ABSTRACT

VIEWS OF AGING AMONG IMMIGRANT RUSSIAN-SPEAKING OLDER WOMEN

by Polina Ermoshkina

More than a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union are currently living in the United States. Many of those immigrants arrived to the United States in older age. While previous studies were focused on the Russian immigrants’ utilization of healthcare services in the United States, almost no studies examined the older Russian-speaking immigrants’ hardships in the Soviet Union. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze interviews conducted with 16 immigrant women from a Mid-Atlantic region, who moved to the US after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Seven identified themes were broken down by two major categories: childhood and adulthood in the Soviet Union and older age in the United States. The findings suggest that views of long-term care, intergenerational support, and socio-economic status are deeply rooted in the cultural and societal expectations of the country of origin.
VIEWS OF AGING AMONG IMMIGRANT RUSSIAN-SPEAKING OLDER WOMEN

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of
Master of Gerontological Studies
Department of Sociology and Gerontology
by
Polina V. Ermoshkina
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2014

Advisor________________________
(Dr. Kate de Medeiros)
Reader________________________
(Dr. Jennifer Kinney)
Reader________________________
(Dr. Jennifer Bulanda)
# Table of Contents

Background 1-7  
Methods 7-9  
Results 10-26  
Conclusion/Discussion 26-29  
References 30-33  
Appendix: The Interview Guide 34-36
Acknowledgments

Data reported in this paper derived from two research projects, “Lifestyles and Generativity of Childless Older Women” (AG030614; PI: Robert Rubinstein) and “Lifestyles and Generativity of Older Russian Women” (AG030614-S1; PI: Robert Rubinstein). We are grateful for the National Institute of Aging for support of this research.
Background

Waves of Russian-Speaking Immigration

More than a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union are currently living in the United States (Hofmann, 2012). According to the Census data, there are 3.1 million Americans of Russian descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Between 2001 and 2010, 37,141 immigrants from the former Soviet Union became American citizens (Office of Immigration Statistics, 2011). Russian-speaking immigrants arrived to the United States in waves at various times and have different reasons for leaving their homeland. This is essential to note since the motive for immigrating may affect a person’s experiences and expectations after entering a new country and may transform over time depending on immigrant groups and the timing of their immigration.

The first wave of Russian immigrants arrived between 1880 and 1920 and consisted of people fleeing religious persecution, for instance, Jews and religious groups that separated from the Russian Orthodox denomination (Belousova, 2011). The 1917 Revolution and the civil war caused another wave of immigrants who were considered “White Russians,” meaning they belonged to czarist surrounding and nobility. This wave of immigrants was unique as they desired to return back to Russia after the collapse of the communist regime (Belousova, 2011). The third wave of immigration occurred between 1941 and 1950, and the number of Soviet immigrants in that period was estimated to be 550,000 (Belousova, 2011). Among the immigrants were many citizens of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), who refused to recognize Soviet occupation and did not want to live under the Soviet regime (Belousova, 2011). These immigrants had no intention to return to their homeland, and, consequently, assimilated fast. The fourth wave of immigrants was in the 1960s and 1970s, and consisted predominately of dissidents who escaped persecution for political beliefs (Belousova, 2011).
Finally, the fifth and the largest wave of immigration took place in the era of Soviet Union collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Belousova, 2011). In nine years (between 1990 and 1999) more than 433,000 former Soviet Union immigrants arrived to the United States (Belousova, 2011). During this period, Jews were a majority of the immigrants. For example, in 1991 alone, 35,219 Russian Jews constituted two-thirds of the post-Soviet immigrant population for that year (Brod & Heurtin-Roberts, 1992). Although the majority of the fifth wave immigrants were of Jewish descent, it is important to note that their experiences in the Soviet Union were drastically different from the other ethnic Russian-speaking groups. Jews were discriminated against in many spheres of life: access to education, employment opportunities and advancement (Remennick, 2007). Therefore, their main reason for leaving the country was ethnic discrimination. Moreover, Soviet Jews experiences in the United States also differed from other Russian-speaking immigrants, as the Soviet Jews immigrated to the United States with a status of Cold War refugees (Gold, 2014). Consequently, they were entitled to refugee benefits (Gold, 2014). Jewish refugees were well educated, from urban communities, and therefore often settled in Jewish neighborhoods in large cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Remennick 2007). Most existing literature is focused on the experiences of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union either in the United States or Israel (e.g. Birman & Trickett, 2001; Chiswick, 1993; Cohen & Haberfeld, 2007; Gold, 1995; Morawska, 2004; Remennick, 2007), while almost completely ignoring other Russian-speaking immigrants.

**Cultural Background**

As mentioned in the previous section, different waves of immigrants meant different experiences in the country of origin and therefore different reasons for immigration to the United States. However, the Soviet Union culture and values were characteristics that all former Soviet
Union immigrants shared. Russian culture is challenging to categorize as it does not fall under Western values (especially, when it comes to gender relations, political views, parent-child relations), or the collectivistic mentality of East Asian societies (Jurcik et al., 2013). Russian-speaking immigrants are a very diverse group. On one hand, there are Eastern Orthodox Russians of European origin and on the other hand, Muslims of Turkic decent indigenous to certain regions (for example Bashkirs and Tatars). Although ethnically diverse, immigrants from the former Soviet Union have a number of things in common: Russian language as a predominant language of communication; the system of education; and values formed under communism, such as collectivism, intergenerational support, and gender roles which are discussed in the following sections (Jurcik et al., 2013).

