill the table, accompanied with fifty bottles of Soviet champagne, fish and delicatessens. The actors eat nothing during the shooting, and the lion's share is used in the following scene, "The Russians have eaten breakfast... The caviar and fish were spread out on the table and mashed up as if wild pigs had run over it. And then champagne was poured over the whole mess so that even the stupidest could see: here the barbarians have celebrated an orgy in the middle of the war" (2000, 144). What still remained on the table was a feast for poorly paid Russian extras in a scene never filmed, but recounted in Kaminer's work. Kaminer himself gobbles up Khrushchev's breakfast. Grisha, Kaminer's Russian comrade, sounds the call to attack the smorgasbord: "Let's dispense with the false humility. We must not let such good things be thrown away. We owe it to our fathers who once fought in Stalingrad. This film is based upon wastefulness, they will buy more stuff and throw it all away again" (145). Diogenes himself was "astonished that when slaves saw their masters were gluttons, they did not steal some viands" (31; bk. 6, § 28). In true Cynic style Kaminer's Russian actors and Kaminer himself pilfer the remains of the prodigal film production.

The dimensions of Jean-Jacques Annaud's Film *Duell—Enemy at the Gates* explain why it captivated the Russian cultural scene in Berlin. Affectionately referred to as Stalingrad, it brought the most cataclysmic battle on the Eastern Front to the outskirts of Berlin and offered countless Russians an "alternative to welfare." It also served as an object lesson in the Hollywood rewriting of European history. Following a closed screening of the film for American distributors, Annaud was apparently forced



to concede that the film was unsuited to the American market. "Not enough blood, they said, not enough beautiful blonds, not enough suffering—not enough of anything. In addition the love story in the film ends in a cul-de-sac. The lovers are not brought together at the end of the film, they are torn apart. The film simply doesn't have a happy end, the US-experts maintained. Such a depressing film would have no success in America" (Kaminer 2001, 32). The European film producers had three days to correct the error. The casting agencies were hard pressed to drum up overnight six hundred Russians "suitable for a happy end," in particular "men with only one leg, invalids and young blond women." Here again a game with duplicitous minority identity is played out, the Turks "dressed in their costumes looked even more Soviet than the Russians themselves." In the scenes reshot for the happy end to Stalingrad the Russians are strewn with more blood, there are more wounds and more moaning, but they are directed to smile, to shout hurrah and to celebrate the end of the decisive conflict of the Second World War: "I want to see a festive mood; show more happiness." In the end the collective trauma mutates into a collective feast with spaghetti Bolognese, olives, mozzarella, coffee and hard cash for the Russians.

Russian Cynics in urban Berlin

Kaminer's stories introduce his reader to countless scenes of the Russian community in Berlin. They are filled with ironic social critique, they celebrate the world of impoverished heady intellectuals, and they are popular. Kaminer can be heard regularly on the radio, his public readings are almost always sold out. In his stories the kitchen anecdotes and satiric *chastushki* find their way to a larger public which Kaminer has helped to generate for himself and for countless other authors from the former Soviet Union. Germany has always shown an interest in Russian culture. But in the wake of Kaminer's success the presence of Jewish-Russian and Russian literature in bars, cafés, theatres and literary clubs has grown dramatically. With that, this immigrant culture has established a forum for its own personal expression and political concerns. That's a hopeful sign for those sceptical of large city culture. It appears to be a process of cultural enfranchisement, a reclamation of public space for minority self-representation.

For many sociologists, modern urban culture ripened in the tensions between the organic structures of the early modern agrarian economy and the inorganic forces of a modern bureaucratic and industrial economy. The former resembles a biotope dependant upon seasonal change, family and community bonding and land ownership; the latter appears by contrast an earthless abstraction, a synchronicity of disparate temporal forms at odds with traditional lifestyles, fuelled by synthetic light, increasingly



abandoned to the forces of global markets and geared to optimally utilize machines. Modern urban culture is the culture of Tyche, of coincidence, and of disenfranchisement. In the urban community where one's work and one's home are separated by depersonalized spaces of pure movement, a structure of mutual non-observance forms part of one's day to day life (see Sennett 1977). As Georg Simmel observed, every time we walk down a big city street, the density and heterogeneity of the masses and the speed and transience of visual and tactile contact with them compels us to behave with reciprocal reserve (1989a; 1989b; ch. 7, sec. 3). Simultaneous proximity and anonymity characterize the life and conduct of the urban dweller. What lies between home and work is an anonymous, purely functional public sphere in which silence displaces dialogue. The urban private sphere is introverted and turned in upon itself, offering little social experience. At the same time, the forces of the global economy, under the guise of mobility, have reduced the possibilities of acquiring lasting relationships on the job (Sennett 1998). If we accept this pessimistic view of the city, Berlin is indeed the capital of Germany: it has the highest proportion anywhere of people living alone in their own apartment.¹⁶ A social tragedy?

