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Life Trajectories of the Russophone Speakers in Germany: 30 Years of Observation

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Abstract: This article presents a multifaceted portrait of immigrants to Germany from the post-Soviet states. The article traces the paths of two families over the course almost of a third of a century after immigration, focusing on language use and integration into the new environment. In-depth interviews conducted at various stages of the integration process and age-appropriate tests served as research material. The content, text, and lexical analyses, as well as a linguistic biography method, were used. The research included four generations of Russian Germans and Jews in each family. Russophones in Germany have not had an easy time integrating but, ultimately, have a positive attitude toward their adoptive country. The results show that the German language became the primary means of communication outside the family and partly within the family where Russian dominates among the second and third generations. The oldest generation (great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers) were fluent in German to some extent; those who moved at the age of 20–40 learned it sufficiently for their jobs; their children studied in German preschools and schools and became completely bilingual; and the great-grandchildren were born in Germany. The younger generations have fully integrated into German society, although strong connections with locals exist among the older generations too. Proficiency in the Russian language is still maintained even among the great-grandchildren's generation, although not to the same extent as among the generation of young parents.

Keywords: language trajectory; linguistic integration; language maintenance; Russian-German bilingualism; institutional support; heritage language

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1. Introduction

The late-Soviet and the post-Soviet events had an impact on every aspect of the social life, from politics and economic growth to interethnic interactions (e.g., Bassin and Kelly 2012; Belousov and Vlasov 2010; Isurin 2011; Lebedeva et al. 2021). The flow of emigration was triggered by necessity, opportunity, and motivation, led to significant sociolinguistic consequences, and has been studied in detail in numerous publications (e.g., Bloch 2024; Ovchinnikova 2022; Ryazantsev et al. 2018; Stasulane 2024). We believe it is important to show the family dynamics of multilingual adaptation to new living conditions in Germany over a long period of time—from the early 1990s to the early 2020s—using the example of linguistic practices in two immigrant families.

Hundreds of thousands of Russian Germans gradually immigrated to Germany from Kazakhstan, Russia, and other post-Soviet states (Ipsen-Peitzmeier and Kaiser 2006; Kaiser and Schonhuth 2015). Russian Germans, often referred to as Spätaussiedler (late resettlers), are individuals of German descent who migrated to Germany primarily after the fall of the Soviet Union. They were granted immediate citizenship upon arrival, benefiting from Germany's jus sanguinis citizenship laws, which prioritize ethnic descent over residency. This facilitated a relatively smoother integration into German society, as they were recognized as part of the German ethnic community. Despite this, Russian Germans have faced challenges

in their assimilation. Many feel a sense of disenchantment, as they often perceive themselves as not fully accepted by ethnic Germans. The Russian Germans decided to emigrate because it finally became possible and because political development in the successor states of the USSR (most Russian German immigrants came from Kazakhstan) did not appear to be promising, making hopes for the resurrection of German autonomy and prosperity within Russia elusive. The integration of immigrants into German Federal Republic's society posed social challenges and problematized much of the knowledge previously accumulated in the field of immigration studies (Struck-Soboleva 2006). Language and cultural hurdles, interruptions in the socialization process, and identity issues all resulted from the abrupt shift in the cultural environment and language community (Linchenko and Gartwig 2023). At first, there were no conceptual representations for the design of the admission system, nor were there any expectations regarding its outcomes. However, over time, the situation evolved, and newcomers adjusted their preferences and priorities accordingly (Panagiotidis 2019). Genkova (2021) shows how the social support impacted the acculturation strategies of Russians and Germans in Germany.

In parallel, Germany experienced a notable resurgence of Jewish culture, fueled by a growing population of Jews, particularly from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine (Ben-Rafael 2015). Russian Jews have a different historical narrative and assimilation experience in Germany. The Jewish community from the post-Soviet states has often faced significant barriers to integration, rooted in anti-Semitic sentiments and traditional prejudices. Unlike Russian Germans, Russian Jews did not have the same legal recognition upon arrival, which complicated their path to citizenship and acceptance in German society. The assimilation of Russian Jews was further complicated by their distinct cultural and often religious identity. Many Russian Jews maintain strong ties to their cultural heritage, which can create a dual identity that is both Russian and Jewish. This duality often leads to a more complex assimilation experience, as they navigate the challenges of integrating into a society that may not fully embrace their cultural background. Soviet Jews were linguistically "Russianized" yet ethnically distinct, and these dynamics shifted post-immigration. Becker (2003) critically addresses the moral and historical discourse guiding German immigration policy for Russian-Jewish emigrants, highlighting the clash between constructed identities and the diverse real practices of the immigrants. The reversal of the moral emphasis on Russian Jews in the mid-1990s, particularly in the context of debates on forged identity papers, revealed its impact on immigrant self-situating and motivations for choosing Germany as a destination. The study also explored tensions arising from German expectations of Jewish identity performance, impacting the lives and experiences of the immigrants. Peck (2005) suggested shifting focus from why Jews choose Germany to how they live there and explored contemporary Jewish life, highlighting the complexities within the community and broader German society, touching on issues of history, responsibility, culture, and identity and hopes for a vibrant Jewish future in Germany. Geller and Meng (2020) claim that post-1990 Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union and Israel has amplified visibility in society while challenging established notions of Jewish identity in the country. Cronin (2019) analyzes the differences in the attitudes among the communities and demonstrates multiplicity of Jewish lifestyles in Germany.