**Collectivism.** Collectivism in Russia is deeply rooted in its history. For Russians, survival in severe climates and invasions from Mongols and other groups required interdependence (Vlachoutsicos, 2001). Collectivistic values were not just imposed by the government; they developed over centuries as a response to the outside factors and challenges. The economic instability of the 20th century, totalitarian dictatorship, and devastating wars encouraged Russians’ reciprocal reliance on their family and friends (Shlapentokh, 2006). This intergenerational support encouraged multi-generational living arrangements. In most former Soviet Union countries, elders live with their children in three-generational homes due to economic and cultural values (Fitzpatrick & Freed, 2000). In addition, children support multigenerational living arrangements because of the economic benefits, while elders prefer living with their children because of their value of the intergenerational solidarity (Katz & Lowestein, 1999). Moreover, when it comes to parenting style, Russian parents tend to foster mutual obligations and interdependence (Chentsova-Dutton & Vaughn 2012). Individualism in
children is discouraged by the parents, and independence is often not promoted (Leipzig, 2006). Consequently, intergenerational support is deeply rooted in Russian history and traditions.

**Gender roles.** Russian-speaking immigrants share not only collectivistic values and multi-generational living arrangements, but also similar gender roles and expectations. Former Soviet immigrant women differ significantly from other groups of immigrant women as they come from a society where women’s role in the public sphere is nontraditional (Aroian, Norris, & Chiang, 2003). Communism formally allowed women not only to receive an education but also be a part of professional work force. However, women took complete care of their families and fully maintained domestic responsibilities as they were pursuing their careers (Voronina, 1994). For men in the former Soviet Union, it was not customary to perform household duties (Buckley, 1989). Women were able to successfully perform all these roles because of the multigenerational home and support from the retired mothers and grandmothers (Aroian, et al., 2003). Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, multigenerational single-mother families with support, especially from grandmothers, became more wide-spread and accepted (Utrata, 2008). Upon immigration, women’s status may change significantly, especially if they are not able to create the same living arrangement and circle of support as in their country of origin (Aroian, et al., 2003). As this section demonstrated, immigrants from the former Soviet Union shared certain cultural values and norms that they brought to the United States, where they encountered challenges that are discussed in the next section.

**Challenges in the New Country**

Immigrants encounter a number of challenges upon immigrating to the United States. First of all, the social networks and living arrangements differ significantly in the U.S. from their home country. In the United States, parents and children tend to live in different households,
which might cause anxiety and an increased level of stress for the elders as they experience their role status change (Althausen, 1993). These adjustments may lead to an increased level of loneliness and depression (Gusovsky, 1995). Additionally, since the immigrants may not have enough English speaking skills to interact with their American peers, they may have to completely rely only on their children for emotional support without having a community of peers (Fitzpatrick & Freed, 2000). Moreover, due to the value of reciprocity among Russians, elders expect their children to be their long-term care providers (Persidsky & Kelly, 1992). However, adult children in the United States are often not capable of providing this help because of their career requirements and other responsibilities.

The idea of institutionalization is very challenging for the Russian immigrants because of their cultural values of family care. In the Soviet Union, all nursing homes were government-owned, non-profit entities (Fitzpatrick & Freed, 2000). Consequently, Russian elders see a nursing home placement as an abandonment and betrayal, while their children experience feelings of guilt and regret (Fitzpatrick & Freed, 2000). Therefore, upon arriving to the United States, some elder immigrants experience additional stress due to the fear of being put in a nursing home. Finally, the healthcare system in the United States is complex and challenging to navigate. While in the Soviet Union, these immigrants had an unlimited access to free healthcare, in the United States, they cannot utilize the health care system as frequently as they used to do (Fitzpatrick & Freed, 2000). Moreover, they are sometimes limited to the Russian-speaking doctors or have to be accompanied by an interpreter because of the language barrier (Persidsky & Kelly, 1992).

**Gap in the Literature**
The challenges described above can be especially significant if the immigrant is an older adult with declining health. Russian-speaking immigrants stand out among other immigrant groups because of the number of older immigrants who entered the United States. Out of the 23,300 Russian-speaking immigrants who arrived between 1979 and 1989, 58.9 percent were aged 61–71 years (HIAS, 1991). The immigration policy of the former Soviet Union influenced the number of older immigrants leaving the country. Based on the policy, the so-called unit of immigration was the family rather than individual (Brod & Heurtin-Roberts, 1992). Therefore, if younger family members were leaving the country, their aging parents had to leave with them (Brod & Heurtin-Roberts, 1992). Consequently, very often the older immigrants left the country for the sake of children, rather than a personal decision to immigrate.

Very few studies have specifically examined the experiences of older Russian-speaking immigrants in the United States. The limited number of studies that do exist are mostly focused on the health services utilization by this group of immigrants (e.g. Benisovich & King, 2003; Brod & Heurtin-Roberts, 1992; Fitzpatrick & Freed, 2000; Van Son & Gileff, 2013). Some studies examined the cultural adaptation of older Russian-speaking immigrants and potential challenges such as poor health, adjustment to a different health care system, and often significant changes in social status (Persidsky & Kelly, 1992). The researcher was not able to find recent qualitative studies that looked at older Russian-immigrants’ (especially older women’s) experiences in the Soviet Union and how they shaped their current views of social status, standards of living, and relationships with their immediate family upon immigration to the United States.

The high percentage of older Russian-speaking immigrants, their collectivistic values rooted in the centuries-long history, multi-generational living arrangements and intergenerational
support, as well a lack of qualitative studies of the older immigrants, allows this study to fill in the gap in the current literature on the experiences of Russian-speaking immigrants.

