Wladimir Kaminer: A Russian Picaro Conquers Germany

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Wladimir Kaminer is currently one of Germany’s most popular writers. His first book, Russendisko (2000), a collection of vignettes of Russian émigré life in Berlin, turned him into an instant celebrity. Since then Kaminer has published seven more books, each of which landed on the Spiegel best-seller list.1 His works have sold over 1.2 million copies in Germany alone and have been translated into fifteen languages, including Russian and English.2 Kaminer is also doing a brisk business in audio versions of his books. In addition, he writes regular columns for a multitude of German newspapers and magazines, he runs a weekly radio show, and his Russian Disco at Café Burger has become a legendary staple of Berlin’s night life.3

Born in Moscow in 1967, Kaminer had no knowledge of the German language before he emigrated to what was still the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1990. After working at various odd jobs, including a stint in a theater, he began in 1998 to write in the language of his adopted homeland. His meteoric career as the “shooting star” of German literature raises several questions. How can we explain his extraordinary success with the German public? What is his national identity as a writer? Does he belong in the company of other successful “translingual” Russian writers, such as Vladimir Nabokov or Andrei Makine? Are his indefatigable graphomania and commercial success an index of literary greatness, or just the opposite?

The question of Kaminer’s popularity is intertwined with that of his national identity. As the title of his first book indicates, the topic of “Russianness” looms large in his literary self-fashioning and public persona. His latest book, I Am Worried, Mama (Ich mache mir Sorgen, Mama, 2004), features an assemblage of Matryoshka dolls on the cover, thus signaling to the potential buyer the work’s Russianness from the outset in a conspicuous, if hackneyed, manner. Kaminer skillfully capitalizes on German clichés

2See Random House press department e-mail to author, 8 June 2004; Vladimir Kaminer, Russendisko, trans. N. Klimeniuka and I. Kivel’ (Moscow, 2003); and Wladimir Kaminer, Russian Disco, trans. Michael Hulse (London, 2002) (this book is not available for sale in the United States, but can be ordered on amazon.co.uk).
3See www.russendisko.de for pictures, sound samples, and updated information.

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about the Russian national character by playing on such stereotypes as the Russian penchant for hard drinking, sentimentality, and chaotic spontaneity, which are antagonistically opposed to notions of German neatness, dullness, and pedantry. It is no accident that in addition to the print version of his books, the audio CDs showcasing Kaminer’s thick Russian accent enjoy a particular popularity with the German public. The same “exotic” appeal pertains to Kaminer’s radio programs and public readings. He frequently refers to himself as “the Russian from central casting” (der Russe vom Dienst), and his public performances are announced with phrases like “the Russian is coming!” (Der Russe kommt!).

While consciously playing with received ideas about Russian culture, however, Kaminer simultaneously undermines them with his own “hip” version of Russianness. His recently released CD Russen Soul provides a good example of this approach. As Kaminer explains on his website, the purpose of this collection of sentimental Russian music is to reveal the “Jamaican sun under the Russian snow.” The cover design of the album is an exercise in intentional poshlost’, highlighting both commonplace and outlandish visual representations conjured up in the popular mind in connection with Russia. Kaminer reveals that he originally proposed a “red-cheeked, cheerful woman with a polar bear on a leash and a torch in her hand—something like the Statue of Liberty, only fatter.”

His partner rejected the idea, however, claiming he had seen this design already on a vodka bottle. A ghoulish portrait of Rasputin was turned down for the same reason. Finally, they settled on a carved wood rendition of a Soviet star pierced by an arrow. Kaminer’s sots art aesthetic allows for a “double take,” as it were: it holds the notion of the Russian soul up to derision, yet it invites us to wallow in its sentimental effusions. Whereas earlier generations of Germans had indulged in the tackiness of the pseudo-Russian singer Ivan Rebroff, Kaminer’s intentionally tacky version of the Russian soul can be enjoyed by a more sophisticated crowd as a postmodern pastiche. The same holds true for Kaminer’s Russian Disco with its Red Star logo. It is a (self)-ironic performance that nevertheless attracts hordes of German fans hungry for Russian “authenticity.” As the journalist Sieglinde Geisel put it: “The irony of the Russian Disco is the promise of redemption from forced irony that it offers to the Westerners: here one can indulge without risk in one’s longings for true feelings, collective frenzy, and passion.”

To be sure, Kaminer’s status as a paragon of Russianness might raise eyebrows with some of his former compatriots. After all, his last name and Soviet passport clearly identified him as a Jew, and it was only because of his Jewishness that he was able to emigrate to Germany in the first place. Kaminer addresses this issue in the first chapter of Russendisko, where he discusses the prejudice against Jews in the Soviet Union that prevented his father from becoming a member of the Communist party. However, he notes that in the late eighties being Jewish became a desirable quality because it facilitated emigration (as had been the case since the Brezhnev era). As his father told him at the

4See www.russentext.de/musik/russensoul.shtml (3 June 2004). I will indicate in parentheses the last date I accessed a web site. All English translations are my own.