Not surprisingly, Kaminer, an advocate of urban pleasures, has a different take on the decline of married couples. "One often hears that Berlin is the capital of singles. The residents themselves laugh about it. The idea could occur only to a superficial journalist who trusts more the statistics than his own eyes. The statistics lie, they have always lied. Berlin is not a city of singles, but a city of relationships. To be more precise, it is one big romantic affair that swallows up every new arrival. Everybody lives with everybody" (2000, 58). Kaminer, a dispassionate observer, is certainly on the mark here: serial monogamy has displaced marriage as the most common form of intimate relationship.

Berlin is certainly a young city of centrifugal diversions, cultural attractions and fetching promiscuous energies. Those who decry the evils of cities are often just covert provincial advocates of *Gemeinschaft* (community), enjoying the vicarious pleasures of city-monging while ignoring (or condemning) its advantages—its intellectual stimulation, its diversity and the libertine delights and freedoms of anonymity. As Don DeLillo once noted: "It is the nature and *pleasure* of townspeople to distrust the city. All the guiding principles that might flow from a centre of ideas and cultural energies are regarded as corrupt, one or another kind of pornography. That is how it is with towns" (1986, 85 {emphasis added}). Russians on the move from Moscow to Berlin are more inclined to see both environments critically but to favour the city. "I prefer the schizophrenia of the megapolitan cities, the great capital cities, to the sleepy paranoid small towns in which nothing much really happens" (Schtscherbina 2001, 120).

In Germany today a strong case can be made for the paranoia of smaller communities; racism and anti-Semitism are more common in Eastern German towns where there are fewer immigrants.

The present essay is an attempt to show that a modern form of Cynic indifference is at work in Berlin's urban culture. Modern Cynic indifference is an urban phenomenon *par excellence*. It is unthinkable in a 'town' environment where everyone has some sort of affective or social bond with almost everyone else and where the anonymous, the neutral, is thus suspicious. But the urban indifference of the Russian Jews in Berlin is not just a response to city life; it is also a response to the cataclysmic changes of the nineties. The fall of the Iron Curtain is, for those from the East, "the most unbelievable event of the last century next to the Russian Revolution and Fascism" (Oroschakoff 2001, 215). Berlin, earlier the epicentre of a world catastrophe, is now the epicentre of post-Cold-War Europe, and it is still struggling with the aftermath. In no other city in Europe is the clash of Eastern and Western mentalities so open and so fruitful. But with the decline of former eastern German industries since 1989, Berlin is also the poorest Western European capital with the highest unemployment. Not—one would suspect—an optimal environment for new immigrants. And yet it is.

Like the antique Cynic philosophers, the Russian Jews and Russians immigrants from post-Soviet urban areas have come to the Capital of Germany both by choice and by chance. Their intelligence and education and their experience with a deficit economy in the East appear to aid them and to endanger them. They can make do with less and maintain a sense of autarky, yet they are overqualified, very literate—and outspoken. Like Diogenes of Sinope and like Kaminer's Russian characters, they talk a lot. They identify with highbrow culture, but their solidarity extends to the lower echelons of society and they tend to live a more collective lifestyle. Life in Soviet bureaucracy has made them more docile, more capable of avoiding violent passions holding on to their equanimity. They prefer irony to anger, anecdote to attack, and they are familiar with the popular generic traditions of satire because these form part of their national tradition. Having matured largely in a culture of censorship and state control, they share in common the cultivation of kitchen debates and unofficial readings, but the limitations of public expression at home also mean that they cherish freedom of speech abroad. And they make use of it. Within the Jewish community alone there are two forums for public readings of 'Jewish literature' now dominated by Russian authors. The "Theater unter dem Dach" in Kreuzberg, "Kaffee Burger" in Berlin's Mitte and the Russian Theatre "Nostalgia" offer regular Russian/German readings for their enthusiastic public. For some time now a bulky tour guide of Berlin has been on the market, written in Russian and list-



ing over forty pages of restaurants, bars, cinemas and clubs with Russian and Jewish activities. There are many other annual events, such as the “International festival of Russian Bards” offering a Woodstock-like three day concert of contemporary Russian folk music. And many of them are Jews. But who’s counting? Neither the Russians, nor the Germans in the audience, nor the Jews themselves. The question interests only a minority within the Jewish community.

So the Jews are back, the Russians are here in large numbers. Is this a case of tolerance? Or integration? Such words never occur to Kaminer, himself indifferent to the question of identity. And it appears as if this indifference increasingly characterizes, in a positive way, his public. The very notion of tolerance presupposes that there is something we have to put up with. But the urban environment he describes schools one in the experience with ambivalent identities; it teaches reserve, but it also dramatically increases the exposure to other cultures and minorities. In the fast pace of public space there are lots of places to sit down and enjoy. And the sense of indifference here is the feeling that ethnic culture per se is really neither good nor bad. You attend what you like. But you are there to enjoy, not to show how magnanimous you are towards other minorities. In view of the diversity of cultures competing for attention in Berlin this benign sense of indifference is working wonders today.