At the Institute of German Language in Mannheim (IDS), a project called "Untersuchungen zur sprachlichen Integration von Aussiedlern" [Investigations into the linguistic integration of repatriates] was initiated at the end of 1992 (its results are presented for instance in Berend 1998; Meng 2001; Reitemeier 2006). Linguistic integration was defined as the acquisition of linguistic abilities that allowed immigrants to communicate effectively and comfortably with locals as well as cope with the basic duties of their new life in Germany. One of the directions was empirical studies focusing on the language learning of Russian-German children, comparing them to Russian-speaking and German-speaking monolingual children, based on their socialization situations. These children's language learning was an extension of current language skills; it was not necessarily a loss in language skills, but rather a rearrangement. This process unfolded differently for

grandparents, parents, and children, and we observed it over the course of three decades (e.g., Meng and Protassova 2016, 2022).

The research questions in this article are as follows: How do the language practices of immigrants from the former Soviet Union living in German-speaking environments evolve over time in relation to their professional aspirations, linguistic integration, and cultural adaptation? What factors influence their decisions to prioritize retraining, seek internships, and engage in linguistic blending? How do linguistic and cultural differences between Russian Germans and Jews affect their approaches to language maintenance and integration into the host society?

2. Theoretical Background: What Develops, What Remains, and What Fossilizes?

Preconceptions against bilingualism often contribute to a lack of respect for the potential of growing up to be a multilingual (see Mehlhorn and Brehmer 2018; Putjata 2018). Immigrants typically maintain their native language while also learning the language of their new country, often using both languages in daily life. Children of immigrants usually become bilingual, with a strong command of the host country's language. However, they may still use their parents' language at home, albeit less frequently. It is common for their grandchildren to predominantly speak the host country's language, often losing proficiency in the ancestral language. This shift is often attributed to factors such as intermarriage, social integration, community and media influences, socioeconomic factors, and the predominance of the host culture in educational and social contexts. This three-generation model of linguistic assimilation, traditionally observed in earlier immigrant waves, applies to descendants of contemporary immigrant groups at different pace (e.g., Alba et al. 2002; Akhtar 2011; Hulsen 2000; Sevinç 2016; Wei 1994).

One goal of our project was to challenge prejudices. The study of Russian-speaking bilinguals has recently been extended to the countries beyond Europe. Venturin (2019), for example, carefully describes discrepancies between different immigrant generations using the models proposed by Ruben Rumbaut (2004) and applies them to young Russian-speaking immigrants to Australia and New Zealand. She presents the Russian speakers in Australia and specifies the relationship between language and identity, claiming that this relationship is affected by strong emotions. Hansen and Olsen (2023) studied emotional assimilation of the Russian Germans in Germany and discovered that they have a strong German identity.

Feliciano et al. (2019), utilizing qualitative interview and survey data, investigated ethnic identity development from mid-adolescence to middle adulthood among immigrant children from various countries, revealing that while ethnic self-identity labels became more stable in adulthood, their significance diminished, particularly among those born abroad, with many preferring labels linked to their origin country yet some adopting exclusively American-related labels, indicating diverse identity patterns influenced by ancestral ties and U.S. racial structures.

Although Russian in the diaspora is not the best-researched language, several significant works in the field can be mentioned (e.g., Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007). While the study of Russian as a heritage language in the diaspora is still developing, the existing research highlights significant insights into the linguistic development of bilingual children with Russian as their L1. Some studies provide evidence of the language development of bilingual children whose L1 is Russian. Schwartz et al. (2015) compared bilingual children from various L2 backgrounds (English, Finnish, German, and Hebrew) against age-matched monolingual children and monolinguals one year younger in order to investigate noun–adjective gender agreement in Russian. In a similar study, Minkov et al. (2021a, 2021b) demonstrated that Russian-German bilinguals have better command of some grammatical rules common for Russian and German than children with another pairing language. Kupisch et al. (2022) provide evidence that German-Russian bilingual children are just as sensitive to gender assignment cues as monolingual children. Bilingual children's naming disadvantage grows as they get older in comparison to monolingual children, and

in multilingual situations, noun learning is more vulnerable than verb learning (Klassert et al. 2014). These studies demonstrate that bilingual children, particularly those with German as their L2, can exhibit a strong command of grammatical rules, similar to their monolingual peers. However, challenges such as a growing naming disadvantage and difficulties in noun learning in multilingual contexts indicate the complexity of bilingual language acquisition.

Our study also examines how family language policies and external linguistic environments shape language retention and attrition across generations. Some previous research has been dedicated to adolescents and young bilinguals. Isurin and Riehl (2017) collected reflections about integration, identity, and language maintenance in young immigrants. Tskhovrebov and Shamonina (2023) distinguish between different migrant generations' performance in Russian under the influence of German, whereas Hoops and Panagiotidis (2021) deal with their identities. All migrants became bilingual to different degrees (Brehmer and Usanova 2017). Anstatt (2011) analyzed the language of Russian-speaking youngsters in Germany in comparison with monolinguals and showed that attrition phenomena in the sphere of active vocabulary were detected in all of them without exception. Furthermore, attrition was noticeable in a variety of grammatical domains for the most part. In other cases, the amount of promised information indicated speech-avoidance behavior, and the speech speed was the same as or much lower than in younger children. With a shift in the linguistic environment during the early primary school years, attrition of the first language appears to be unavoidable. Minkov et al. (2019) and Kagan et al. (2021) demonstrated that the language policy in the USA, Germany, Israel, and Finland and self-identification processes influence the grade of language performance in L1 in L2 surroundings. These findings underscore the importance of further research to fully understand the nuances of Russian language development in bilingual and multilingual environments.