heyday of Gorbachev’s reforms, “the greatest freedom is the possibility to scram.” Kaminer spontaneously decided to try his luck in Germany after he heard rumors in 1990 that Erich Honecker accepted Russian Jews to compensate for the fact that the GDR never made any reparation payments to Israel. East Germany was an easy destination for emigration because no visa was needed and a train ticket from Moscow to Berlin could be obtained for not much money. Moreover, an uncle assured Kaminer that Germany’s extensive social safety net made it an ideal place for freeloaders (p. 12). The Jewishness of the Soviet emigrants to Germany was for the most part secular and, as Kaminer implies, in some cases fraudulent. He treats with ridicule the efforts of the local German Jewish community to help the newly arrived Jews regain the faith of their forefathers. Predictably, the issue of circumcision is used to salacious comical effect. Kaminer reports that only one of his colleagues consented to this operation, which is performed with the help of laser beams. When he publicly displays the result of the surgery to the assembled community of fellow émigré Jews, they are unimpressed and advise him to stay away from Judaism (p. 16). The Jewish theme disappears almost completely from Kaminer’s book after the opening chapter. “Russian,” rather than “Jewish,” is the common denominator that he uses for the immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Kaminer’s reluctance to engage the issue of his Jewishness is illustrated by the story “A Lost Day” (“Ein verlorener Tag,” 90–93). He reports that a newspaper editor calls him one morning to ask for a contribution on “Jugendkultur” (youth culture). After wracking his brain for a whole day with musings about MTV and Beavis and Butthead, Kaminer finds out that the editor meant “Judenkultur” (Jewish culture). He is angry about the lost day and decides to go have a drink. There is no mention of completing the assignment. One wonders whether Kaminer’s failure to understand the editor on the telephone was not somewhat of a Freudian slip, or, more likely, whether he invented the whole story based on the similar sound of “Jugendkultur” and “Judenkultur.” In fact, it seems unlikely that the editor would actually have used this term. A central theme of German Jewish writing, the conundrum of being a Jew in post-Holocaust Germany, is of little concern to Kaminer. At best, the topic becomes grist for his ironic mill. The story “Daily Life of a Work of Art” (“Alltag eines Kunstwerks,” 46–49) tells the fate of a

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4Kaminer, Russendisko, 23. Subsequent references to this work will be given with in-text parenthetical notes.

5Honecker had nothing to do with this decision, but it is true that the de Maizière government of the GDR began to grant automatic residence permits to Soviet Jews in July 1990. After reunification, the residence status of Soviet Jews who had entered the country before 15 February 1991 was officially recognized in all of Germany. See Julius H. Schoeps et al., eds., Russische Juden in Deutschland: Integration und Selbstbehauptung in einem fremden Land (Weinheim, 1996), 14.

6In a 1993 survey among 413 Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union who had settled in Germany, only 12.6 percent identified themselves as “religious” (ibid., 149).

7The word “Judenkultur” has a rather peculiar ring, given the use of “Juden-” compounds by the Nazis (for example, Judenrat, Judenfrage, and so on). A more common and neutral term for “Jewish culture” in German would be “jüdische Kultur.”

8A more relaxed attitude toward the Nazi past is characteristic for many Russian Jewish immigrants in Germany, given that they perceive the role of their community in World War Two as that of victor rather than victim. They tend to view anti-Semitism as a Russian or Ukrainian rather than a German problem. See Brian Poole, “Adiaphora: The New Culture of Russians and Eastern Jews in Berlin,” Public 22/23 (2001): 150–51. Kaminer does address the issue of anti-Semitism in Russia in his novel Militärmusik (see below), but there is never any mention of German anti-Semitism.
gigantic shell-shaped cement contraption with the title “Heart of a Mother” that a Jewish émigré Russian sculptor in Berlin submits as his entry to the contest for the official German Holocaust memorial. After being turned down by the jury, the sculptor proposes to ship his work to Prague as a monument to commemorate the Czech women raped by Soviet soldiers. Instead, it winds up on a trade fair of erotica in Hamburg, where it symbolizes “the unfulfilled longing for vaginal contact.” Finally, Kaminer discovers the object on a Berlin playground where it has become a painted snail surrounded by happy children.11

The protean quality of the work of art with its shifting significance resembles the unstable national identity of the inhabitants of Kaminer’s Berlin. It turns out that the Turks running the Turkish restaurants are really Bulgarians, the Italians are Greek, the Sushi bars are run by American Jews, the Chinese in the Chinese restaurant are really Vietnamese, the Indians are Tunisian, and the Afro-American bar is run by a Belgian—in short, “nothing here is real, everyone is himself and at the same time someone else” (p. 98). Kaminer is the paradigmatic embodiment of this hyphenated, hybrid identity. His own statements about his national identity have been somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he claims total indifference toward this question. In a 2003 interview with Deutsche Welle, for example, he expressed his bemusement at attempts to peg him as

11It is perhaps no accident that one of the paragons of sots art, Dmitrii Prigov, used to make a living as a hack sculptor. As he explained to David Remnick, “I made the gigantic bunnies and bears you see kids climbing on in playgrounds. ... These were great works, and I always fulfilled my plan.” See David Remnick, Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia (New York, 1997), 229.
either a Russian, German, or Jewish author. He explains: “I understand that for others this is an important distinction. But personally I don’t give a damn about it” (mir selbst ist das schnurz). On other occasions, he seems to break down his national identity into various components by drawing a distinction between his private and public self. When asked by an interviewer in the same year whether he saw himself as a Russian German, cosmopolitan, or “Multikulti-Berliner,” the answer was: “The Soviet Union is my homeland (meine Heimat). Berlin is my home (mein Zuhause). Russian is my mother tongue. German writer is my profession.”