On the third of June, Berlin celebrated its annual “Carnival of Cultures.” The weather was atrocious. Cool thick sheets of rain drenched the masses throughout the day. Nevertheless, the carnival was attended by over six hundred thousand people (one fifth of the city’s population). The flamboyant costumes and music of the “Caribbean Heatwave” from Trinidad were a thrill to watch and the Latino group “*Sapucaiu no Samba*” won first prize for the best performance. Less shrill, but equally popular, was the programme presented on the Eurasia Stage on the corner of *Zossener Straße* and *Blücher Straße*. Sasha Pushkin, the indomitable experimental poet, singer and composer, entertained his large following with Russian songs, accompanied by a Scot on the balalaika and an African on the drums. Next on the stage was a Jewish-Russian band playing steamy Klezmer. Finally Kaminer himself appeared in the guise of disk jockey. The Russian rock and roll captures the mood of the youth in the eastern half of Berlin. It’s called “*Ostalgia*.” Nostalgia for the East. For this young generation *Ostalgia* is not really a longing for what is lost. It’s an expression of the enthusiasm for what is here again: the Eastern Jews, the Russians. The crowd is dancing despite the rain. Such beautiful moments in European culture are not easily dampened.

Notes

1 On indifference and the Holocaust see Baum (1988). Kershaw speaks of “the indifference of the German people towards the fate of the Jews” (1983, 274). “It would not have been possible without apathy” (371). Todorov proposed that “at the end of the path of indifference and conformity lies the concentration camp” (1996, 253). As I shall point out in this essay, what most clearly distinguishes antique Stoic and Cynic indifference from modern indifference is its nonconformist quality. Indifference and apathy are strategies for ignoring the commonly accepted mores and morals of a corrupt society. Geras canvases the vast literature on the Holocaust and indifference; he notes that “liberal culture underwrites moral indifference” (1998, 59), but his theory that a contract of mutual indifference, based upon the principle of neither offering help to others nor expecting it from them, is formally flawed insofar as it fails to differentiate between ignoring crimes (including failing to help potential victims: incidentally, now considered a criminal act in Germany) and actively planning them. Herzfeld’s study is more sophisticated; it draws attention to the fact that the criminal and destructive sense of indifference occurs in correlation with practices of racial and cultural exclusion. For Herzfeld, “indifference is the rejection of common humanity” (1992, 1). Thus the destructive potential of indifference is sought not in indifference itself, but in the sources of racism from Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain to Alfred Rosenberg. Lenain implicitly likens indifference to passive self-disenfranchisement (1986, 5); on the other hand, he points out that the rules of neutrality and impartiality (also forms of indifference) governing the legal system are central to modern democratic culture (48). Thus the indifference of administrations cannot be viewed merely negatively, for it is also a guarantee of impartiality bridling partisan zeal in a public culture differentiated into numerous discrete private spaces (see Lenain, 73–80).

3 The very word Cynicism is misleading and the English language adds to the false impression surrounding the Cynic school. Webster’s dictionary (1994) defines “cynic” as (1) “an adherent of an ancient Greek school of philosophers who held the view that virtue is the only good and that its essence lies in self-control and independence” and (2) “a faultfinding captious critic; especially one who believes that human conduct is motivated wholly by self-interest.” In German the word for a Cynic philosopher (Kyniker) is clearly distinguished from the modern pessimistic sense of the word (Zyniker). Thus Manfred Geier, a specialist in the philosophy of Stoic and Cynic indifference, writes: “The ancient Cynics (Kyniker) were not nihilistic cynics (Zyniker)” (1997, 89). This distinction is often lost in English; in the present essay I shall capitalize the philosophical term Cynic and use the word cynical in order to stress the discrepancy.

5 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 806: “Das praktische Gesetz aus dem Bewegungsgrunde der Glückseligkeit nenne ich pragmatisch (Klugheitsregel); dasjenige aber, wofür ein solches ist, das zum Bewegungsgrunde nichts anderes hat, als die Würdigkeit, glücklich zu sein, moralisch (Sittengesetz). [...] Das zweite abstrahiert von Neigungen, und Naturmitteln, sie zu befriedigen, und betrachtet nur die Freiheit eines vernünftigen Wesens überhaupt.”

