

Building Projects of Well-Being



“We live well here. We have enough of everything. One has only to know how to manage it in the right way.” I heard statements such as these repeatedly from immigrants. It took me some time of managing my own life in Germany—shopping, paying bills—before I realized that “managing it in the right way” was not an easy project, especially for welfare recipients, many of whom were immigrants. The amount of welfare received by these people—the elderly, the unemployed, and particularly unemployed parents with children—was not just insufficient for creating a “good life” but was barely enough for a basic month’s sustenance. I came to realize that in order to exist above that bare level of subsistence those on welfare must develop a set of strategies for building and sustaining what I will call “projects of well-being” in Germany. The aim of this chapter is to explore how Russian Jewish immigrants in Germany build their projects of well-being and to identify the important elements in these projects. As this chapter reveals, successfully building projects of well-being is only accomplished through an investment of much time and effort and continuous movement across diverse spaces of consumption.

The consumer-type that will be drawn here has its roots in the socialist “culture of shortage” (Miller 1995:16). For a long time, the phenomenon and culture of consumption was viewed as a feature of the capitalist world, while its role and practice in the socialist world was incomprehensible to and misinterpreted by Western scholars (Svab 2002). Focusing primarily on the production of goods and the economic practices of goods distribution, Western scholars overlooked and disregarded socialism’s culture of consumption

and failed to adequately consider the socialist consumer's everyday consumption practices and accompanying cultural practices (see Chelsea 2002; Rosenberg Weinreb 2009; Svab 2002).

In the center of the socialist culture of consumption stood what I call the “consumer-fighter,” an extremely skilled and resourceful figure who was drawn by dreams of and desires for some material “thing” (the *veshch*) that was lacking and who persisted in his or her efforts to acquire the missing commodity and to build a better life. It is impossible to understand Russian Jewish immigrants' consumption practices in Germany without considering the same individuals as Soviet and post-Soviet consumers and exploring their dreams, desires, and practices (see also Bernstein 2010). In other words, in addition to considering the immigrants' movement in German spaces of consumption, this chapter will move in time, glancing back at the immigrants' Soviet and post-Soviet lives as a way of understanding their present practices.

In Pursuit of . . .

Homo Sovieticus was a string-puller, an operator, a time-server, a free-loader, a mouther of slogans, and much more. But above all, he was a survivor.

—Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*

There are multiple styles of shopping, and there are particular consumer cultures that are dictated by status games and influenced by personal tastes and predispositions. Some consumers browse for hours, gazing admiringly at shop windows and moving from shop to shop, trying on this or that. Others commit quickly: with clearly defined objectives, they make their way to a particular shop, and, once the task has been fulfilled, they leave, glad to be free from the dominant consumer spectacle. There are those, too, like my acquaintances Rita and Irina, who enter consumer spaces with the relentless pace of experienced bargain hunters. Without a moment's hesitation, they plunge themselves into the shopping mall, leaving no *Angebot* (German for “sale” or “discount”) unturned, no new shop ignored, missed, or overlooked. During the three hours of our time together that Rita had allotted for the chase of a carpet for their house, they looked at so many other items and learned so much more. While the carpet in question was not found, the endeavor gave me a glimpse into the way that immigrants navigate and manage consumer space in managing the project of well-being.

Rita, about sixty years old, and Irina, in her late forties, belong to a group of “poor” consumers. Zygmunt Bauman (1998) refers to their kind

as “flawed consumers.” While they are limited in financial resources and act on the margins of consumer space, regarding them as “flawed consumers” minimizes their agency and underestimates the skill with which they navigate consumer spaces as well as overlooking the creativity they exercise to achieve their material goals. They negotiate their way through the consumer system, sometimes maneuvering through it successfully and other times defeated by it. They are persistent in their determination to build and sustain their projects of well-being.

One of the first steps in this project is taken in the initial stages of the immigrants’ residence in Germany. This step is of paramount concern and is aimed at *obustroitsya* (“settling down”), which might include furnishing a flat or otherwise putting in order one’s *byt* (a Russian term referring to the material side of one’s life), thereby establishing some settledness and order into life. For the majority of my informants, a similar process in the old country would have taken years and multiple efforts and been beset by financial hardships. In Germany, on the other hand, the process of setting up a home can be completed relatively quickly, thus providing immigrants with “proof” of the worthiness of their migration endeavor. Irina’s house, where the whole family had lived since arriving in Germany three years before our meeting, provided a good example. Irina’s flat was fully furnished (some might even perceive it as being overfurnished), with wardrobes, bookshelves, television sets, and wall-to-wall carpeting. The design of the furniture and their positioning in the flat, the colors and patterns of the carpets, the artificial flowers decorating the walls—all evoked the domestic aesthetics of her former home in Ukraine and showed the aspiration, which I observed time and again in immigrants’ houses, to recreate homeyness in a new place.

