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COLLECTIVE MEMORY
AND RECONVERSION OF ELITE:
FORMER NOBLES IN SOVIET SOCIETY
AFTER 1917

SOFIA TCHOUIKINA

The fate of Russian nobility, a group that had been suppressed and nearly liquidated after the October Revolution, began to interest Russian society in the late 1980s, which was a period of historical reexamination. This newly found interest inspired a wide scope of social action: the previously obscure memoirs of aristocrats were found and published; genealogical research became widespread among the descendants of nobles; the post-Soviet nouveau riche began to imitate the lifestyle of pre-revolutionary nobility; and some decrepit palaces and estates were reconstructed, or even in very rare cases the ancestral estates were privatized by the descendants of owners. In several Russian towns associations of descendants of nobility were formed. Provincial museums augmented their exhibits with information about the noble families who had historically resided in the area. Small towns constructed statues commemorating their old regime mayors. Émigrés of noble descent began to return to Russia and to participate in the reconstruction of the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 1997). The return of the memory of nobility to the social scene was all the more spectacular, considering that in the preceding decades it was completely absent from the public life of society. In the interwar period, from 1917 to 1941, the pre-revolutionary elites were often mentioned in newspapers as negative personages, remnants of the old order, subject to discrimination and repression. After World War II these “former people” disappeared entirely from public discourse.

Post-Soviet appeals to the memory of the Russian aristocracy rarely alluded to the experience of those descendants of nobility who actually lived their lives in the USSR. While currently the image of the Russian pre-revolutionary elite is very important as an invented tradition (Hellberg-Hirn 2003) the consequences of the social suppression of nobility within the structure of Soviet society have been largely ignored.

Historical research has focused on the adaptation strategies of the old elites and other marginalized groups of Soviet society in the 1920s–30s on the basis of archival documents (Channon 1987; Rendle 2008; Smirnova.2003). My article highlights the process of the dissolution of the former nobility in Soviet society from a sociological perspective, exploring the creative potential of collective memory and its ability to form social groups and boundaries. This study seeks to understand how the collective memory of the tsarist regime influenced the adaptation paths of the former nobles in the post-revolutionary Russia; the impact of the memory of survival in the Stalinist Russia in forming new identities and social groups in the postwar era; and finally the echoes of the pre-revolutionary elite’s transformation in contemporary Russian society.

My analysis centers on twenty-three in-depth biographical interviews, which I conducted in the mid-1990s with women and men born in the 1910s into noble families. I also exploit other autobiographical sources produced by that generation—memoirs, letters, family chronicles—contrasting them with the interviews and memoirs of representatives of other social strata who were young in the 1930s.¹ My respondents, who were interviewed in their waning years, were born on the eve of the October Revolution, witnessing the demise of the old regime in their childhood. Their youth corresponded to Stalin’s modernization of the 1930s; and their adult lives played out in postwar Soviet society. This generation of nobility willingly or unwillingly contributed to the formation of a new social structure, having become an inseparable part of it. Not only had they integrated into this society as individuals, but they also formed a particular social milieu within Soviet society.

This research is inspired by the discussion among French sociologists about the role of collective memory in the long-term reproduction and reconversion of the old elites.² This discussion makes use of Maurice Halbwachs’s concepts of “social frames of memory” and “collective memory,” (Halbwachs 1992) while the concept of “reconversion” of social position issued from the theoretical perspective of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, Boltanski, and de Saint-Martin 1973).

The concept of “reconversion” explains the mechanisms of indirect reproduction of social position of an elite threatened by a social decline. Reconversion is most often effectuated under the pressure of circumstances, following from the impossibility of reproduction of the class position by ordinary means. In this theoretical approach the class position is defined by the volume and the structure of capital (social, economic, symbolic, and cultural). Reacting to decline, individuals and social groups tend to mobilize the existing capital in order to transform their mode of existence and obtain some missing resources and gradually their social position changes. When statistically a social or professional group significantly diminishes or disappears, it means that behind these figures hides the process of reconversion by hundreds or thousands of people.³

French sociological studies of elites from the 1990s provide me with a detailed empirical account of the process of reconversion of the descendants of old elites in the twentieth century and the role of collective memory in this process (Saint-Martin 1993; Mension-Rigau 1990, 1998; Le Wita 1998; Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1989; 1995). A collective belief in the social existence of a group, despite social change and the loss of privileges, and a belief in the group’s originality and superiority form the background for the construction of group boundaries and for the persistence of a model of education. An effective intergenerational transmission helps to effectuate a long-term reconversion of symbolic, social, and cultural capital into economic capital, and thus maintain a relatively high social position and avoid decline. In this sense, collective memory can be seen by and of itself, as a form of capital.