A linguistic biography (LB) is a concept within sociolinguistics that refers to the narrative of an individuals' language experiences throughout their life (Franceschini 2022). A LB is a personal account of an individual's experiences with language throughout their life (Council of Europe 2024). It reflects on the languages they have learned, how they learned them, and how those languages have shaped their identity and experiences. It encompasses various aspects of language use, acquisition, and identity formation within a person's life story (Nekula 2021). An LB typically includes information about the languages spoken by the individual, their proficiency levels, the contexts in which they learned and used these languages, and the impact of societal and cultural factors on their language development (Johnstone 1999). The method to collect an LB recognizes that language is not static but evolves over time in response to social, cultural, and personal influences (Havlin 2022). By examining an individual's LB, researchers gain insights into how language shapes and is shaped by the experiences and identities of individuals within a particular sociocultural context (e.g., Favaro 2021; Weirich 2021). This approach helps to understand the complexities of multilingualism, language acquisition, language maintenance, and language shift within diverse communities (e.g., Haller 2014; Singer et al. 2022). A linguistic biography can cover topics such as the languages spoken in one's family and community growing up; the process of learning additional languages in school or through immersion; challenges faced when learning new languages; the role of languages in one's education and career; how proficiency in multiple languages has impacted one's life; feelings and attitudes towards the languages in one's repertoire; characteristics of other people's languages; and reflections on the language structure and use. An LB includes information on linguistic, cultural and learning experiences gained in and outside of formal educational contexts and promotes the development of proficiency in multiple languages.

3. Materials and Methods

Our study, conducted over several decades, highlights the importance of language exposure and parental attitudes in heritage language maintenance. By focusing on the speech characteristics of the project participants, we trace their LBs. Long-term observation

allows us to understand how their language practices align with the level of proficiency they have achieved in each language.

The extended family is the social unit that is most important for the linguistic integration of immigrants of all generations in Germany. In this situation, the selection of families to be observed was performed in a sporadic fashion in a Mannheim hostel, which meant that people from various social groups took part in the longitudinal study. The language competences, attitudes, and practices that Russian Germans bring with them from their home society have a significant impact on the path and outcomes of linguistic integration. By introducing cross-sections into this process and collecting linguistic data that allow the language status to be assessed at the relevant time interval, the results of an individual's language acquisition can be reconstructed. Observations of linguistic encounters, studies of electronically recorded oral communication, analyses of authentic texts, collecting self- and third-party linguistic competency ratings, and language tests were among the approaches used (Meng and Protassova 2022). The Russian-Jewish families were observed in their country of origin (three of them), followed by their time in hostels in East Germany (Protassova 2006), and, subsequently, in various environments throughout their life in Germany.

We are looking at LB interviews as linguistic interactions. Biographical interviews focus on the interviewee's life, including stations, constants, and changes, as well as the interviewee's assessment of them. The interviewer calls the interviewee's attention to his/her linguistic evolution in LB interviews. We observed the speech habits of a number of Russian German families, mostly from Kazakhstan. They arrived in the early 1990s and were accommodated in a hostel in Mannheim. The longitudinal study draws upon hundreds of interviews gathered from 10 German-Russian and four Jewish-Russian families over a span of 30 years. The Russian-Jewish families arrived around the same time but initially settled in the eastern part of Germany before later moving to the western part. The families were anonymized and are unidentifiable. No statements interfere with the integrity of their life and personality.

In addition, a C-test was administered with those Russian Germans who grew up in Germany (e.g., Mashkovskaya and Baur 2016). The C-test is a language proficiency assessment tool designed to evaluate a person's overall command of a foreign language, particularly in written form. Test-takers are required to reconstruct the missing parts of the text, which assesses their vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and reading comprehension skills.

4. Results

4.1. The Journey to Germany

The participants of the present study could be divided into two groups: Russian Germans, in common Russian-German parlance, *Rusaks*, and Russian Jews, known collectively as *contingent*. The former referred to the hostels as *lagerja* 'camps', apparently because of their historical experience in the Soviet Union, while the latter called their shelter *haim*, which sounds similar to the Hebrew 'life' and to the male name *Khaim*.

In this section, we will present the fieldwork conducted with two families, using the experiences of other families as background to enrich the overall picture. After leaving the hostel, the first one, the Steiners, a Russian-German family, moved to the western part of Germany; the second, a Jewish family, originally from Moscow, today live in Bonn. The Steiners' biggest problem in the hostel was that their baby girl was constantly sick. Grandfather Steiner spoke fluent German or, rather, a dialect he learned at home as a child. His son, however, had to attend a language course, *Sprachkurs*. This word was also Russified and shortened to *shprakhi*. Because of the baby's ill health and various household duties, the mother of the family had little opportunity to study. The second family, the Weiners (Russian Jews), relocated to the eastern region of Germany with their daughter, a middle-school student before emigration. The grandfather arrived later and settled down in West Germany. From his youth he, a WWII veteran, could speak some German and never was shy to use it openly. The parents were concerned about the girl's integration into a new

school. They all started learning German before emigration. Trying to consolidate their daughter's knowledge of Russian and understanding and appreciation of Russian culture, they read and re-read the Russian classics together with her. Despite differences in the physical locations of the hostels where the two families resided, the jargon they acquired and employed was lexically similar. In everyday conversation, members of both families referred to themselves as Russians, and Russian Germans also called themselves *Rusaki*.

Mixed ancestry can significantly influence the educational attainment of third-generation immigrants, often leading to distinct outcomes compared to their peers with single-ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Hunkler and Schotte 2023). In both cases, some of the ancestors were Ukrainians. Thus, the families reacted in similar way to the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine.