The distinction between a private Russian (or Soviet) essence and a public role as a German writer presupposes that these identities exist separately rather than forming an undifferentiated blur. It becomes clear that Kaminer’s German identity, just like his Russian persona as “the Russian from central casting,” is essentially performative. The flamboyant “wild Russian” in Kaminer coexists with the role of an upright German family man. In another 2003 interview he says: “Am I not a nice Russian (ein netter Russe)? I always emphasize that I am a German author, and only privately a Russian. I think that people have understood this by now.” The adjective “nett” (meaning something like “nice,” “neat,” “tidy,” “pleasant”) aptly captures Kaminer’s German persona. In one of his columns he even suggests that he and his family could serve as official “Leitfiguren” (leading models) of the German national culture, given that they lead a “rather humdrum bourgeois life” (ein ziemlich spießbürgerliches Leben). As he points out, his (Russian) wife is a member of the local Kindergarten parent-teacher organization, they are in favor of “absolute quiet after 11:00 P.M., sometimes even earlier,” they like eating hot dogs, and they regularly watch the “Harald Schmidt Show” (the German equivalent of the “Tonight Show”). The only problem is that he doesn’t drink beer, but he states that he would be willing to down a few mugs of Schultheiss now and then in return for being officially recognized as the “leading hot dog” (Leitwürstchen) of the German national culture.

Kaminer’s parody reflects the debate in Germany about whether foreigners should be expected to assimilate in conformity with a German “Leitkultur.” As it turns out, the Russian Jew Kaminer represents this ideal to perfection. Rather ironically, the German authorities are indeed beginning to recognize the value of showcasing Kaminer abroad as an emissary of German culture. He has been invited several times already by the Goethe Institute to read from his works in foreign countries, including Russia and the United States, which he toured in the spring of 2003.

Kaminer’s official status as a German writer raises the question of how he should be categorized as an author. Does he fit in any way into the established canon of German literature? His own answer to this question is characteristically tongue-in-cheek. In a piece written in 2003 and posted on his website, he muses about the fact that for alphabetical reasons his books are shelved in libraries and bookstores between those of Franz Kafka.

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12See www.dw-world.de/german/0,3367,1534_A_657365,00.html (25 July 2003).
14See www2.lifestyle.t-online.de/dyn/life/kult/lite/ar/ar-wladimir-kaminer-interview.html (21 July 2003).
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and Heinz Konsalik. As he says, “I know that this is no accident.”16 Konsalik, the author of roughly 125 best-selling novels with titles like Hot Love in the Taiga, was one of the most successful German authors of the twentieth century in terms of volumes sold. What does he have in common with Kafka and Kaminer? According to Kaminer, the following: “We authors from the K-shelf are all humorists.” This seems at first sight a rather peculiar assertion. Kafka is not generally known for his humor, although there does exist a minor critical tradition that sees him as a representative of carnivalesque comedy.17 The case for the humor in Konsalik’s sentimental pulp fiction is even harder to make. If there is any humor to be found at all in Konsalik, it must be of the involuntary kind. Here is how Kaminer summarizes the typical plot of a Konsalik novel:

A German POW with strong masochistic inclinations falls in love with a dominant Russian woman in uniform with leather boots and huge breasts. He cannot live without this woman, he wants her to kick and torture him. Maniacally the German follows these wild taiga broads (diese wilden Taiga-Tanten) through Siberia, sometimes across half of the globe, sometimes he comes very close to the big breasts, but then something happens again, and they are gone.

Like Konsalik, Kaminer is a producer of serial German best-sellers that capitalize on stereotypical notions of Russian and German identity (although Kaminer does it ironically, of course). In the case of Kafka, the role of national identities is reversed: if Konsalik was a native German who floated a constructed “Russianness,” Kafka entered German literature from the outside as representative of a Slavic/Jewish periphery. The same is true for Kaminer. To use the term popularized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, both Kafka and Kaminer represent a kind of “minor literature” within the German national canon. Unlike Kafka, the Prague Jew who wrote in the “paper language” of the empire, however, Kaminer uses the natural idiom of his German environment. His linguistic situation resembles that of other immigrant writers in Germany whose medium, to quote Azade Seyhan, “is not a ‘deterritorialized’ major language but one that still occupies its natural territory and has annexed the textual domain of the foreign writer who contributes to the literary history of the host country in the currency of its national language.”18 Unlike Kafka’s incisive, soberly abstract style or Konsalik’s purple prose, Kaminer writes a rather earthy, no-frills German characterized by a simple syntax replete with colloquialisms and occasional four-letter words. There are practically no Russianisms in his language.19 Kaminer’s assumed linguistic persona is that of the “average German” with no outward literary pretensions.