Methods

Sample

This research uses the interviews conducted for the study “Lifestyles and Generativity of Childless Older Russian Women” (3-R01-AG030614-02S1 AARA) that investigated the views of caregiving and generativity in a sample of older Russian-speaking immigrant women. The sample for the original study was 16 immigrant women from a Mid-Atlantic region, who moved to the US after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fifteen women in the sample had children. The original investigators found that childless Russian women were unwilling to participate in the interviews. At the time of the interviews (2010), the participants were between 61 and 84 years (M = 74.5 years; SD = 5.8 years). Nine described their ethnicity as Jewish; three as Ukrainian; two as Russian; and two as “mixed” (i.e., mother Ukrainian and father Polish and Latvian for one participant; and mixture of five bloods for the second participant). Nine participants were widows and lived alone in their apartment; 6 were married and resided with their husband, and one identified herself as single. The length of living in the United States ranged from 4 months to 22 years (M = 15.2 years).

Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews, each lasting around 90 minutes, were conducted at each participant’s home. Fifteen participants answered interview questions in Russian through a translator; one participant spoke English without a translator. All interviews were audio recorded and the English translation provided at the time of the interview was transcribed. The original analysis of the transcripts was conducted with the focus on generativity (de Medeiros, Rubinstein, & Ermoshkina, 2013). The interview guide included questions regarding different
types of generativity (e.g. historical, familial, individual, and relational) and allowed the participants to tell their life story. Examples of the interview questions are: What are the most important ideas or values you think you’ll pass on to other people? Thinking about your family for a moment, what do you think are the most important beliefs, ideas, or values you got from them? What things in your life do you think will outlive you? Could you describe your life for me? Start where you like and take as much time as you need (Appendix). The current investigator did not participate in the recruitment, interviewing, original translation, or transcribing of the interviews. However, the researcher, who is a native Russian, has a unique relationship with data. She listened to the original recordings of the interviews, which included discussions in Russian between the translator and participant, and provided detailed secondary translations of the interviews for the original research team. She therefore has a vantage point on data that was not available to the original research team.

Analysis and Interpretation

This study was granted exempt approval from the University of Maryland-Baltimore County’s Institutional Review Board. The interviews were reanalyzed using a thematic analysis approach. While some scholars (Boyatzis, 1998) consider thematic analysis as a tool to use across different methods, others (Braun & Clarke, 2006) define it as a unique method. The purpose of thematic analysis is to “identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The researcher followed the six phases of analysis: familiarize oneself with the data; generate initial codes; search for themes; review the themes; define and name the themes; produce the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The data analysis began with reading the interviews to familiarize myself with them and generating a list of ideas that stood out. Following Boyatzis’ (1998, p. 63) definition of a code as “the most basic segment, or
element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the
phenomenon,” twenty initial codes were developed. Examples of initial codes include the
consequences of World War II, persecution, care providers, multigenerational homes, the
collapse of values, being brainwashed by the system, constant fear, a lack of connections, etc.
Since there were only 16 interviews, coding was performed manually rather than using
qualitative software. The third phase included interpretive analysis of the data through the
themes development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), themes
are “the conceptual linking of expressions,” and they differ in shapes and sizes (p. 87-88).
Although the researcher looked for repetitions in data as one of the ways to identify themes, the
importance of each theme was not dependent on the number of times it was mentioned by the
participants. The investigator combined different codes to form an overarching theme. For
example, the codes “consequences of World War II,” “famine,” “poverty,” and “scarcity of all
resources” were combined into the “extreme hardships” theme. Additionally, during this phase
the investigator considered the relationships not only between the codes and the themes but also
between different levels of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, the theme of “guilt for
accepting help” amalgamated with the theme “meaningful activities” and resulted in “meaning in
life in productivity and independence” theme.

The next stage was the refinement of the themes in order to produce a thematic map
which Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 89) identified as “an overall conceptualization of the data
patterns, and relationships between them.” The fifth phase comprised naming the themes and
establishing clear definitions that would capture the essence of each theme. The final stage
included producing a final report, which for the purposes of the current study, is the results
section of this critical inquiry.
Results

When sharing their life stories, the research participants separated their experiences of being born and raised during or immediately after World War II from their current experiences as immigrants residing in the United States. As such, the themes are broken down by two major categories: 1) childhood and adulthood in the Soviet Union and 2) older age in the United States.

Childhood and Adulthood in the Soviet Union

Four themes emerged as the women recollected their childhood and adolescent years in Soviet Union: “life in fear,” “extreme hardships,” “permissible discrimination,” and “nursing home is not an option.”

Life in fear. Certain groups and their family members in Soviet Union, for example, those of aristocratic roots, those who practiced any religion, those from affluent families, experienced government persecution. “Life in fear,” therefore, describes participants’ fright about being arrested and sent to prisons or forced-labor camps for belonging to a certain group. For instance, one participant described her neighbor whose husband was a member of the Tsar’s White Army and was buried in France. She had to hide her noble heritage because of her fear of being arrested. No one in the community knew about her noble heritage. Families had to hide their Tsarist elite membership in order to protect themselves. As one of the participants said:

_I found a picture of my grandparents, who were aristocrats, and showed this picture to my mom, and she said, “Where did you find it? You can’t, you can’t look at it.” They were afraid that if someone finds out about our ancestors we will be arrested. So my parents burned all the photos. They were afraid to go to prison for having those photos. It was a very strict time._