During one of my visits with Irina, her friend Rita called. Someone had told Rita was about a carpet sale at one of the city’s shopping centers. Rita was in need of a new carpet for her dining room, as the old one had been chewed and stained by her black dachshund puppy. After a series of back-and-forth telephone calls, Irina and Rita agreed that they must not wait and should run to the shop that very day. As our time was limited, Irina and I rushed to meet Rita in the city center and, from there, to take the bus to a distant mall situated in the suburbs. The rush began as soon as we left Irina’s house: we ran after the tram, jumping over the tram rails and squeezing ourselves through the closing doors. We hopped off at the city center, finding ourselves in the town square surrounded by a number of malls and shopping centers. Rita was already there waiting for us. We began to move toward the bus stop, but Irina, having noticed something we had not yet seen, suddenly changed direction, dragging us toward the mall’s entrance. “Ice cream—they’re advertising ice cream, ice cream for free!” she shouted while running and pointing at two women eating ice cream.

Rita chased after her, trying to object: “Calories!!! Extra calories!!! Look at us!!!”

“I don’t care. It’s tasty. Let’s go!” Irina shouted back.

We rushed into and through the shopping mall. Before we reached the ice cream, however, Rita pointed out a new shop, and she and Irina both stopped for a moment to look in the shop’s window at some signs advertising a sale. By the time we reached the ice cream stand, all the ice cream was gone. But people eating ice cream continued to appear from somewhere, and so Irina, with us in tow, rushed to the opposite side of the mall in pursuit of the desired treat.

A few minutes later, with chocolate ice cream in our hands, we stood outside waiting for the bus that would take us to our original destination, the carpet store. When the bus approached, Rita looked questioningly at Irina, remarking “Eating is not allowed on the bus.” Not wanting to waste time waiting for the next bus, we boarded. The driver chose to ignore our ice cream or else was too distracted to notice. Once seated, Irina and Rita were discussing the sales and the new shops they had noticed, as well as items they intended to buy at the end-of-the-season sales.

Rita’s and Irina’s movement through consumer space was dictated by their long experience of living in a Soviet system of material scarcity. In that system, the thing (*vech*), the commodity itself, was lacking, a rarity to be chased after and waited for in long lines; it required consumers to calculate how it would be bartered for and obtained through the mechanisms of *blat*, or “connections” (see Fitzpatrick 1999; Ledeneva 1998; Ochkina 2009). Sheila Fitzpatrick (1999) traces this Soviet economics of scarcity back to the early 1930s: “[T]his was to be a society built on shortages, with all the hardships, discomfort, inconvenience, and waste of citizen’s time associated with them. The *Homo Sovieticus* emerging in the 1930s was a species whose most highly developed skills involved the hunting and gathering of scarce goods in an urban environment” (2). A particular set of practices developed: when they saw a queue, people “quickly joined it, inquiring what goods were on offer after securing a place. The question was formulated not as ‘What are they selling?’ but ‘What are they giving out?’” (41). Being available on a moment’s notice to run after products and *things* was the only way most people were able to manage the reality of scarcity in the Soviet era.

The general economic crisis that followed perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union made life for post-Soviet subjects difficult at unprecedented levels: material survival became the focus of people’s lives (Humphrey 2002). Catherine Wanner (2005) aptly refers to the situation as a “poverty of the strong” from which “Education, skills, good health and a willingness to work did not ensure an escape” (518).¹ In the 1990s, the post-Soviet urban space came to resemble one big bazaar, and the well-being

of many came to depend completely on their ability or inability to adapt to some sort of trade-barter system. With many factories and institutions having closed and others delaying payment of salaries (which, when ultimately paid, had lost much of their value due to inflation), trade-barter businesses allowed people to manage in the post-Soviet situation of structural collapse. As Caroline Humphrey (2002) describes the situation, there was “an endless sporadic flow of people into trade, prompted as much by absolute necessity as by the desire to make profit” (70).