16See www.russentext.de/literatur/3k.shtml (3 June 2004).
17Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in particular characterized Kafka as “an author who laughs with a profound joy, a joie de vivre, in spite of, or because of, his clownish declarations that he offers like a trap or a circus.” See their Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, 1986), 41.
18Azade Seyhan, Writing Outside the Nation (Princeton, 2001), 27.
19The only example of Russian interference in Kaminer’s German that I was able to detect is the incorrect use of the verb “dämpfen” to describe the Soviet jamming of the Voice of America (Schönhauser Allee, 107). “Dämpfen” (“to muffle”) is a possible translation of the Russian “glushit’,” but when used to refer to the jamming of air waves, the customary German term is “stören.” Of course, other Russianisms in Kaminer’s prose may have been eliminated by his German editors.
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Kafka and Konsalik are of course polar opposites in terms of literary reputation and academic prestige. Kaminer’s conflation of these two authors challenges the traditional divide between “high” and “low,” elite and mass literature. In their discussion of “minor literature,” Deleuze and Guattari describe how language bursting out of territorial borders can take the form of “pop-pop music, pop philosophy, pop writing.” That is indeed an apt characterization of Kaminer’s literary technique. His preferred genre, the laconic prose miniature, his deadpan style, his characters without any “depth,” and his rudimentary plots that frequently trail off without much of a conclusion or punch line make him a typical representative of literary minimalism.

Only one of Kaminer’s books deviates from the genre of the prose miniature: Militärmusik (Military Music, 2001) carries the generic subtitle “Roman” (“A Novel”). The work warrants a more detailed discussion both because of its unusual length and its content, which differs from Kaminer’s other works, since its plot is situated not in the German present, but in the Soviet past. It is a sort of autobiography, beginning with Kaminer’s birth in 1967 and ending with his decision to emigrate to Germany in 1990. The book offers a panoramic and satiric view of Soviet society during the 1980s from the point of view of a nonconformist “underground man.” Kaminer’s bohemian lifestyle leads him on an extended trajectory through the expanses of the Soviet empire from the Baltics to Central Asia and through a variety of social milieus, including the theatre, the underground rock scene, a community of alternative campers in a Latvian forest, and the Soviet Military, where he serves two years in an anti-aircraft defense unit north of Moscow. The story ends on 22 June 1990 (that is, the anniversary of the German attack on the Soviet Union), when Kaminer finds himself in a westbound train approaching the border at Brest-Litovsk en route to Berlin.

The generic status of this work has caused some debate. In various interviews, Kaminer himself referred to Militärmusik as “not a real novel”—in one interview he calls it “a gigantic short story.” A German reviewer found the generic designation “curious,” since the book seemed to him a collection of anecdotes rather than a novel. Another reviewer comments on the static and flat quality of the novel’s characters, claiming that they resemble “wax figures in a collection of curiosities (Kuriositätenkabinett) that melt away as soon as one comes too close with the spotlight.” Similar judgments can be found among the customer reviews posted on amazon.de, where a reader faults Kaminer for presenting an assemblage of episodes lined up like “pearls on a string” rather than an attempt at “serious autobiography.”

20Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 26.
21For a discussion of minimalism in Russian literature see my Russian Minimalism: From the Prose Poem to the Anti-Story (Evanston, 2003).
Traditionally, German autobiographical novels relating the author’s coming of age have tended to follow the venerable model of the Bildungsroman. For readers accustomed to this canonic form, Kaminer’s Militärmusik must indeed appear as a deviation from the novelistic genre, since it offers no psychological insights, no description of a process of maturation, no tale of successful social integration (quite to the contrary, it presents a tale of sustained alienation). However, the work conforms in many details to a different tradition with a longstanding pedigree: the picaresque. One could even call Militärmusik a picaresque novel par excellence. The panoramic-episodic plot and the first-person narrative, beginning with the hero’s birth, correspond to the canonical form that the picaresque novel has taken since its inception in sixteenth-century Spain. The novel’s hero is in many respects a typical picaro. At the end of the first chapter, “Socialist Education” (“Sozialistische Erziehung”), he summarizes his personality as follows:

Although still young, I quickly managed to accumulate everything negative that a citizen of the Soviet Union could possibly come up with. I was not a real Russian with my passport marked “Jew,” not a member of the Komsomol, a bit of a hippie and a passive dissident. I drank alcohol with strangers and, when the opportunity presented itself, tried to make money with illegal deals. Like many of my friends I had several altercations with the organs of public security, and my name was registered in the so-called “Black Book” of the KGB youth division.

All in all: not a bad start.26

In his compendium on the theory and practice of picaresque fiction, Ulrich Wicks has described the quintessential picaresque hero as a

pragmatic, unprincipled, resilient, solitary figure who just manages to survive in his chaotic landscape, but who, in the ups and downs, can also put that world very much on the defensive. The picaro is a protean figure who can not only serve many masters but play different roles, and his essential character trait is his inconstancy (of life roles, of self-identity), his own personality flux in the face of an inconstant world. ... Despite the savvy he soon acquires, part of him remains engagingly innocent.27

This seems quite an apt characterization of the literary persona that Kaminer assumes in Militärmusik. Although the narrator establishes himself early on as a trickster and rogue, he nevertheless maintains a sort of Candide-like naiveté throughout the book.