Not only was it necessary to hide noble heritage from the Soviet government, but also faith and religious beliefs had to be hidden as well. People who practiced any religion were
ridiculed, openly discriminated against, and put in prisons. One participant remembers how her grandmother baked “kulich” (Orthodox Easter cake) and her parents were furious because they were afraid that if their communal flat (the predominant form of housing arrangement in Soviet Union where each family had one room, while the bathroom, hallway, kitchen, and telephone were shared with neighbors) neighbors saw it, the whole family would be arrested. She told another story about her grandmother reading the Bible:

*It was terrible, absolutely terrible. If you have a Bible in the house, you have to hide it.*

*You will be mocked at school for having a Bible at home. You were an outcast at school.*

*When my grandmother wanted to read her Bible, she had to close all the windows, all the doors, and make the room very dark. When I asked her, “What are you doing?” She said, “I’m reading the Bible; don’t tell anybody because it’s very, very dangerous to do this.”*  

*People were afraid to go to church because something might happen to them. At school a teacher will ask, “Who is going to church?” and children had to tell on each other.*

As the participant mentions, simple acts of religious practice (reading or even having a Bible at home) put the whole family in real danger of being arrested.

Finally, people were arrested for words against the system or the government. One participant remembered when her 14-year-old neighbor invited a group of children to play on the day of Stalin’s death. As they were crying, he told them: “Hey, let’s play. Go to hell Stalin, let’s just play.” Someone reported him to the officials and the next day he was arrested and put in prison for four years. Neighbors or coworkers could write a letter to the government accusing someone of being a traitor or planning a counter-revolutionary activity. One participant explained:
My father was a military engineer, and he worked for the department of automatics at the factory. His coworker wrote an anonymous letter and accused him of being an enemy of the nation and wrote some story about him. And my father was taken from the family.

He was in prison for three years without a right to write letters, without a right to contact his family. My mother didn’t know where he was, if he was even alive. We were so scared because we didn’t know what to expect from the government.

Because the grounds for arrest in Soviet Union were vague and the decisions of the government officials were unpredictable, the participants feared for their destiny after the arrest of their relative.

However, not all participants lived in fear, as some of them did not belong to the groups persecuted by the Soviet government. In childhood and adolescent years, two participants were strong believers in communism and Soviet ideals, and were not aware of the injustices of the system. One explained:

*Like everybody else, I truly believed in Communism, we all truly believed what they told us, we follow all the rules. I was a proud pioneer, I believed in it.*

For one of these two women, Stalin was a role model. One woman said she was devastated when he died.

*When I was 17, Stalin died. We put his photo in a frame in my house. Everyone was crying. It was a tragedy. It was like a member of your family died. We were all thinking how we were going to live without him. People who saw the real system were in prison. Stalin killed everyone who was against him or the system. It is hard to describe, very hard times.*
Using the words of this participant, some people were “brainwashed” by the system. As they truly believed and supported the pillars of Communism, they could not imagine what the system was doing with people who chose to go against it. Fourteen participants mentioned fear that they experienced under the Soviet system either because of their Jewish heritage, religious beliefs, or past membership in the elite class.

**Extreme hardships.** “Extreme hardships” describes the devastating poverty and the scarcity of all resources that these women experienced during and after World War II. All 16 participants mentioned the abject poverty they observed and lived through. The starvation forced one participant’s grandfather to take frozen red beets from the communal field to feed his family. Their neighbor notified the government and her grandfather was arrested for stealing communal property. Another woman had to gather wheat stalks in the field to survive hunger.

*Starvation was everywhere. Government gave everyone a special food card for bread,*

*and we had to wait in line for the whole night to get one loaf of bread. Yeah, all night we were waiting in line to get this one loaf of bread.*

Quantity of food was very limited. Moreover, certain food items were considered a luxury and were almost impossible to obtain. One woman remembered how her father became sick and the doctor prescribed him green onions to boost his immune system with Vitamin C. Her mother spent all her income on green onions for a few months. No one in the family was allowed to eat green onions except the father. Another participant was a resident of Leningrad during World War II and experienced the siege of the city. She said:

*During World War II, I was living in St. Petersburg, it was called Leningrad then, and there was a siege of the whole city by Germans. The city was surrounded by the German army. We only had 125 grams of bread per person for one day, nothing else and no other*
food. That was not even real bread; it was mix of something eatable and looked like bread. Thanks to Leningrad’s scientists some sort of plankton or water weed was found, and they add it to bread to get more calories. The winter was extremely cold, thousands of people died and their corpses were on the streets because the soil was frozen and no one could dig graves. There was no epidemic because it was that cold.

People who lived through the Leningrad siege that lasted 872 days experienced inhumane conditions in the city surrounded by the Nazi army. As one participant described, hunger was not the only cause of death among the city’s residents; extreme winter temperatures were also a contributing factor.

The participants experienced not only scarcity of food, but scarcity of other resources, such as clothes, shoes, school furniture, and items of personal hygiene. One participant recalled not having shampoo or soap at home; consequently, all children at her school were infested with lice. Another participant remembered how she had to go to school barefoot in the winter because no one in her village had shoes. Often her school teacher would send children back home because it was too cold in the school building to study. She explained:

When we were at school we didn’t have desks or any other furniture in the rooms, so children of rich parents, had a chair because their parents made this chair for them. My parents were very poor so I was sitting on the floor during the classes. And everyone was constantly thinking about food. If someone brings bread to school, other children will steal it and eat it really fast, so when the person comes back, the bread is gone. We had to constantly think what we are going to eat. When I see all this furniture now, I constantly think about my school years.
As she mentioned school equipment was primitive, and very often nonexistent. To have a chair in the classroom was considered a luxury and could not be afforded by the poor families.