The situation of communal living in a hostel presupposes that people get to know each other. They visit each other, discuss common problems, and constantly give useful and sometimes useless advice to each other, especially in issues related to bureaucracy, paperwork, and legal regulations, as well as job hunting and buying their first cars in Germany. They exchange information as to which stores are the cheapest and share impressions of the "Russian" food stores where one can buy goods unavailable in German stores but essential for keeping a familiar diet and cooking favorite dishes. Ultimately, time spent in the hostel is a vital step toward integration. From old-timers, newcomers learn vocabulary related to bureaucracy: *auzidler*, 'resettler' (from the German *Aussiedler*); *sotsial* or *sotsialamt*, 'social bureau' (Sozialamt); *arbaizamt*, 'employment office' (Arbeitsamt); *kindergeld*, 'child benefits' (Kindergeld); *anmeldovat*, 'sign up, register' (sich anmelden); *tsojgnisy*, 'certificates' (Zeugnisse); *shtojery*, 'taxes' (Steuer); and *termín*, 'appointment' (Termin). Such items are learned through their use in the Russian speech of individuals who have lived in Germany for some time, rather than directly from German.

The spheres of language borrowing are related to the idiosyncrasies of integration: first and foremost, one must be able to name official organizations (such as kindergartens, schools, clinics, divisions of the municipalities) and items issued or processed via them, as well as registration processes. They also learn the vocabulary needed for shopping. Because pronunciation and understanding of oral speech are still an issue, some people twist German words and rearrange their elements. The frequency and invariance of such words reveals several things at once: these are new realities to adjust to; you cannot translate them into Russian because it would be unclear what you are talking about; this is a sign or a marker of the beginning of integration. Long and cumbersome words are frequently abbreviated, which makes communication easier. Many borrowed words contain parts that can then be used in other contexts. Immigrants intersperse their Russian speech with local toponyms, German conversation formulas, interjections, names of foods and other words frequently used in everyday conversations. For instance, various new forms are derived from the word *Tschüs!* 'Bye!' turning it into a noun in the plural and verbs: *chiusiki*, *chiuskat'*, and *perechiuskat'sja*. Some people have a habit of adding the German diminutive suffixes *-chen*/*-lein* to all nouns in a sequence, even to Russian, or Russian diminutive suffixes to German words, like *frau**shka*** and *herr**ushka***. Before the adoption of euros, some people referred to German money as *pfeni**shki***, while today they use *ojr**iki***, euros (both are endowed with Russian suffixes combining diminutive and endearing meanings), while others still use *rubles* and *kopecks* when counting money or discussing prices.

The syntactic constructions of the Russian language are also influenced by the interference with German or the desire to express the thought in a simple, understandable way: после солнц*а*, 'after the sun'; строить снегов*ика*, 'build a snowman'; р*а*д з*а* это, 'happy for it'; or уже пришл*о* время к т*о*му, чт*о*бы сп*а*ть, 'it is already time to go to sleep'. Such structures are not a direct translation from German; instead, they emerge from hypothetical combinations, implying that such a structure is easier to apply in the language in which their thought would be formulated (compare to semantic promitives by Wierzbicka 2021).

Academic subject labels borrowed from German (like mathematics, chemistry, and biology) have become popular among young people. The names of discos are frequently

employed in youth slang. One of our interviewees confessed that "Because you hear it all the time, swear words are the first ones you learn". All narratives and discussions connected to Russia by "native" Germans are treated with special sensitivity (conversations, arguments, condemnations, and memories), and such situations are vividly recalled. Every now and then, the name of Hans the watchman, the sole "true German" whom the residents see on a daily basis, appears in conversation. "He likes to *betroit'* [from German *betreuen* 'supervise'] us", says one respondent (borrowed words are pronounced in a Russian way).

Children begin to attend kindergarten or school, and they serve as conduits between the family and the dominant society. Myths about the German educational system are passed down from one generation of the residents to the next. School gives the following first impressions: it is like work, it is rare that youngsters think of the lessons as a means to learn something that inspires and excites them, and it is gloomy. The "good news" is that everything is very orderly and rigorous, and the lesson lasts exactly the amount of time specified in the rules. Unfortunately, if teachers do not make a particular effort to encourage communication between the novices and their classmates, friendships and even simple dialogues with peers rarely emerge. Some young people claim that during their first two years at school, they never spoke to anyone at recess except their Russian-German co-ethnics. If the school has Russian language teachers, newcomers instantly establish a special relationship with them. Later, more and more friends are "true" or "local" Germans, yet friendships with other "Russians" who speak German fluently but whose culture is much closer to their parents' homeland traditions lasts for years. However, the communication is primarily in German, with some Russian words and references to family culture interspersed.

In the dorm, many conversations circle around romances with refugees and displaced persons from other nations, such as Poland, Romania, and countries of the former Yugoslavia. Love stories and new friendships emerge and are discussed; these new relationships are attractive by the novelty of multicultural connections, some sort of "restitution" for the lost multiethnic homeland. Adolescents miss friends who have remained in their homeland. They mature faster than their peers, because they have more responsibilities at home, e.g., they often have to act as translators and interpreters for their parents, because they pick up the new language faster than adults. Naturally, it is very hard for them to carry out these tasks because their lexicon in German covers topics studied at school but has little to do with legal, bureaucratic, medical, and other issues; moreover, their parents do not understand that special training is needed to translate properly. In families in which education is a high priority goal, children are often told that they must study hard in order to find decent jobs and make good careers. Later, it becomes prestigious to marry a "true" or "local" German, although a lot of young people find spouses in their in-group.

Russian Germans start attending church and switch to the local annual cycle of holidays, although some of the Soviet festive traditions persist. Those who arrived in the last 20 years are familiar with the new or re-established Russian holidays, but few are liked as much as the New Year and Easter. The Jewish religion is the central theme of *Haim*, although many were completely ignorant of Judaism or the Jewish way of life before arrival in Germany. For the Russian Jews, Christmas was first associated with the Soviet New Year; later, some started observing Jewish holidays, but there are also those who give tribute to all three calendars: German, Jewish, and Russian.