The choice of a first-person perspective is crucial for the peculiar character of the picaresque worldview. As Wicks has noted, “the picaro’s narration is itself a trick, a lure, the narrative analogue of the tricks he has played to survive.”28 Characteristically, in the first chapter of his novel Kaminer presents a self-portrait of the narrator as a trickster. Kaminer’s highlighting of his narrative urge at the detriment of any “solid learning”

26Kaminer, Militärmusik, 61–67. All subsequent in-text page references refer to this volume.
28Ibid., 58.
Adrian Wanner makes it clear that the reader is not dealing with a Bildungsroman, but rather with something like an Anti-Bildungsroman. The account of Kaminer's story-telling during his school days reads like a self-characterization of his later approach to writing:

I told one story after another. Some people were excited about them, others got mad—but everybody listened attentively. I became the greatest crackpot (Spinner) in school. At the same time I developed another particularity: the absolute incapability of learning anything solid. I immediately turned around any information that came my way and concocted another story. I always got the best grades in literature, even though so-called “literature” as a subject didn’t interest me in the least. (p. 18)

Kaminer reports that his narrative talent got him the assignment of “political informer” in school, a job that consisted in collecting and presenting to his classmates a weekly bulletin of important news. Most of his news items were completely made up, which led him to the realization that “the border between reality and fiction is sometimes very thin” (p. 17). Nobody seemed to notice or care about the fictional nature of his performance. Only when he announced that Zimbabwe had declared war on the Soviet Union was he found out and prevented from entering the Komsomol. A few years later he got in trouble again when he won first prize at his school in a “Students recite Maiakovskii” competition with a pastiche of his own making that he presented as an early poem of the Communist bard. When the poem was exposed as a fake at the citywide final, the irate director expelled Kaminer from school.

“Ejection,” as Wicks observes, “is the picaro’s second ‘birth’ ... a kind of initiation shock. ... Ejection repeats itself in less radical ways forever after in the picaro’s life as he leaves or is left by one master after another or has to flee circumstances.” Situations of ejection indeed abound in Kaminer’s narrative: he is ejected from school, from his job at the Maiakovskii Theater and assorted other places of employment, from the city of Moscow during the 1980 Olympic games, from an upscale restaurant in Kiev. Even his final departure from his Soviet homeland, although voluntary, follows the same pattern of leaving behind forever a familiar environment.

Another staple of the picaresque plot used in Kaminer’s narrative is the motif of the unusual birth and childhood. The book begins with an account of the fifty-year jubilee of the “Great October Socialist Revolution” in 1967, the year Kaminer was born. The cab driver who brings Kaminer’s father to the hospital to pick up his new-born son suggests that he should call his new offspring “Oktobrin” in honor of the great anniversary. However, Kaminer’s father is preoccupied with more mundane issues. Because of the festivities, the driver is unable to make a right turn on Kalinin Prospect to get to the hospital. He has to be persuaded to do so with a bribe of twenty-five rubles. A subsequent bribe in the same

29Ibid., 66.
30While the Soviet authorities did banish “undesirable elements” from the capital during the Olympics, it seems hard to believe that the then thirteen-year-old Kaminer would have been subjected to such measures. The rest of this chapter, relating how Kaminer escorts a herd of cattle on a railway transport from Riga to Tashkent and sells along the way a Latvian vagrant woman as a bride to a rich Uzbek, rather stretches credibility as well. The whole episode reads like an inserted oriental fairy tale.
amount goes to a traffic cop who witnesses the illegal turn. Once at the hospital, the
doorman, a nurse, and an employee at the registration office have to be paid twenty-five
rubles each to perform their job duties. After having spent his monthly salary in bribes,
Kaminer’s father is finally able to bring his wife and son home, driving along vast
contingents of police and red flags. The contrast between the solemn self-presentation of
the Soviet regime and its corrupt reality sets the stage for everything that follows.

An important focal point of the urban surrounding in which Kaminer grows up is a
nearby mental hospital. The encounter with an inmate of this institution, an exhibitionist
who accosts him and his mother in a park, propels the young Kaminer to utter his first
words: “Get lost!” (Hau ab!). As he claims, it is because of this “psychic trauma” that he
“began to speak and has been unable to stop ever since” (p. 15). Later he engages in
lengthy discussions with the mental patients. He discovers to his amazement that they
enjoy a much greater freedom than the average Soviet citizen, since they don’t have to lie
and pretend, and that they are fully aware of their privileged position. For a while,
“Mongoloider” (Down’s syndrome patient) appears to him a desirable career choice. The
motif of the madhouse is something Kaminer may have borrowed from Il’f and Petrov’s
Zolotoi telenok, in which the inhabitants of a mental institution conclude that they inhabit
the only normal place to be found in the Soviet Union. In addition, the madness scene
constitutes an important element of the picaresque, where, as Stuart Miller has noted, it
serves as “an appropriate reaction to universal disorder.”31 The madhouse becomes a
recurring motif in Militärmusik. Later in the novel, the narrator visits a friend who has
been institutionalized for his excessive devotion to the French singer Patricia Kaas.
Nevertheless, Kaminer creates the impression that the personnel of the institution is even
more insane than its patients.