Fourteen participants experienced evacuation during World War II. After the war, they returned to homes that were either destroyed or taken by their neighbors. One woman recalls when they returned to their apartment, it was taken by their former neighbor. The apartment was given to him by the German officers because of his cooperation with the Nazi army. She told the interviewer:

> When WWII started I was only 12 years old. My hometown was the first one bombed. We had to run away, to leave everything behind. We didn’t even take our passports, we were without documents. We returned home in 1945. Our house wasn’t bombed. I think, maybe, Germans lived in our house because some houses they didn’t touch. Everything else was ruined. When we came back to our house another person was living there with his family. He was a policeman, like a chief of police.

After World War II was over, the participants’ families had to start from zero as their homes were either demolished during the bombing of the city, or were taken by other people. Since families had to go through emergency evacuation, their documents were either lost or left at home. Consequently, it was challenging for the participants to prove their rights to the apartment and evict the unlawful occupant.

All participants without exception lived their childhood through excruciating poverty, famine, and the absence of basic resources. Their experiences were often not understood even by their grandchildren who were born and raised in a different era.

**Permissible discrimination.** “Permissible discrimination” describes instances when participants were openly discriminated against of their ethnic and/or religious heritage, lack of
connections, or opinions against the ruling elite. This type of discrimination was often either allowed or encouraged by the government. Nine participants, who described their ethnicity as Jewish, experienced anti-Semitism while living in the Soviet Union. This discrimination caused them to immigrate to the United States as they did not see a future for their children. As one of the participants stated: “After I saw what was happening in my country, all the discrimination against the Jewish people, I didn’t see a bright future for my daughter. That is why we decided to immigrate to the United States.” Another woman said:

*When I applied to the university, it was the first time I experienced anti-Semitism. I passed all my entrance exams but was not accepted because I was Jewish. I couldn’t find a job. And after Stalin died, everything changed. I was allowed to pursue my education.*

During the Stalin era, Jewish people were not accepted to the universities, and often had to go to community colleges. However, people of non-Jewish descent also experienced discrimination during the entrance exams if their family did not have connections. As one participant recalled when she passed her university entrance exams, she still was not admitted. Instead she had to attend a community college and work in construction. She said, “Imagine a young girl working on the construction site in freezing weather. We were installing electric wires and there were no windows, just walls. I was 19 years old at that time.” Another participant saw how unjust the system was and was trying to go against the system. As it was perestroika (restructuring of the political system that occurred in 1980s under the leadership of Gorbachev) she could no longer be arrested for her opinion. Instead, her supervisor started using other means to discriminate against her. She said:

*Lttle by little my supervisor started pressuring me - he didn’t give me bonuses, he assigned me for very hard, complicated tasks; he wanted me to leave this place. Even*
though for all those six years I was tortured, my character became stronger. I never quit, my personality became stronger and I became a fighter. It was perestroika; everything was a little more open.

During the perestroika, decades-long religious persecution was criticized; many injustices of the Soviet era were open to public. Although employees could not be arrested for their opinions, other ways to discourage freedom of speech were used (the complexity of the assigned work; financial punishment).

Religious practice stopped being the grounds for arrest; however, religiosity had to be hidden from coworkers and supervisors because of the potential discrimination and mocking. One woman recalled how her supervisor organized a meeting and made fun of her in front of her coworkers for attending a church. Another woman named religious discrimination as a primary reason for immigrating to the United States. She said:

I was working at the kindergarten, and when other teachers in the kindergarten found that I was attending a worship service, they started thinking that there was something wrong with me, maybe mentally. So they reported me to the Department of Education. Then they fired me. They didn’t let me practice my religion. I found that there was no way for me to stay in the country and openly practice my beliefs. My husband’s sister immigrated to the States and she helped us to immigrate here.

With the change of political regime, persecution of ethnic and religious groups was terminated. Religious practice and Jewish heritage were not grounds for arrest but an excuse for firing someone from work or publicly mocking their beliefs. During perestroika the participants still had to hide their religious affiliation and opinions about the work supervisors in order to save their jobs and work climate.
**Nursing home is not an option.** This theme describes participants’ firm belief in intergenerational care and support of older adults and negatives views of the nursing home system. All participants, while residing in Soviet Union, experienced living in a multigenerational home. Since taking care of older adults at home was a cultural expectation, the participants confirmed that their parents were the care providers for the aging adults in the family. Putting an older adult in a nursing home was viewed as a betrayal as the Soviet culture was rooted in collectivistic values. As one woman explained:

*Our grandparents lived with us until death. We were taking care of them. When my father was dying we came there for two months with my son and we took care of him until his death. We knew that he was very sick and we went there to take care of him. It was like a rule to take care of older people until the end.*

Being brought up in a culture where intergenerational support is encouraged and widely practiced the participants considers it a “rule” to take care of the aged.

Upon immigrating to the United States these women learned about the existence of nursing homes and even have acquaintances who were placed in nursing homes. For one participant, it was especially challenging to learn that some people in the United States would voluntarily go to a nursing home even when they have adult children. She said:

*My grandmother became blind at the young age, and she was living with us until she died. We took care of her. Nursing home is not an option, absolutely not. It is very rare to put someone in a nursing home because nursing home was terrible in this time and we never even thought about nursing home. Nursing home is a last resort. It is like a death penalty for your loved ones. I was shocked to learn from my American friend, who fell down on the floor and needed constant care, that she would never live with her children.*
She said ‘my children are independent; I would not go live with them if I need care.’ For me it was shocking to hear that. Later on, I found that my friend was placed in a nursing home. This is America for me. It is very shocking when you have children who are so fortunate and you do not want to live with them when you need help.