Tags, interjections, introductory words, and stable phrases: such as *doch*, 'still'; *tut mir leid*, 'sorry'; *Gott sei Dank*, 'thank God'; *normalerweise*, 'usually'; and *wieso*, 'why'; are words that speakers enjoy using because they add color to their speech without requiring deep knowledge of the language or grammatical consistency. "And everything else *dazu*", 'in addition', is an example of how the Russian construction comes to rely on the German word. Short and expressive German communicative words are swiftly assimilated, such as *gut, schön, ja, nein, Danke,* and *bitte*, which are readily inserted into the Russian speech.

Borrowed words are sometimes encountered with translations or descriptions, such as "After school, this, *raukhepause* [should be Raucherpause], smoking break, that's it", or "The

automobile had to be *otshlepit'* [from German *schleppen*, 'drag'], towed, in short, dragged away", which has a humorous effect because it is a homophone of the Russian "spank".

Life in the hostel unfolds in front of everyone's eyes; talk, gossip, and stories abound. The inhabitants visit each other at any time of the day and often spontaneously without prior arrangements, as it is common in Russia. They may drop in for a short chat or stay for hours. *Haim* is a relatively restricted environment, in which people from various parts of the former Soviet Union—Armenia, Belarus, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan—as well as from Poland, Rumania, Somalia, and others, not all of them Jews, coexist, each bringing their own customs, language variants, way of thinking, cuisine, patterns of hospitality, etc. Getting to know each other, tenants try to figure out how different families bring up their children, how they spend their leisure time and manage their economies: how much they spend and how much they save. Neighbors start going out together, visiting restaurants and nightclubs; they also do sports together, playing football, volleyball, or other team games. At first, the mixture of food smells is overwhelming, because everyone still uses familiar recipes, be it pies, shish kebabs, mayonnaise salads, or cream and custard cakes. Almost every week someone has a birthday, and neighbors are frequently invited to join celebrations.

The hostel is a birthplace of immigrant folklore. There are legends about some personalities whose fate gave unexpected twist in Germany. They may have left the hostel a long time ago or never even lived there, but the tales survive and are gradually enriched with fantastic details. There are hilarious stories about pitfalls awaiting migrants in the first period of adjusting to their new country. Many of the inhabitants get nicknames, e.g., a short man is called *Minimal* after the name of a supermarket chain. In general, tenants like Germany, Germans, and the German way of life. They sometimes repeat the maxim pronounced by one of them: to live here feels like being tourists who sometimes travel abroad to visit department stores.

In the first years, a lot of talk is devoted to the acquisition of German. There are discussions about difficulties of grammar and pronunciation. Methods of learning new words are shared and compared. Linguistic terms are explained, and observations about different accents, standard language vs. dialects are made (colloquial German vs. *hokh* German, Hochdeutsch, or literary German). Russian Germans are often astonished to discover that their parents, who have maintained their dialect, talk "incorrectly". They delight in recognition when they hear a word they remember from infancy but have completely forgotten as it is not used in the speech of native Germans or in the language courses (e.g., *Stiefel*, 'boots'). When they find their vocabulary in German is insufficient to express themselves, they insert Russian terms or symbols of reality; in fact, a few years after arrival, when attrition takes its toll, they are confronted with the same problem when they speak Russian and often insert German words to substitute for the forgotten Russian ones. The majority of Russian Germans and Jews follow the same strategy: instead of sitting in class, which is particularly tough for men, they prefer to go back to their occupations as soon as possible. When they observe youngsters making rapid progress in language learning, they conclude that environment is everything and communicating with German speakers at work will teach them better than any course. Nevertheless, Russian-speaking academics feel that they need to learn as much German as possible.

After moving from the hostel to an apartment, émigrés acquire vocabulary related to their "own" (or rather rented) home: (*shlafzimmer, tapety, tepikh,* and *shild* or 'bedroom, wallpaper, carpet, and sign'). They learn the related slang: *warm* cost of the apartment, where 'heating' stands for all communal services vs. *kalt* cost, where 'cold' connotes rent alone. After getting a job, the terminology of work enters their lexicon (the correct German terms would be written with capital letters, but here they are used with Russian pronunciation, including a false stress, that is why they are written in a different way): to work *fest*, 'permanently'; to get a *kundigung*, 'Kündigung, to be fired'; to write a *beverbung*, 'Bewerbung, job application'; to do *urlaub*, 'Urlaub, to be on vacation'; and many others. Through personal experience, some people are unfortunately well versed in medical and

legal jargon. Speech is enriched by deciphered pieces of advertisements or accidentally picked up words and phrases: *Wo ist meine schlanke Linie?* or 'Where is my slender line?'—an expression meaning that the speaker would like to take care of how she looks; *Weil ich es mir wert bin*, 'Because I deserve it'; and *Informieren Sie sich kostenlos und unverbindlich*, 'Get free and non-binding information'. These and similar speech clichés are remembered because they are frequently repeated or because they were delivered with good pronunciation, in the advertising of desired goods, or in an emotionally colored context.