Irina recalls:

Everybody stood there in the *tolkuchka* [market²], selling something. The chief doctor of our neighborhood clinic was there. My gynecologist, not a young woman anymore, was also there in the *tolkuchka*. She had not received her salary for months. Her clients had brought her all these small souvenirs, in gratitude, for which she had no need. So she was standing there selling them. She had a grandchild to support.

After her maternity leave, Irina, at that time a mother of two small children, chose not to return to her engineering unit at the factory. There was no sense in it: people hardly remembered when the last salary had been paid, and the future of the enterprise was unclear, although the factory was still technically open. She tried several things. She studied accounting and worked for a small private firm, the real business of which remained unknown to her until an acquaintance advised her to quit if she did not want to get into serious trouble. Afterward, she completed a hairdresser's course, turning her childhood hobby into a profession and earning a small income from it. In addition, she and her husband bred dogs, with “all those puppies living with them in one room” of their dilapidated, rat-infested flat. But all this still did not bring in enough income. As Irina explains, with two small children, a husband who worked as an engineer at the half-closed chemical factory and who was a passive man who “never knew how to manage and was always satisfied with what he had,” they hardly survived. She did not want to live like that. She started to trade. First, it was some fruits and grapes from her mother's garden; next, she involved herself in the cosmetics trade. In post-perestroika reality, the business of trade defined the lives of many. A stall in the market could cost more than a flat. The whole post-Soviet urban space was filled with bags and sacks of things. These were piled high in bazaar stalls or were dragged somewhere to be traded and exchanged for other goods. Things were snatched up (*raskhvatyvalis'*) by customers.

The German consumer space that Irina and Rita now occupied was of a very different nature, calm and affluent. Still, in navigating it, the two

women applied the shopping modes they had cultivated in their previous lives—only this time the obstacle was not a shortage of commodities but their limited financial resources in the face of a surplus of consumer goods and choices. Nonetheless, their past consumer experience directed their current performance and facilitated their management of the new consumer space. Such was the case during Rita's carpet search, to which we now return.

We had finished our free ice cream by the time the bus dropped us off at the shopping mall. Amidst the "sale" signs posted all over the large hall of the carpet department, we flipped through the piles of carpets to find the one we needed. We had probably come too late, and the discounted carpets were already sold out, or perhaps from the beginning the discount had not been enough to match Rita's pocket. The carpets we saw were too expensive. We turned over more and more carpets. "Maybe this," Irina pulled a carpet out of the pile with Rita's help, and they looked at it critically. "The price is okay, but it is too large. What should I do—roll it up and hide the extra under the sofa? Then this extra part will not be seen," Rita said aloud. "You can cut the extra off," proposed Irina. Examining the carpet, Rita observed, "The color . . . It doesn't match my wardrobe—that black wardrobe with violet frames on the side, in the sitting room, you know!" The carpet was pushed back into the pile. Exhausted, we proceeded to another pile of carpets. We moved through them slowly. Rita suggested we go home, but Irina, not yet ready to give up, dragged us out to the bus station, and we moved to another carpet shop on the other side of town.

In her study focusing on consumer practices in socialist Slovenia, Alenka Svab (2002) writes, "Everyday Socialist economics consisted of some, to [the] external (especially Western) observer, strange practices, which helped people to 'survive' and to make . . . life better" (72). In a world of scarcity, people had to "know how to spin" (*krutit'sia*, a Russian idiom, equivalent to "make do").³ When explaining to me the ways in which immigrants manage their lives, one woman remarked, "Someone buys a chicken. What does one usually make with it? One dish only. But *nashi ljudi* [our people] will make soup, meatballs, stew, and even something else, in addition, all that from the same chicken."⁴ This approach of creativity and thrift, learned in the Soviet culture of scarcity, allowed people to produce much from little, or, as Russians would say, to make "candy from nothing" (*sdelat' konfetku iz nichego*). One's ability to make do in these and other ways was not just a source of satisfaction; it was a kind of personal achievement.

Finding sales and discounts (German: *Angebot*) was a critical means for building a life of affluence. To demonstrate the power of the *Angebot* to me, Tamara, a woman in her early forties, gave the following example during our conversation in late autumn. She told me that, according to

her calculations, the cost of all that she wore at the moment, including the coat and shoes, was about fifty euros. What she wore was not of low quality: Tamara loved to dress up. She cared about the way she looked and was very selective in what she wore. But all the things she wore had been bought at a discounted price, “hunted down,” to use Tamara’s term, at sales.