As the participant implied, having adult healthy children guarantees one home care and support in old age in the former Soviet Union. Therefore, it is incomprehensible for the participant how someone can choose a nursing home over being cared for by their children.

According to one participant not only cultural expectations cause people to become primary care providers for their aging relatives; another cause is inability to afford a separate apartment. Multigenerational homes were often the result of circumstances rather than a mutual choice of generations. One participant explained:

In my country we take care of our parents and grandparents, yeah, we all live together. We usually live together because we don’t have an opportunity to buy our own apartment. If the government gives you an apartment, you have to live with your grandparents, with your children all together. It can be one bedroom apartment and ten people live together. Right now people can buy an apartment, but in the past it was almost impossible.

The participant admitted that the current housing situation in Russia is drastically different from the Soviet Union times, where the housing shortage caused many families to live with their parents and grandparents.

Many participants expressed fear and disgust specifically with the Soviet Union nursing homes, not the American ones. The researcher speculates that the Russian immigrants are not necessarily against the nursing home system per se, but, instead, they are against the very
specific system established in the Soviet Union. Many participants used very strong language to describe nursing homes in the Soviet Union, for example “terrible,” “horrible,” “death penalty,” “it is day and night here and back home.” One participant said:

*My husband was hit with a big rock. We were taking care of him, day after day. Doctors predicted he would not walk because of his spine, brain, arm, and leg injuries. For two weeks I was taking care of him. Many people came to my house and suggested me to place him in a nursing home. Nursing homes in our country are different; they are just terrible, terrible. So I took care of him all by myself.*

Being born and raised in multigenerational homes, these women’s perceptions of care is formed by the culture and tradition they observed in the Soviet Union. The idea of nursing homes is alien to this generation; however, a few participants stated that they specifically fear Soviet-style nursing homes. Consequently, more exposure to the American nursing home system might help transform negative opinions of this form of long-term care among Russian-speaking older women.

**Older Age in the United States**

When the participants discussed their current experiences of living in the United States, the following themes emerged: “Meaning in life in productivity and independence;” “Seeing happiness in little things;” and “Intergenerational comparison.” Following is a description of each theme with examples.

**Meaning in life in productivity and independence.** This theme describes the ways the participants are trying to stay independent and the feeling of guilt they experience as their independence declines. The participants are trying to find meaning in their everyday life and preserve their independence. For instance, a 63 year old interviewee considers learning to drive a
car at the age of 61 as her biggest accomplishment: “I am independent now, I have job, and I can drive my clients to different appointments.” Some of the participants were especially concerned with not bringing anything to society and relying on their children. One of the women refused to accept help from her children because she was aware of her children paying for her two granddaughters’ education. She said:

*I guess right now is the happiest time in my life, but I still feel guilty because I rely on my daughter and don’t bring anything.*

After immigrating to the United States, the participants experienced increase in dependency and decrease in productivity. Knowing the financial challenges their children experience upon immigration, these women feel guilty to constantly utilize their children’s help and services. The participants tried to fill their lives with “substantial things, not just cleaning, and eating” and found meaning in life through establishing new hobbies (for example, stitching, walking, or memorizing long poems) and taking care of their grandchildren. As one woman said:

*I can’t bring anything to society; I am kind of old for this. When I came to America I took care of my grandchildren right away. It was time-consuming, but I didn’t think about myself at that time. I was just thinking about my children and grandchildren and how to give them the best.*

Since many participants immigrated to the United States to give their future generations a more prosperous future, they agreed to dedicate their time and self to raising their grandchildren.

The participants mentioned two barriers that impede their independence and productivity: the language barrier and health issues. For example, one woman was dreaming of traveling to Yellowstone National Park but was unable to fulfill he dream due to a significant decrease in
health. Only one participant spoke English fluently and did not require the service of a translator for this study. Another participant took English language classes before immigrating to the United States; however, she still experienced challenges with the language. The other 14 participants identified language barriers as a reason for their reduction in productivity. One woman explained:

*When I came to the US, I couldn’t find myself as productive as I used to be – I don’t know the language, I can’t go anywhere and that is why I was depressed.*

Immigration to the United States significantly reduced independence and productivity of these women. All the participants expressed a desire to maintain the lifestyle they led back home. However, with the language barrier and decreasing health, they have to rely on the help of their children and Russian-speaking community.

**Seeing happiness in little things.** This theme describes the participants’ attitude towards their current financial well-being. Since all the participants experienced severe poverty and immense hardships during their childhood and adolescent years, they learned to find happiness in small things. One woman showed a little statue that she purchased in the Dollar Store and said: “all day I have been looking at it and thinking how it is possible to do such a beautiful thing. I have been looking at it the whole day and feel happy.” For another woman the happiest time in her life was when her mother brought home a bag of sugar. It was luxury to eat sugar at the time when everyone was starving. Therefore, this teaspoon of sugar was one of the most memorable events in her life. She said:

*All my life I have been living in the same village. My salary was tiny, around $30 a month. And here in the United States I have a bathtub. I feel like a President, I have a bathtub in my house.*
Having such simple amenities as running hot water, and a bathtub makes the participant satisfied with her current socio-economic status.