Kaminer finally gravitates toward the world of the theater, which embodies
symbolically and literally the principle of role-playing, a key motif of the picaresque
narrative. Characteristically, Kaminer is admitted to the theatrical institute after
performing another act of verbal play-acting: he writes a successful essay on “The Decisions
of the 20th Party Congress and their Consequences for the Development of Agriculture.”
Once he has entered the institute, he discovers to his pleasant surprise that he is surrounded
by a community of like-minded individuals:

Not only all the students, but also the teachers were for the most part con artists
(Hochstapler). The main reason for this was that we studied a discipline that
consisted mostly of hot air. Most foreign authors on the curriculum had not
been translated into Russian and were either prohibited or at least undesirable.
The textbooks were mostly written by our own teachers. Besides that we told
each other about films that nobody had seen or talked about books that nobody
knew.” (pp. 35–36)

“Communities of roguery” are a standard feature of the picaresque plot widely attested
in Kaminer’s novel. An entire chapter is devoted to his activities in the underground rock
scene, where he organizes illegal concerts disguised as private parties, outsmarting along

31Stuart Miller, The Picaresque Novel (Cleveland, 1967), 97.
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the way the ever-present agents of the KGB youth division. The ultimate example of a brotherhood of outlaws is a vast campsite in the Latvian forest populated by three kinds of characters: “Idos” (adherents of some alternative ideology or religion such as Hare Krishnas, Buddhists, or Satanists), “Narks” (drug addicts), and “Indis” (“wild campers” who come to the place simply in search of freedom and adventure). Kaminer states that despite the seeming anarchy, daily life at the camp was well regulated and largely free of conflict, since everybody adhered to a set of unwritten rules. In his discussion of the picaresque genre, Wicks points out that such communities “may serve as a satirical inversion of the social order; but, paradoxically, these brotherhoods are much more ordered and structured than the social order they ostensibly undermine.” To Kaminer, who spends three months at the camp, the place seems a utopia come true. He sees it as a kind of Eden, “like communism without the phrasemongering” (p. 147). In this sense, the episode provides the vision of paradise contained in almost every picaresque novel.

Kaminer’s stint in the Soviet Army provides a contrary example of a community experience. Given the protagonist’s status as a bohemian nonconformist, it is not surprising that his military career turns out to be anti-heroic, to say the least. His superiors soon recognize his true talents by making him the “assistant entertainment organizer” of their unit. Kaminer’s image of the Soviet military as an institution marked by incompetence, corruption, and alcoholism is less than flattering, although the portrait is rather more benign than one would expect. Kaminer claims that it was because he and his comrades were asleep at the switch at their air-defense unit that the German pilot Matthias Rust was able to perform his famous flight to Moscow and land his Cessna on Red Square. Kaminer’s performance as a naive, bumbling soldier is reminiscent of Grimmelshausen’s Simplicissimus, the foremost picaresque novel in German literature, or of Hasek’s Good Soldier Schweik. Soldier Kaminer does not display any kind of openly anti-militaristic or pacifist attitude. Essentially, he seems to look at his army experience as yet another “cool” adventure (p. 159, English in the original).

Social satire, a view of society “from below” has always been a hallmark of the picaresque genre. The picaresque narrator is by definition an outsider to the world he describes. In an influential article, Américo Castro has suggested linking the perspective of the Spanish picaresque novel with the point of view of the converso, or converted Jew. The situation of Kaminer and his family in the Soviet Union indeed resembles the cultural alienation of the Spanish conversos: they too have assimilated to the reigning ideology by abandoning their original faith, but are still treated with suspicion both by the state authorities and by many of their compatriots. The Jewish theme appears in Kaminer’s narrative in characteristically muted form. Aside from the reference to “not being a real Russian” cited earlier, the topic surfaces in the chapter “Life in the Park” (“Das Leben im Park”). Kaminer’s job du jour consists in organizing a cultural summer

32Wicks, Picaresque Narrative, 47.
33See Miller, Picaresque Novel, 97.
program in a park belonging to a secret submarine factory. Among the invited lecturers is a group of “strange fellows, all wearing black sweaters with hoods. On the backs of their sweaters stood the word ‘Memory’” (p. 99). Kaminer’s boss introduces them as “ecologists working for the purity of nature and the reconstruction of the Orthodox Church.” He adds that they have the approval of the local party authorities, who think that “a healthy popular initiative cannot hurt in our difficult times” (p. 100).