Paradoxically, it was people’s marginal positions, articulated in this case in the ample time available to them because they were unemployed and not busy with a formal job, that allowed them to manage the consumption process with relative efficiency and to find products of satisfactory quality. (In fact, my working informants would often remark that their nonworking compatriots were managing households and budgets much better than they could.)

The case of Alexei, a man in his mid-forties who had been in Germany for ten years and unemployed for two years when I met him, provides a salient example of how consumer space could be navigated and managed at its best by those on its margins. Alexei went shopping almost every day. Each day, something was needed, and the process, as he explained to me, took a lot of time and effort. He preferred not to carry heavy bags, which meant that sometimes he went shopping two or even more times a day. He explained his strategy this way:

Shopping should be done in a wise way. One should be prepared when going to a particular shop and know what one wants there. Organic bread can be bought in one shop. It does not matter where one buys mineral water. But, for instance, peppers: it’s better to buy them at Lidl [a supermarket chain]. At Netto [a competitor chain] they sell them already packed, less tasty, and there is a green pepper in the pack that is practically useless.

In a later conversation, Alexei tells me, “Once, there were five supermarkets in the vicinity of my house. Now, because of the economic decline there are only three left,”

“What does one do with so many stores?” I ask him.

“Get the *Angebot* lists from all of them and check what is going on,” Alexei answers.

Alexei has severe myopia, but, in Russia, he had mastered the technique of speed-reading. He applies this technique now to poring quickly through the abundant *Angebot* lists. Eating healthily is important to him, and he tries to buy organic products. Although limited in his resources, Alexei has found successful ways to organize his life in his present circumstances, just as Rita and Irina had “spun” their “candy” to make a better life and build well-being in their own circumstances.

Consuming Europe

Among Russian Jewish immigrants in Germany, the ability to create and sustain successful projects of well-being relied, among other things, on the ability to travel, particularly around Europe.⁵ Among these immigrants, Paris was seen as the most important and desirable vacation destination, and many of the immigrants began their European travels with a visit there. The Russian longing and passion for Paris can be traced to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the city was the preferred destination for the Russian aristocracy, intelligentsia, and culturati. In the twentieth century, Paris became a refuge for the swarms of Russians expelled by the Revolution. The Soviet era inherited this Parisian dream. For the Soviets, Paris came to be the epitome of *zagranița* (“abroad”). As anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2005) has noted, *zagranița* was the significant place of “elsewhere.” Multiple worlds of “elsewhere” permeated the late Soviet culture and imagination. These places of “elsewhere” were the manifestation “of the internal deterritorialization of Soviet culture during the period of late socialism.” These places were “simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic.” In the Soviet quest for “elsewhere,” people engaged “in various cultural and intellectual pursuits based on the experience of a faraway ‘elsewhere’—foreign languages and Asian philosophy, medieval poetry and Hemingway’s novels, astronomy and science fiction, avant-garde jazz . . . [,] hiking . . . [,] and going on geological expeditions in the remote nature reserves of Siberia, the Far East” (Yurchak 2005:159–160; see also Vail and Genis 1996). In their quest for “elsewhere,” Soviet people dreamed of Paris. As the Soviet joke went, all people want to return to Paris, whether or not they’ve ever been there before.

It was thanks to Paris or, to be more precise, due to the personal financial crisis that ensued following her trip to that city, that Genia, in her early sixties, took me in as a renter and flatmate. I moved into Genia’s house right after her return from Paris. I would hear her moving around, yelling, and complaining that her legs ached. Like other tours the tourist offices offered immigrants, Genia’s trip had been organized to achieve the maximum in a short period and in the most inexpensive way. To economize on hotels, tourist buses traveled at night. The two nights spent on the bus and the three days of running through Paris museums took their toll on this already not-so-young and not-so-healthy woman. But Genia had fulfilled her dream of seeing Paris. “You remember,” she told me, complaining and simultaneously laughing at herself, “how they used to say in the Soviet Union: ‘To see Paris and to die [*uvidet’ Parizh i umeret*].’”

A trip to Paris and touring around Germany and the neighboring Scandinavian and other European countries were crucial elements in con-

structing immigrants' projects of well-being in Germany. Touring was the ultimate mark of an immigrant's achievement of Western affluence. Travel signified the person's ability to break through the formerly closed borders and to turn what had once been only a fantasy into something real and accessible.