The time spent in the hostel was both stressful and rewarding for the young Steiner family. For the first time in their lives, they lived in an apartment that they did not have to share with others. They were eager to begin a new life in a new place and were not afraid of challenges. The daily struggles, disenchantments, and dilemmas of the first years seemed to be over. They would not like to repeat the experience of adaptation, but now they recall how difficult it was without sadness. The Weiner family remember their time in the hostel as being unlike anything else, like a trip to another nation, an experiment in a container, or a voyage to a deserted island as in popular TV reality shows. While traveling around the country, if they find themselves close to the hostel, they stop by and experience bizarre, melancholic, and emotional sensations, as if this were the spot where they spent their childhood or the house where they were born. The location of the hostel was not as pricey back then as it is now, but its value for them is different: it is the site of a one-of-a-kind experience not to be forgotten. Despite these nostalgic feelings, like the Steiners, the Weiners would not like to go through the experience of living in the hostel again. They note that, packed with events and new encounters and impressions, the period of living in the hostel appears to be longer than the actual time spent there. Both families eventually settled down, and they like their new homes arranged according to their tastes.

Our interviewees, the Steiners and the Weiners, moved out of the dorm into rented apartments. They told us that they were in touch with their former neighbors in the first year after moving: they continued to meet up, went to visit acquaintances in other towns, and learned about the fate of their former neighbors through them because these were their communities of practice during the socialization period. However, those who do not live nearby usually lose contact two or three years later. Perhaps this is due to a rejection of one's own image as a novice, a "white crow" who by chance finds herself/himself in a group of people who are educationally distant or do not share values. As émigrés' become better integrated, their social networks are changing and so are their allegiances and identity. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many Russian-German Aussiedler, in particular, display pro-Russian attitudes and are rather hostile towards Ukrainians. However, in our cases, old acquaintances were refreshed and both families helped Ukraine through their re-established network.

Even many years after migrating, learning a language remains a challenge; some people find it easier to grasp spoken language, while others find it simpler to do exercises. After 5–8 years, the attitude towards the adaptation time changes entirely: some view it as a particular phase of their life, full of hopes and expectations but also disappointments. It was akin to being on probation, a period full of bitter moments when you wished you could go back. Others, however, remember it as the longest pleasant time of their life. The number of interactions with first acquaintances dwindles, while connections with pre-emigration friends and family who are now dispersed across Germany are being reestablished. Regular visits to relatives and trips abroad become routine.

A major aim in terms of language is to find individuals one feels comfortable to speak to. These individuals need to understand the problems of expressing oneself in a language which is not your own. They should be patient and willing to listen to accented and fractured speech, ask questions to clarify the meaning of their interlocuter's message, and correct mistakes but without humiliating him/her. It is not always possible to find such conversation partners, and as a result, some émigrés are too ashamed of their poor command of German which hinders their occupational and social integration. New neighbors, work

colleagues, and friendly elderly people become those with whom one can try speaking in German.

The expatriate families lived in their home country in a multicultural environment and then moved to a bilingual and multilingual setting in the host country, with Russian and German being the most essential languages for them. Those who had a profession before emigration usually want to return to it. Retraining and reintegration into the labor force remain the major goals for the educated. A common dream among them is to find a position as an intern, even if it would mean volunteering. This is seen as a chance to acquire new skills and improve one's language by learning relevant terminology. Language-learning reflections, as well as continual irritation at the sluggish pace of obtaining the requisite abilities, play an important role in everyday communication.

Those who found jobs requiring manual labor communicate primarily with immigrants from different backgrounds who use contact varieties of German that consist primarily of ready-made formulas. Their vocabulary is rather limited, since the native Germans they mostly talk to are not well educated. However, their professional lexicon and other language skills required for the job are excellent. They do not speak literate German but local dialects. After they acquire the clichés needed to carry out their tasks at work, their progress in the language stalls. If their job requires the use of written German, their language gradually becomes standardized. Their proficient-in-German children who once admired the ability of their parents to communicate with the locals now make fun of their bizarre German. Some individuals may still face judgment regarding their original German identity based on their family names and physical appearance.

Living in a German-speaking environment has an impact on the Russian language that is used by immigrants from the post-Soviet states. They grow so accustomed to inserting German words and phrases into conversations that they consider it an anomaly if their interlocutors do not code-mix: "Do you speak German at all? Why don't you try it? Just one word?" On the other hand, some Russian-German interviewees admitted that their Russian had become rusty, and they were unsure whether they would be able to maintain it. They observed that what happened to their ancestors' German in Russia was happening to their Russian in Germany (on their linguistic abilities, see also Meng and Protassova 2023a, 2023b).

When comparing the attitudes of Russian Germans and Jews to the role of German, the former feel that learning German entails using it all the time and everywhere, speaking it, and not distinguishing oneself from the locals. If they switch to Russian, it means nothing; in principle, they are able to ignore it; the way of life is primarily concerned with matters within a small and large family and circle of friends, preferably with native German involvement. The Jewish families want to master all the registers of literary language, to immerse themselves in a life similar to that at home (but not identical with it). All necessary information should be there, especially in the professional field, which includes active contacts beyond one's immediate environment. They are eager to maintain the way of life and language of the homeland. Some changes are inevitable, but they should be based on one's own ideas of the quality of life and not be overinfluenced by the worldview of the locals. Extensive social networks are kept up to date and function as a safety net.

There were ups and downs in the families we closely observed: the Steiners had a second child; both parents found jobs but for poor pay. They adjusted their way of life in an attempt to emulate the locals. The lifestyle of the family remained the same as it had been in Moscow before the departure. In the Steiner family, all children are now adults with families of their own. They received professional education and are employed. Other families moved out of their rented apartments into their own apartments or houses, often with small gardens, which was their dream. The father of the Weiner family has retired, and his daughter has married a man from Russia and started a family, now with a child of her own. The daughter's husband is well-established in the IT sphere although he learned German as an adult. As an amateur football player, he quickly integrated and found a lot of friends with whom he speaks German. The daughter works remotely.