The talk of the black-hooded characters bears the innocent-sounding title “The Irresistible Beauty of Lake Baikal.” It begins with a slide show demonstrating how the pristine waters of the Siberian lake are being polluted by the raw sewage of a cellulose factory. The speaker explains this event by the fact that “five years ago, the factory director, comrade Ivanov, and two leading engineers, Petrov and Mikhailov, were replaced by the engineers Goldberg and Kramstein.” He reveals that the local population refers to the poisonous powder that destroys Lake Baikal as the “Jewish Cancer” (pp. 101–2). The audience reacts with hollering and whistling. Kaminer reports: “I was completely enraptured (völlig begeistert) by this show, I had never seen anything like that.” The speaker goes on to introduce a witch-like woman who offers a special brand of cookies of her own making that protect the organism against the Jewish Cancer. While she distributes her cookies to the public, an Orthodox priest collects money for a church to be built on the shore of Lake Baikal, which will “banish the evil force with its holy sunray.” Kaminer decides to try a few of the witch’s cookies and ends up with a terrible bout of diarrhea.

The phone conversation between Kaminer and his boss the next day provides an example of Kaminer’s deadpan at its most extreme:

“What was this all about yesterday?” he asked me in a worried tone.
“Oh, nothing particular, really. The Jews have poisoned Lake Baikal” was my quick summary of the evening’s outcome.
“Aha, good to know. I was thinking of going there on vacation soon,” said the boss and hung up. (p. 104)

Kaminer’s pose of a naive simpleton who is enraptured by the “funny people in black hoods” doesn’t diminish the force of his portrayal of the notorious (and now apparently defunct) Obshchestvo Pamiat’. His narrative manages to expose both the buffoonish and sinister side of this organization and reveals at the same time to what extent its hate-mongering seems to have enjoyed the tacit approval of the state authorities. In this sense, Kaminer’s Jewishness, although submerged in most of the novel, indeed constitutes an important focal point of his picaresque persona. The satirical force of Kaminer’s narrative is enhanced rather than diminished by the first-person narrator’s stance of simple-minded innocence.

Given the many picaresque features in Militärmusik, do we have to assume that Kaminer wrote his novel as a conscious pastiche? In light of his own dismissive attitude toward “literature as such,” it seems unlikely that he was familiar with the Spanish prototypes of the picaresque novel or with the history of their German and Russian
incarnations in the works of Grimmelshausen, Chulkov, Narezhyi, Bulgarin, and others. He never mentions the more modern Russian examples of the genre in the work of writers such as Erenburg or Voinovich, which may or may not have influenced Militärmusik. Unlike, say, Thomas Mann’s Felix Krull, Kaminer’s novel is hardly an attempt to modernize a traditional genre. In a recent interview, Kaminer claimed that the alleged nonfictional character of his writings makes him eschew any kind of conscious “literariness.” In an almost Tolstoyan manner, he seems to suggest that “form” gets in the way of “truth.” As he put it, rather naïvely: “As far as possible, I am trying to avoid any literary form, since every form falsifies the content.”

The similarities between Kaminer’s Militärmusik and the classics of the picaresque novel point less to conscious imitation than to a structural coincidence, triggered perhaps by comparable sociohistorical and biographical circumstances of their authors. Like the Spanish creators of the picaresque tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Kaminer grew up as a societal outsider in a troubled empire. As Harry Sieber has noted in his study of the picaresque, the authors of the first Spanish picaresque novels lived in “a period of profound social change” as “the Habsburg kings were committed to empire-building and waged war on a scale that the world had never seen before.” Nevertheless, “the efficiency of the Spanish military decreased in the second half of the century.” Quoting a study by Geoffrey Parker, Sieber points out that “the soldiers soon came to exhibit the same picaresque values which invaded Spanish society in the late sixteenth century: idleness, brutality, and bravado, the thirst for gambling, the urge for falsification.” This situation is reminiscent of the militarily overextended and economically undersupplied Soviet Union during the late Brezhnev period with its concomitant mood of universal cynicism. It is this sociohistorical context, according to Sieber, that engendered “the emphasis of the picaresque on poverty, delinquency, ‘upward mobility’ (self-improvement of the pícaro), travel as an escape from despair, social satire of a system unresponsive to the needs and desires of a growing active community of ‘have-nots.’”

The reasons for the popular success of the Spanish picaresque novel in other European nations may shed some light on Kaminer’s appeal to the German public. The European readers of the early modern period seemed to savor the Spanish picaresque narratives most of all as a source of entertaining “exotic” information. The foreword to the 1586 English translation of the anonymous Lazarillo de Tormes, the prototype of the Spanish picaresque novel, describes the content of the book as “strange and mery reports, very recreative & pleasant,” offering “a true description of the nature & disposition of sundrie Spaniards.” This ethnographic curiosity could be tinged with chauvinist contempt for the foreign culture. As Frank Kearful has noted: “To Englishmen of the sixteenth and