But the trips carried additional meaning. Frequently, when discussing what motivated their move to Germany, Russian Jewish immigrants spoke of themselves as *evropeiskie liudi* ("European people") and talked about their desire to live in European culture. They saw their immigration as a migration to Europe, of which Germany just "happened to be a part." People used to emphasize the closeness of German or European culture to the culture from which they came, describing it as the culture "close to their hearts" (in contrast to the Oriental/Levantine culture of Israel).

Immigrants traveled a lot, and in so doing, they consumed Europe. For that reason, a travel agency was a good business to open.⁶ One agency, promoting itself in the flourishing and competitive market, came out with the slogan "*Iskolesim vsiu Evropu*," which translates roughly as "Let's crisscross Europe." People often explained to me, "Anyone who wants to can save money and go traveling one or even more times a year." For some, travel represented an intellectual quest and a source of satisfaction; for others, it was more related to a joke told among immigrants, that to travel meant that one could "check the box signifying that one had 'been there' and 'done that,'" as everyone else had. It is likely that the division between the two groups was not so great, since in most cases, spiritual enrichment and the demonstration of "being there" went together. By "traveling over Europe [*putshesvovali po Evrope*]," people staked their claim to European geographical and cultural space. By consuming European culture, they asserted their narratives of migration and reassured themselves of the success of their migration endeavor.

This assertion of European status and of success through travel required people to make sacrifices, however, both financial and physical. It took about three days after her trip to Paris for Genia to return to herself. After she did, she was glad she had made the trip. She had finally been to Paris, had visited the places that once she had only been able to read about. She had visited museums and seen paintings that once she had seen only in art books and brochures.

Moving between Two Worlds

Just as touring Europe became a crucial part of constructing immigrants' projects of well-being in Germany, so, too, did travel in the reverse direction—crossing the eastern border back into Russia or Ukraine. Very few of

my informants had not gone back to visit their home country at least once. Those who did not return had been traumatized or feared for their safety. Faina and Misha, for instance, a couple who had emigrated from Moldova in 1997, still bore the trauma of the civil war they had lived through. Adik, a man from Ukraine who had gone into debt in a money-laundering business on the black market in the 1990s, still lived in fear, seven years later, of being found by “those people [*te liudi*].”

For most who had returned, border crossings tended to evoke feelings related to the immigrant’s position and attitude toward the place they lived now as well as for the places they had left. Ilya, a man in his fifties, vividly remembers how, three years earlier, when he had crossed this border as a new immigrant, one border guard had approached their bus driver asking, “Are you still busy transporting the Kikes [*vsio eshche perevozish zhidov*]?” On reentering Germany after a visit to his former homeland, Ilya, for whom the three years in Germany had not gone smoothly, was surprised at how glad he was to return. Germany, the place over the border, felt like home, while the place left behind evoked heavy feelings and difficult memories.

For the young who had grown up in Germany, the eastern border carried no real emotional significance one way or the other, and they traveled east only on obligatory family trips with their parents. Those who worked and whose time was limited were motivated by a desire to make the most of their vacation, and traveling to the eastern homelands represented only one possible destination. Having realized themselves professionally and being much more integrated into German life, they were more apt to choose their vacations based on German travel trends and fashions. With the passing years, the attachments of many of them to their former countries had weakened.

For many immigrants, the border was a “corridor of opportunity” (Flynn 1997), and many businesses opened in Germany that were aimed at post-Soviet markets. Many immigrants involved in trade spent their time between two countries, living in both. Some worked in Russia, coming back in order to do the paperwork and keep their status in Germany. Patterns of traversing the borders for business gains were varied. One acquaintance revealed a plan to buy a secondhand truck in Germany for transferring goods back and forth but to register the car in Ukraine, where insurance payments were lower and demands for car maintenance were fewer.