In Russian-German families, siblings who grew up in Germany predominantly use German with each other and both languages with their relatives. However, half of them struggle with written communication. Not all of the young adults are familiar with the Russian alphabet or are able to read it. These issues have been discussed in some of our previous publications. In the family we are considering, the German grandfather taught his grandchildren to read and write in Russian. In the Russian-Jewish family, the daughter sometimes uses Russian at work, while the granddaughter attends a bilingual daycare center. Nevertheless, at least half of their daily communication occurs in German.

Being able to create the local history of their life was crucial for the participants in the project: today they speak eagerly about moving from one apartment or house to another until they found what was suitable. They enjoy showing photos of their trips across the country and overseas, and they are proud to tell stories about reunions with old friends and people visiting them on special occasions. All families have wedding albums of their children, and they are proud of becoming grandparents. They feel similar to others who must recount a story of hard work and extensive study before achieving visible results.

4.2. General Assessment of Language Abilities

The young Russian-German participants were asked to complete a C-test. Spontaneous explicit accounts of participants' German acquisition, spontaneous assessments of their own German abilities, and spontaneous reports of other people's assessments of their German-speaking abilities were already known. The availability and usage of their German was a source of practical evidence. The C-test measures general language proficiency and is widely used in Germany (e.g., Grotjahn 2010). As mentioned before, the C-test is a valuable language assessment instrument, offering insights into language proficiency while being adaptable for various educational and research contexts. C-tests with participants and local Germans who belong to the same educational and professional level reveal that both groups do not differ statistically substantially on their respective levels of performance, as shown in Meng and Protassova (2022).

All participants have good general oral German skills after residing in Germany from their childhood on, allowing them to function securely and confidently in everyday and professional situations. In ordinary conversations, native speakers are frequently credited with "full mastery" of their original language. Persons with a migratory past are sometimes considered less fluent in the majority language than people without a history of migration. This does not have to be the case, however, as our findings demonstrate. Within each of the two samples, German abilities span a wide but comparable range.

During the Russian-language interviews, the phonic design of our participants' comments is predominantly target-language Russian; they speak like people who learned and practiced Russian in a Russian-speaking environment. However, most reflect German phonic influences, albeit to varied degrees. They are essentially non-existent among individuals who learned Russian almost completely in a Russian-speaking setting until early primary school age, or among those whose one parent is Russian. Almost everyone seems to have effectively adopted the word accent, which is quite changeable in Russian. Surprisingly, the discursive qualifications examined are all the same. All participants keep track of their comprehension progress and are able to discriminate between what they understand and what they do not, as well as support the resolution of comprehension issues using various ways (e.g., Meng and Protassova 2020). They contribute to the conversation using interjections and particles. All subjects can follow simple, everyday language question-and-answer sequences, though most of the time only in bilingual mode. Not all participants have the skills necessary to construct complicated utterance chains, give them a unified structure, and design them in a listener-friendly manner. In all areas, there is a significant disparity between receptive and productive ability in the area of semantic qualification. Even though our subjects are capable of comprehending a wide range of words and word combinations, they are unable to apply them directly to the creation of their own conversation contributions. Furthermore, their vocabulary must be differentiated and expanded

beyond the scope of everyday linguistic subject areas. The basic structures of nominal and verbal inflection, as well as the usage of verbal aspects, are usually present and available in the sphere of morphological-syntactic qualifying, although some uncertainty is expressed in irregular forms. Almost none of the participants have sufficient literal Russian language qualifications. Some individuals have learned the Cyrillic alphabet through personal or familial efforts, or through occasional exposure to non-systematic lessons. None of these individuals received native-language training, including native-language literacy.

After analyzing the data, Meng and Protassova (2022) concluded that language skills serve important purposes in communicating with partners in various ways. These skills allow for the transfer of knowledge, the coordination of activities, and the expression of sentiments in the respective language, and they are able to do so because they embody the individual appropriation of the language's socially constructed linguistic forms of action. Written language abilities, such as reading and writing in Russian, are not considered as important as oral communication. The results of the longitudinal study, in which Meng and Protassova, together with around 70 other people, have lived through life's ups and downs for more than a quarter of a century and witnessed the growth of about 25 children, are unprecedented. It will be impossible to replicate such a study due to the complete change in economic, political, and communicative circumstances. The socioeconomic situation in Germany and the rest of the globe has changed dramatically; the Soviet Union, where the participants grew up without access to the Internet, no longer exists. The knowledge obtained in the reception of newcomers and guiding and observing the acquisition of second languages contributes to a researcher's growing interest in studying linguistic integration. Nonetheless, achieving balanced multilingualism and life-enriching multiculturalism remains a challenge.

5. Discussion

Studies have previously shown that the rate of language shift can vary among different ethnic groups (e.g., Hochman and Davidov 2014; Sevinç and Backus 2019; Tran 2010). The third-generation groups often grapple with their identity, balancing their ethnic heritage with their integration into the host society. Studies suggest that feelings of belonging and identification with either the ethnic group or the mainstream society can influence language use. The experiences of the third generation reflect broader trends in ethnic integration and identity formation. While the three-generation hypothesis remains a useful framework for understanding language loss among contemporary immigrant groups, the outcomes are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic factors that can lead to varied experiences across different communities. The complex interaction of various integration factors is specifically illustrated in the chapter by Isurin (Isurin and Riehl 2017, pp. 135–57) in relation to different groups of immigrants—of Russian, German, and Jewish origin. However, they arrived in Germany significantly later and in a different political context than those we studied over an extended period.