35On the history of the picaresque novel in Germany and Russia see Jürgen Jacobs, Der deutsche Schelmenroman (Munich, 1983); Jurij Striedter, Der Schelmenroman in Russland: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des russischen Romans vor Gogol’ (Berlin, 1961); and Ronald LeBlanc, The Russianization of Gil Blas: A Study in Literary Appropriation (Columbus, 1986).
36“Irgendwann verschwindest du,” NZZ am Sonntag (1 August 2004): 45.
38Ibid., 9.
39Cited in ibid., 51.
seventeenth centuries ... Lazarillo de Tormes and its national successors were proof from the Devil’s own mouth of his chosen people’s hypocrisy, idolatry, and barbarism." To German readers of the twenty-first century, Kaminer’s picaresque account of the former Soviet Union offers a similar frisson with its first-hand account of life in a “barbarian” place. This vicarious experience is enhanced by the perceived status of Militärmusik as a “true description.” In numerous interviews, Kaminer has insisted that he never invents anything and that everything reported in his stories is a true event. As far as Militärmusik is concerned, he claims that the book is “almost 95 percent true.” The assumption of truth is indeed a crucial component of the “autobiographical pact” that attracts many readers to works of this genre. However, apart from the fact that any autobiographical truth assumption is inherently problematic, Kaminer’s own self-portrait of the narrator as trickster should put the attentive reader on guard. Kaminer is a performance artist not only in his books and on stage, but also in his media interviews.

It is worth noting that Kaminer’s books, in spite of their high sales figures, have not reaped unanimous praise with the German public. While the press has given Kaminer a generally friendly reception, not all of his readers agree with this positive assessment. Many of the customer reviews of Kaminer’s books posted on amazon.de call the author “superficial” and “mediocre” and take him to task for writing pointless anecdotes that convey an impression of “so what?” A reviewer of the English edition of Russendisko concurs with this judgment, writing that “many stories border on the banal, and even interesting moments are overshadowed by a ‘who cares’ slap-dash style of writing.”

Perhaps it is beside the point to speculate about the quality or “greatness” of an oeuvre whose banality seems intentional. Kaminer is a manipulator of clichés both in his writings and in his numerous interviews with the electronic and print media. His answers to journalists frequently betray such a conspicuous banality that one wonders whether it is not part of a conscious ploy. In response to the hackneyed question, “What is the meaning of literature for you?” he offers commonplaces that sound like a caricature of what a stereotypical writer would say on such occasions, for example: “Through writing...

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40Cited in ibid, 60.
41Kaminer himself seems to have become aware of this situation and to resent its implications. Perhaps in order to prevent German right-wingers from using his Militärmusik as political propaganda, he has tried to forestall attempts to read his story as a tale of capitalist superiority. In a 2003 interview he states that “socialism, as I knew it from the 1980s, was pretty harmless and distant from the private life of the individual citizen. Not like Western capitalism, which is seemingly so free of ideology, but deeply penetrates every household and sticks its tongue out of every pant pocket” (interview with Karsten Herrmann, www.titel-magazin.de/kaminer.htm [21 July 2003]).
44For a representative review of Militärmusik see Förster, “Aliens in Moskau,” which begins with the statement: “If any more proof is needed that real life provides better entertainment than all fantasy, Wladimir Kaminer is the latest case in point.”
45Homa Rastegar, www.munichfound.de/new.cfm?News_ID=1598 (25 July 2003). Others have tried to give Kaminer’s deadpan minimalism a more positive and serious interpretation. Brian Poole puts Kaminer in the context of Stoic indifference and Cynic irony, claiming that he embodies “the benign indifference and ironic ambivalence of a modern Diogenes,” qualities that he later identifies as “inherently Russian.” According to Poole, Kaminer’s stories “share with the Cynic tradition both the (Menippean) speech genres of satirical social critique and the perspective of solidarity with the underdogs” (“Adiaphora,” 140, 147, 156).
about life, one understands it better and can open up hidden realms. Literature, for me, is a dialogue, in which both partners—the author and the reader—are interested.”46 Shallowness can be a conscious strategy. In the case of minimalism, it even provides the formula for artistic creation—in the minimalist oeuvre, there is only surface and no depth. As it so happens, this is also a characteristic element of the picaresque narrative. “Shallowness,” as Ulrich Wicks has pointed out,” is the key to the picaresque; there is incongruity between the depth of probing that the confessional narrative form implies and the actually shallow surface skimming that picaresque life portrays.”47 What makes Militärmusik perhaps Kaminer’s most significant and successful work to date is the fact that here, unlike in his other books, and despite his declared hostility toward literary form, his slap-dash minimalism has entered into a happy marriage with an established narrative genre.

In view of Kaminer’s self-fashioning of his biography as a picaresque novel, his current phenomenal success as a German writer, provides, as it were, the implied ending of the story: the picaro has finally “made it” and has become a respectable and wealthy member of society. Such an outcome is foreshadowed already in the picaresque prototype Lazarillo de Tormes, where at the end of the book the protagonist claims to have given up his roguish ways and arrived at a state of material well-being and marital bliss. To be sure, the anonymous author of the novel strongly implies that this idyllic outcome may be illusionary. By contrast, Kaminer’s fortune appears solid enough and his position as a respectable German citizen firmly assured. One wonders, however, whether behind the façade of newly found respectability Kaminer has not remained the same old picaro whose performance as “German writer” is yet another virtuoso act of role-playing.

47Wicks, Picaresque Narrative, 58.