Knowing how their relatives and friends are living back home, these women are afraid to complain about their current financial difficulties. For example, one woman’s friend in Ukraine does not turn on her refrigerator because she has no food to put there. Since the participant has food at home in the United States, she is thankful: “some people don’t have anything, so you have to be thankful.” Another woman said:

*I mostly have enough of everything, and when I don’t have enough I am afraid to make God angry with my complaints. I know that there is always somebody who needs money more than me. I send many things to my relatives in Ukraine. They definitely are in more need than I am here in the United States. We also help at church; there are many people in the church who are living worse than us.*

Their past experiences in the Soviet Union and the examples of their parents and grandparents taught them how to survive on very little. Women of their generation who went through a devastating war, famine, and scarcity of all resources learned how to manage their financial resources: “Russian women can save money. We cook and buy everything on sale, and don’t go out to eat, so we can live on a very small amount of money.”

**Intergenerational comparison.** This theme describes how the participants compare their current lives in the United States with the one their parents had in the Soviet Union. This theme includes comparisons with the lives of grandchildren as well.

All participants mentioned comparing their current lives in the United State with the lives of their parents and grandparents in the Soviet Union. Being able to live separately from children in their own apartment in the United States is a significant accomplishment in the eyes of these
women. Their current living arrangement is better than that of their parents, who had to live in communal flats. One participant recalled how her neighbors had ten people living in a one-room communal flat. She said:

*When I have guests here at my home I always serve food in good china and they are asking me why I don’t use plastic plates instead. But I can’t do it, my mom during and after the war always served everything in good china. And she did it without running water in her house, so for me it is just embarrassing. It’s a shame to do this - to put plastic plates.*

Remembering her mother’s example and having running water in the house, the participant feels uncomfortable using plastic dishes that are popular in the United States. The participant’s current lifestyle is significantly easier than her mother’s life during the war; therefore, she feels almost obligated to serve guests in the best china.

Additionally, participants compare their standard of living in the Soviet Union with the one their grandchildren have in the United States. Growing up during famine makes it impossible for the participants to be selective in their food preference; consequently, their grandchildren’s behavior is not understandable for them. One woman explained:

*When I ask my grandchildren if they want fruit (watermelon or strawberry) during the winter time and they tell me they hate it, I am shocked. All these fruit here are available during the wintertime. In our country they were not available even maybe right now, I don’t know. I compare what I saw there and what I see here. Here stores have so much food you can’t even try it all. I will never forget this hunger, how children were starving.*

As the memories of poverty and starvation in the Soviet Union are still vivid for this participant, her views about what is enough are shaped by the past experiences. As the
participant mentioned something as simple as having fresh fruit and vegetables during the winter time makes her satisfied with her financial situation. One woman said:

*It’s impossible even to compare, it’s a big difference, lifestyle here and lifestyle in my village. In my village we didn’t have running water, so if you want to wash yourself you have to boil water and wash yourself in a little bucket and you’re happy. When I come here it was such a big difference because now I have a bathtub and a shower and I don’t need to boil water.*

Being from the village and having to boil water all her life, the participant truly appreciated the simple luxuries of her new home in the United States.

These women’s grandchildren, even if not affluent by the American standards, have a financially higher standard of living than the participants or their parents. Their grandchildren have a choice to eat what they like; they have a wide selection of produce in the stores, their parents give them a choice of meals – a practice unheard of in the Soviet Union.

*It’s so different, sometimes my grandson asks his mom what they going to eat today and I am just shocked. When I was growing up we sometimes didn’t even have bread. If you have bread or milk or soup it is more than enough.*

These women’s stories demonstrated that the concept “more than enough” is subjective and based on their experiences in the past. No matter how small their current income in the United States is, all of them can afford milk and bread and soup – simple food that was so scarce during and after the war.

Immigration to the United States has the advantages and disadvantages for these older women. Although financially they became more affluent (for example, they all have their own apartments, they can afford to buy simple food, and their children and grandchildren have job
opportunities), they lost independence. Even though they are helping to raise their grandchildren, they sometimes feel isolated because of the language barrier. Finally, their views on caregiving are challenged by the new system. Coming from a society where family caregiving is anticipated, they are immersed in a society where nursing homes exist and prosper and where adults have a choice to decline children’s caregiving.

Conclusions/Discussion

A large number of older Russian-speaking immigrants arrived to the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the gerontological research community has yet to catch up with these immigrants’ experiences in the Soviet Union and in the United States. Analysis of the current academic literature showed that the research is heavily focused on the Jewish immigrant experiences in the United States, while virtually no studies have looked at the older non-Jewish immigrants. When studying Russian-speaking immigrants, it is crucial to remember the waves of immigration, as they allow us to understand the reasons for leaving the homeland. Moreover, it is important to note that Jewish experiences in the Soviet Union were different from the other Russian-speaking groups. In the current study, nine participants out of 16 were of Jewish descent; of these, all, without exception, identified discrimination as a primary reason for immigrating to the United States. The participants of non-Jewish descent identified other reasons such as better job opportunities for their children and grandchildren. Knowing the waves of immigration, the ethnic background of the Russian-speaking immigrants allows the gerontologists to develop and tailor effective programs and services for each ethnic group from the former Soviet Union.