7 Kant associated the “duty of apathy” with self-control of one’s own feelings and impulses; it reflects a virtue based upon an inner freedom, namely the freedom to bring one’s own capacities and inclinations under the control of reason. Nevertheless, Kant noted that apathy’s bad reputation arose out of the confusion between dispassionateness and moral apathy. In a paragraph on “apathy (considered as strength) as the prerequisite of virtue” he writes: “Dieses Wort ist, gleich als ob es Fühllosigkeit, mithin subjektive Gleichgültigkeit in Ansehung der Gegenstände der Willkür, bedeute, in übelen Ruf gekommen; man nahm es für Schwäche. Dieser Mißdeutung kann dadurch vorgebeugt werden, daß man diejenige Affektlosigkeit, welche von der Indifferenz zu unterscheiden ist, die *moralische Apathie* nennt: da die Gefühle aus sinnlichen Eindrücken ihren Einfluß auf das moralische nur dadurch verlieren, daß die Achtung fürs Gesetz über sie insgesamt mächtiger wird. Es ist nur die scheinbare Stärke eines Fieberkranken, die den lebhaften Anteil selbst am



Guten bis zum Affekt steigen, oder vielmehr darin ausarten läßt. Man nennt den Affekt dieser Art *Enthusiasm*, und dahin ist auch die Mäßigung zu deuten, die man selbst für Tugendausübungen zu empfehlen pflegt." (1968, 540–541).

8 Gomperz cites *Le roman russe*, where Pierre's feeling is described as "ce sentiment indéfinissable, exclusivement russe, de mépris pour tout ce qui est conventionnel, artificiel, humain, pour tout ce que la majorité des hommes estime le souverain bien de ce monde." (de Vogüé 1886, 310).

9 The classic study is *Istoriia russkoi intelligentsii* (Ovsianiko-Kulikovskii 1914). *Russische Geistes- und Religionsgeschichte* (Masaryk 1913) contains a brilliant overview of the traditional tensions between political absolutism and social critique. In both works one learns that the indifference and apathy towards the upper echelons of society was a defensive mechanism of individuals engaged in free thought. They also illustrate a pattern of geographical or psychological immigration (withdrawal into the self) reflecting the value (and the cost) of Stoic independence in Russian culture.

10 See the classic study by Holquist and Clark (1984).

12 Kaminer errs here. The actual date prior to which the Russian Jews had to enter the country in order to obtain the status of a refugee was the 15th of February 1991.

13 The large Turkish minority (about 400,000) in Berlin grew organically over decades; the bulk of the Russians (or Russian Jews) appeared to arrive overnight.

14 I should note here that the overwhelming majority of Jews from the Soviet Union were, by nationality, simply Jews at home, but the language and culture with which they most closely identified was clearly Russian. Valeri Biletski typifies the attitude of Jewish Russians when he writes: "The three pillars of Russian literature of the twentieth century—Ossip Mandelstam (1891–1938), Boris Pasternak (1890–1960) and Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996) are Jews. [...] Russian literature of the twentieth century is unthinkable and unimaginable without these three." The historian Andrei Reutov suggested that "after the eradication of the aristocracy as a class in Russia, particularly the Jews played a considerable role in maintaining the heritage and in the continuation of cultural traditions in Russia." See Biletski (1996, 280, 283).

15 According to a representative opinion poll, 49% of the Jewish immigrants to Germany indicated that anti-Semitism was the most important reason for their immigration; 88% had direct experience with anti-Semitic attacks; 99% of these immigrants believe they have a higher level of personal security in Germany than at home. About 84% of the Jews from the former Soviet Union come from Russia and the Ukraine. (See Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt, 1996, 54, 31, 75).

16 The wisecrack on the enthusiasm for dead Jews in Germany reflects the perspective of Gad Granach, a "Prussian" Jew born in Rheinsberg and now living in Jerusalem. His autobiography, *Heimat los! Aus dem Leben eines jüdischen Emigranten* (1997) is filled with Berliner and Jewish humour.

18 About 16% of the population of Berlin is unemployed; here 31.6% of the Jewish immigrants are employed (only 14.3 % nationally have found a job). See Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt (1996, 89–91).

21 Kaminer, 43ff ("Mein erster Franzose"), 139ff ("Wie ich einmal Schauspieler war").

22 The term "Rußlanddeutschen" that Kaminer uses here applies to Germans who remained on Soviet territory following the Second World War. Like the Jews in the Soviet Union, they often fell victim to Soviet national prejudices and political suspicions. With the removal of travel restrictions from the Soviet Union in the eighties many German-Russians immigrated to Germany where they immediately received the status of German citizens. But like the Russian Jews for the Jewish community, the Germans often looked (down) upon the German-Russians as mere Russians with no real roots in German culture.

26 About one half of all the apartments in Berlin are inhabited by a single individual, accounting for about one half a million of the population of 3,3 million. The birth rate is correspondingly low and the stabilization of the population requires immigration. See Berliner Zeitung (2000); Neumann (2000); Lenz (2000).

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