Let us give an example. MG (anonymized), who is a Jew from Ukraine, is the owner of a Russian private school. She enumerates motives for studying Russian in Germany (noted in 2018):

- Grandparents are the most fluent ones in this language [Russian]. Children can easily explain themselves to the parent generation in the language of the environment, yet communication with grandparents becomes superficial if, by the age of 10, children can only manage to express themselves in 'baby talk' while grandparents speak an awful "emigrant" language [English or German]. This impedes intergenerational communication and impoverishes children by removing a whole layer of necessary family experience from them, not to mention the discomfort of grandparents' who would like to communicate with their grandchildren in a deeper and more subtle way than just inquiring "aren't you hungry?" or "have you washed your hands?"

- Great Russian literature, and similar things. This is the most ambitious plan for a Russian émigré parent. Few parents manage to reach the point when their children's Russian is sophisticated enough to read Tolstoy in the original, but some do.
- While almost everyone today agrees that bilingualism is beneficial, we can only genuinely guarantee this sort of bilingualism with our native language as a component. No amount of instruction can compensate for the absence of an environment.

MG emphasizes the importance of preserving the Russian language among the younger generation of Russian-speaking families in Germany. She highlights several key motivations for learning Russian: maintaining meaningful communication with grandparents, accessing the rich cultural heritage of Russian literature, and fostering genuine bilingualism. MG argues that without the native language as a foundational component, children risk losing a vital connection to their family's cultural and linguistic heritage, which can lead to a diminished intergenerational bond and an impoverished sense of identity. Not all families are aware of how they speak, whether or not they should mix languages, or whether they will need to help their child with learning to read or if it will happen naturally. This is a difficult task for families who are simultaneously dealing with everyday problems, striving to master the German language, and participating in the labor market. The achievements of the families could be higher, but they are relatively good for their conditions (cf. Bucca and Drouhot 2024; Pivovarova and Powers 2019; Zhao and Drouhot 2024).

Teaching Russian as a foreign language in Germany is a common practice in the education system. Russian is offered as an optional foreign language in some secondary schools and universities, often only as a third language option (after such language as English and Romance languages). The curriculum for Russian language classes includes grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and listening comprehension. There are also language schools and private tutors who offer Russian language classes for people who are interested in learning the language or in language maintenance (Bergmann 2014, 2021; Witzlack-Makarevich and Wulff 2017). There is a developed infrastructure in Russian and the possibility to communicate in various everyday situations (Brehmer 2021; Ritter 2021).

Despite the fact that more than 30 years after their arrival in Germany, German has become the dominant language for all of our study participants, Russian remains an intrafamilial language, especially in communication with relatives who have not yet learned German or who still live in Russian-speaking countries. Our participants felt that while German would be the most important language for their children, knowing other languages, such as Russian, would also be advantageous. The majority of individuals in the study alternate between a bilingual Russian-German mode and a monolingual Russian mode (see Grosjean 2013). This means that there are moments when they more often shift between Russian and German, and phases when they use more monolingual Russian.

In our case, both Germans and Jews seem to retain their ethnic identity. However, Russian Germans expected to be accepted in Germany as Germans, but those around them partly imposed a Russian-speaking identity, which persists to some extent in the third generation. Russian non-religious Jews maintain the Russian language partly because it is a part of their culture and identity. In both cases, the language is perceived as potential capital, and the presence of Russian-speaking relatives and friends highlights its practical value.

6. Conclusions

The language practices among immigrants from the post-Soviet states who now live in German-speaking environments are influenced by their professional aspirations, linguistic integration, and cultural adaptation. This process occurred in diverse ways for grandparents, parents, and children. Many adults seek to return to their previous professions and prioritize retraining and reintegration into the workforce. Some aspire to internships, even if unpaid, to improve their language skills and learn relevant terminology. Children's pursuit of happiness is not postponed; they strive to be themselves here and now. Living in a German-speaking environment leads to a blending of languages, with

individuals inserting German words into their Russian conversations. This linguistic fusion reflects their immersion in the local culture but also raises concerns about maintaining their native language.

Attitudes toward their time in hostels evolve over years, with some recalling it as a phase filled with challenges and others reminiscing about it fondly. As connections with pre-emigration friends and family are reestablished, social networks become vital support systems. Language use differs between Russian Germans and Jews, with the former emphasizing integration and the latter seeking to preserve their language and way of life from their homeland or accepting entrance into the Jewish community of practice.

More than 30 years after immigrating, the participants' German is strong, and Russian serves as a means of communication with relatives and friends outside the country. There are moments when they more often shift between Russian and German, and phases when they use more monolingual Russian. Those immigrants who arrived as children sometimes become balanced bilinguals, while those who migrated as adults have become functional bilinguals, coping with their second language in everyday situations.

Russian Germans identify with their German heritage while also maintaining aspects of their Kazakhstani, Russian, and Ukrainian backgrounds. Russian-Ukrainian Jews maintain a distinct Jewish cultural identity, which was reinforced through the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. Both groups share a Russian heritage; their assimilation processes in Germany are shaped by differing legal statuses, cultural identities, and societal perceptions, leading to unique experiences within the broader context of immigration and integration.

For families like those in our study, their life trajectories were both stressful and rewarding. They now reflect on the 1990s with nostalgia but would not want to relive this experience. Despite challenges, they have settled into their new homes and lives and invest time into their children and grandchildren. Those engaged in manual labor often communicate with immigrants using contact varieties of German, while their language proficiency may stall if they do not need to use written German. Ups and downs are part of the families' experiences, with some facing job losses and relocations, while others achieve stability and success in their adoptive country. Integration involves overcoming linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic challenges while striving to build a better future. The interaction of various factors underscores the exceptional contributions of our longitudinal research in understanding the long-term dynamics of heritage-language maintenance and bilingualism.

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