The most striking finding of this study was the idea of being satisfied with little things in life, including their current socio-economic status. As the participants compared their current
lifestyle and living arrangement in the United States with the one they experienced in the Soviet Union, they talked about how much they had in the U.S. All of the participants were living in modest (according to American standards) apartments. However, these women expressed satisfaction with their current living conditions. This finding is consistent with a study of older immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Finland (Heikkinen, 2011). It was the only study that the researcher was able to locate that mentioned the older former Soviet Union immigrants’ perceptions of their current living arrangements. Heikkinen (2011) found that for the former Soviet Union immigrants in Finland, the convenience of running cold and hot water and electricity were crucial. Our study found that having simple food, running water, sewage, and a bathtub were reasons for being very pleased with their current living arrangements. Moreover, unlike their ancestors who resided in multi-generational homes, the study participants had the luxury of living alone or with their husband in the apartment. Satisfaction with their current conditions is significant to note because it might be a coping mechanism that makes it easier for the immigrants to accept immigration. Moreover, such positive attitudes might facade challenges that they face in the new country, specifically, the language barrier, decreased productivity and independence. Learning about the older immigrants’ past and present living arrangements and their role within the family is beneficial for gerontologists, social workers, and service providers as it allows them address issues unique to this group of immigrants, specifically, transition from a multigenerational homes to a single-generational home and potential weakening of intergenerational ties with their grandchildren.

It is also important to mention that the participants expressed a strong desire to be productive and to contribute to the American society. However, the language barrier and, for some of the participants, health were the main reasons for the low level of productivity, and,
consequently, depression. Volunteer opportunities targeted specifically to this elder immigrant group would help them to remain active and productive in their community. Local senior centers and colleges might establish intergenerational language programs for this group of immigrants, specifically pair local residents, who would like to learn Russian language, with an older Russian-speaking immigrant. These classes would be mutually-beneficial, as women would be able to practice their English, while local participants will acquire Russian language skills. Additionally, since a large university is in close proximity to this Russian-speaking community, it will be beneficial to utilize their outreach services for the benefit of this group. University students might hold a book drive to benefit elder immigrants in need of reading materials in Russian. Finally, local religious and secular organizations can utilize these women’s volunteer work for the benefit of the whole community by assigning them tasks that do not require English language fluency, such as volunteering in a soup kitchen, stocking supplies, and gardening.

Community involvement opportunities for the Russian-speaking elder immigrants will not only empower them, but also make them less dependent on their immediate family.

There are two major limitations in the study that should be acknowledged. As it was secondary analysis of qualitative data, the researcher did not have a chance to build her own interview guide and to ask clarifying questions. Additionally, since this is a qualitative study the experiences presented here are not generalizable to all former Soviet older immigrant women. Despite these limitations, this study is an important first step in understanding the experiences of Jewish and non-Jewish older immigrant women in their home country and how their past affected the way they perceive their economic status in the United States and how they view long-term care.
This study’s results suggest that further qualitative research is needed to investigate the type of volunteer work and social activities this particular immigrant group would be interested in participating. Moreover, a closer examination of Russian-speaking immigrant women’s experiences with the Soviet and American long-term care system is needed to find out if they are willing to utilize the services of a well-equipped American nursing home.
References


Utrata, J. M. (2008). *Counting on motherhood, not men: Single mothers and social change in the*


Appendix: The Interview Guide

General background:

1) What is your age and date of birth? Marital status?
2) What is your religion? (or, do you have a religion that you practice?)
3) How would you describe your race or ethnicity?
4) Did you ever work? What did you do most of your working life?
5) What is a typical day like for you? Can you walk me through a day?
6) What are your main activities nowadays? What are your favorite activities at the present time?
7) Now that we have met and talked for a few minutes, I’d like to know more about you and your life. Could you describe your life for me; whatever comes to your mind about what happened along the way? Start where you like and take as much time as you need.

Historical generativity:

1) Suppose, someone asked you—as an older person—to write down some advice on how to live that you thought would be as good 100 years from now as it is today. What would you write down?
2) Do you ever feel that you are a living representative of a particular cultural, historic, ethnic, or racial tradition? Are there any traditions you feel a part of?
3) Would you say that you think your family’s history is personally important to you? How so? What things in particular?
4) Is there a person in your family who keeps track of things like family history, births and deaths, and things like that? Who is it?
5) All and all, what things in your life do you think will outlive you?

Familial generativity:
1) What would you say that you feel about your family’s heritage or history? Do you feel that it is a part of who you are? How so?

2) Thinking about your family for a moment, that is, all the people and generations in your family that have come before you, what do you think are the most important beliefs, ideas, or values you got from them?

3) Do you feel you are a part of a family tradition? Do you see anything of your mother/father in you?

Individual generativity:

1) Thinking about your life, what things are you most glad went the way they did?

2) Thinking about (the last 5 years/your life as a whole), what activities have given you the greatest happiness or satisfaction or have had the most meaning for you?

3) What are the most important ideas or values you think you’ll pass on to other people? To whom?

4) Thinking about (the last 5 years/your life as a whole), in what ways/what areas have you been most creative or productive?

5) Was there ever a moment when you felt the desire to describe what you know or what you’ve experienced to other people, so that it won’t be lost when you pass on?

Relational generativity:

1) Think about (when you were a child/when you were 50/the last 5 years) . . . who did/do you admire most? Which persons have had the greatest influence on you? How?

2) Thinking about your life in the last 5 years, who have you been closest to in that time? Who is the most important person in your life right now?
3) Suppose a younger person, a teenager, say, came to you and asked you for your most valuable advice on how best to live. What would you tell them?

4) Which people do you think you have had the greatest influence on in their life? How so? Do you see anything of yourself in other people? Elaborate.

5) Thinking about your life (as a whole/the last 5 years), which people or groups do you feel you’ve influenced the most?

6) Thinking about the people you know, how would you like people to remember you? Who will do so?