A steady flow of secondhand cars crossed the border to Ukraine and Russia in the 1990s and to the Czech Republic and Poland in the 2000s, and many immigrants, particularly those living close to the border, were involved in the secondhand car business. Industrial products were transported into post-Soviet space; food products were exported to German shops that catered to Russian immigrants. At one point, an informant suspected

that I worked for some sort of trade business. Nina, a woman in her early fifties and an immigrant from Ukraine, agreed to an interview, but when we met she was extremely suspicious of me. She observed me carefully and resisted all my efforts to engage her in conversation. Avoiding all questions about herself, Nina tried to learn what my real purpose was. In the past, Nina had worked as a secretary in one of the OVIR offices, which belonged to the branch of the internal intelligence service that controlled the movement of Soviet citizens abroad and processed all travel documents. Indeed, Nina seemed to be a sophisticated person. Nina developed the following conspiracy scenario about me: “Are you working for the Israeli Mossad or the German *Sozialamt* [the name migrants used to refer to the department responsible for welfare recipients]? Or maybe you work simultaneously for both of them, collecting information about immigrants [*sobiraesh informatsiiu ob immigrantakh*]?” In the end, Nina drew her own conclusions about my actual intentions in Germany, which she shared with a common acquaintance. Although these conclusions lacked the imagination and creativity of her initial theories and seemed unappealing to me, they seemed significant to her: Nina determined that I was in Germany to set up meetings and talk to people in order to learn what was worth buying in Germany for export to Ukraine.

My acquaintance Ida, an attractive and very energetic woman in her fifties, used to travel to her native Ukrainian city twice a year. It was because of those trips, she lamented, that she still had not visited Paris. Ida traveled to Ukraine to visit her son, who had returned there after not finding work in Germany. Ida also went there to visit friends. On her visits, sometimes to give as presents and other times to sell, she would bring clothing and appliances that she bought at discount prices or found at Red Cross shops. Once there, she would buy high-quality, elegant clothes for herself, items she would never be able to afford in Germany. She also takes old shoes in need of repair to Ukraine. In Germany, she explains, it is often cheaper to buy a new pair or even two pairs on sale than to have old shoes repaired. When I met Ida, she was preparing to travel to Ukraine for a longer trip than usual. She was going to take care of her teeth there: her German health policy would not cover all the expenses, and it was cheaper to be treated in the Ukraine, particularly when she had an old dentist-friend there, with whom she had already made arrangements for treatment.

Some visited their homeland by car, while others took buses. Buses left from many cities to diverse destinations within the former Soviet Union; advertisements for these trips filled the Russian-language newspapers. Other than business people, the group that most often traveled was made up of unemployed welfare recipients who had no time constraints. This kind of traveling there and back was called *kursirovat* (“to ply”) in the immigrants’

language; travel increased during summer and lessened over winter. This movement was difficult to spot—even for those who knew it was occurring. My acquaintance Sergei had become adept at recognizing when his neighbor, Anna Mikhailovna, who traveled frequently to Ukraine, was in or out: he could tell by the way the curtains in her apartment windows were closed. As recipients of welfare money, these immigrants were limited in their ability to travel abroad, being allowed to leave the country for only two weeks once a year. And they were obliged to inform the welfare office about any trip. Many of these immigrants traveled more often and for longer periods, however, and they had no choice but to conceal their illegal travels from everyone except close family or a few friends, as they feared that their absences might be discovered or that other immigrants would inform on them, thus threatening not only their chances for movement but also their welfare money.

Once, I found myself in conversation with Sonia, a sixty-year-old woman who had come to Germany ten years earlier from Ukraine. The conversation took place just before Sonia and her husband's departure for Ukraine. They were going there to bury the ashes of Sonia's recently deceased mother, whose wish it had been to be buried beside her husband. Sonia did not belong to those who "plied," and it was actually only her second trip to Ukraine after ten years of being in Germany. The couple had informed the welfare office of their current trip. But last year, for instance, when traveling to Spain, they had just left, telling nobody, not even their good friends, so as not to create unnecessary talk and envy.

"Thank God, until now they did not check us," Sonia told me.

"What?" I asked, not sure I understood.

Look, people travel around a lot. To Russia, Ukraine, Canary Islands, Italy, Spain, Greece. . . . If that possibility is closed, I can't even imagine what would happen to the people. It would be a real catastrophe. . . . The nice thing in this migration is that people can go to their Moscow, their Poltava . . . and there is no nostalgia—if one wants, one can go there. Go! Kiss your favorite birch tree,⁷ visit a grave, and come back. That gives a feeling of freedom. And when one can't go, when one is limited in movement—there is not that feeling of freedom. It is depressing then . . . then it will be a catastrophe.

As Sonia's words imply, the ability to move and visit the immigrants' former countries was a critical component in managing their projects of well-being in Germany. I would often hear people describing their presence

in Germany as something that they didn't really want, as though they had moved there for lack of a better option and as something not completely certain or final. One of my acquaintances, who traveled to his native Ukraine almost annually, explained his trips in the following way: "I would like to live in Ukraine in a way that I could visit Germany, but, as I am not able to live in such a way in Ukraine, I live in Germany, visiting Ukraine." On his visits to Ukraine he gave the impression of a well-established person. Would he have had such an appearance had he lived in Ukraine and only been visiting Germany? Would he even have been able to afford such a trip? He was doubtful.

As one woman told me, "What do you think? Many of our people [*nashi liudi*] live with one leg here and another leg there, and there are many here living like that." The woman, as I came to know, was constantly moving back and forth to Ukraine. Somebody else told me this: "*Mnogie priekhali siuda kak bi otsidetsia*," which means "A lot of people come here to kind of sit through the hard period in their Ukraine." The implication is that, when things get better there, they will go back.

"My *priekhali siuda zhit*"—"We came to live here," emphasized one couple when they spoke to me, thus choosing to juxtapose themselves with many others who came *otsidetsia*—to sit through the hard times. Coming to *zhit* ("live") or *otsidetsia* ("sit out the hard times") marked the two contrasting positions, one signifying the immigrants' attempt to be socially involved and belong in a new country, the other marking detachment and noninvolvement. For some, their presence in Germany remained merely a physical one, and deeper connections or involvement in the surrounding world were suspended. As one of the immigrants sarcastically remarked, "It seems like people departed from there, but actually never arrived here."

People's well-being in Germany was contingent on their ability to cross the border, while their ability to enjoy a stay in the former Soviet Union hinged on the knowledge that they could return to the world of satiety and calmness. Physical movement was not always necessary to cross the border. People can cross borders virtually through the simple act of installing a satellite dish that connects them to Russian or Ukrainian TV channels. These satellite dishes, usually placed on apartment balconies, are a telltale sign of immigrant households. They transport their owners "there," putting them back into the heart of the discussions in the Russian Duma (parliament) and keeping them current with Kiev's latest evening news. The border crossings—whether actual or virtual—allowed people to combine the two worlds: the one they had left and the one in which they now lived. Each world compensated for some lack in the other. Combined and incorporated, "here" and "there" sustained their projects of well-being and made it possible for them to continue.

Consumer, Commuter, Citizen?

The people I have described here moved from the poorer and troubled regions of Eastern Europe to the affluent spaces of the West. Their goal is to have a better life; they come to consume affluence. Exploring the immigrants' everyday efforts to realize their projects of well-being illuminates them as financially constrained but nonetheless sophisticated consumer agents. Although emerging more often as losers than winners in their consuming ventures, they persist in their endeavors to bring material well-being into their lives. Building these projects of well-being with such limited resources, they artfully implement the survival habits acquired while living in the socialist and post-socialist economies. They succeed in turning consumer spaces to their advantage.

Immigrants' projects of well-being consist of a number of components: the navigation and management of different spaces of consumption—malls and shops—allowed immigrants to build and sustain a level of material well-being, while the ability to tour Europe provided proof to themselves and others of their belonging to the affluent Western European world. Finally, for many, the ability to move between their former homes and their adopted country was also crucial. On the one hand, when they visit their former countries, they are now the “foreigners” who can demonstrate their affluence to others while simultaneously reassuring themselves of their luck and the success of their new lives. On the other hand, the visits satisfy their nostalgia and soothe the feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and social inferiority that many of them, particularly the unemployed among them, experience in the host country. Afterward, they return to Germany . . . until the next time . . . when the same cycle of visiting and returning will be repeated.

The immigrant type that I found in Germany, the contours of which have begun to emerge in this chapter, was particularly present among the older immigrants, although it was not limited to them: it was evident, too, among the younger, working-age generation of immigrants. This type of immigrant often related to the surrounding place through consumption. Apart from that, her or his relations with the surrounding world seemed to remain rather superficial. One writer on the *vorota.de* forum depicted this immigrant type as shouting exultantly—“We live in Europe. Do you know that they brought strawberries to Aldi⁸ yesterday?” (*vorota.de*, December 10, 2009). For this type of immigrant, consumption, an initial objective of the immigration project, seems also to have become its final destination point. In some way, this immigrant seemed to remain only a commuter, hardly a citizen.