Despite the fact that the life paths of the European nobility and upper-class bourgeoisie in the twentieth century are incomparable to their Russian counterparts

¹ For these purposes I used interviews from the archive of Renvall Institute for Area Studies (Helsinki), conducted in 1997–98 by K. Gerasimova and myself.

² I use the word *elite* in a general sense, without referring to discussions about meritocracy, democracy or power elite. The term “old elite” I use to designate the descendants of the privileged families of the *ancien régime* (nobility, gentry, catholic and protestant bourgeoisie) whose descendants belong to the upper class or to the upper strata of the middle class and for whom family memory functions as a sort of resource in their social life.

³ For example, instead of inheriting a family business, the descendants of entrepreneurs can invest in a quality education, obtain prestigious diplomas, and become top managers. Thus the number of entrepreneurs would decline, whereas a group of managers would emerge. This case is described in Bourdieu, Boltanski, De Saint-Martin, *Les stratégies de reconversion*.

(given the difference in their respective historical situations), this theoretical approach proves useful in understanding the Russian case. The autobiographic sources, especially interviews, made possible the study of functioning of the memory of stigmatized and disenfranchised elites as a collective representation and as a social practice.

I will first examine the characteristics of the noble memory under the tsarist regime and the first wave of reconversions in the 1880s, then I will pass on to the study of the coping strategies of the elder generation of nobles (parents and grandparents of my respondents). In the third section I will describe the pattern of education at home in the Soviet period based on the collective memory of the old education model, then I will examine the influence of Soviet educational institutions and the formation of a new milieu of Soviet society on the base of the old elites. Finally I compare the family memory of the Russian former nobles with their French counterparts.

Noble Memory and the First Wave of Reconversion at the End of the Nineteenth and Beginning of the Twentieth Century

There were numerous and varied aspects of noble collective memory at the end of the nineteenth century: genealogy and family history, the ancestral estate, all kinds of memorial objects, configuration of relations within the milieu (neighbor network in the provinces, network of alumni, balls, etc.). All these different forms of collective memory served as family memory, because the extended family was a nucleus in which all the activities intersected. Of course, by the end of the nineteenth century, as was observed later in the Soviet period, some nobles consciously broke relations with their milieu of origin, but the majority of individuals tended to rely on social relations and thus reproduced the collective forms of living where the instrumentalization of the past played a central role.

Transmission of family memory was an indispensable part of the process of upbringing and education, as a family's past was itself a status symbol. The stories of glorious ancestors told to children—which were often illustrated by portraits hanging on the walls of manorial estates—spoke of notable, often glorious, events in which ancestors had taken part. The moral of these stories was that a young member of the family was predestined to serve the family and the country as did his relatives. The young listener was in turn later to become an example of virtue for future generations. Knowledge of genealogy, of the family's coat of arms, and of well-known relatives all gave one the opportunity to be accepted into circles of people of same social background.

The average noble family history at the beginning of the twentieth century was not free of ambiguities. The last quarter of the nineteenth century was in many ways a critical period for the Russian nobility. With the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the series of “great reforms” of the 1860s the strong position of agrarian elite was undermined and gave way to the development of capitalism in the country. The following decades saw significant changes in the economic condition of nobility and gentry; elite social classes of a new type began to form, and the estate of the landed gentry became more and more stratified; part of it gradually transformed into capitalist landowners, the other part was ruined. The less fortunate landowners migrated to the towns and cities, reconverted themselves into the “bourgeois” professions, and dissolved into the urban educated middle classes. The fate of unprofitable noble estates was omnipresent in the imagination of the epoch, as is

reflected in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. The high aristocracy also lived through a period of crisis, as even the richest families who possessed multiple estates and could afford to live from land rent saw their fortunes decline and were forced to find new solutions to stabilize their status and income. Possible solutions included investments in natural resources, purchasing actions in or constructing factories and various companies, and last but not least being employed by the military or civil service.

The traditional family order, even if it was still decidedly patriarchal, was destabilized as well. The economic crisis of nobility affected both men and women: while men were increasingly forced to seek gainful employment dowerless noblewomen faced decreasing marriage prospects. Whereas their sisters were often left in a state of celibacy, impoverished noble men sought the daughters of rich entrepreneurs with large dowries: fusion of nobility with the new elites was becoming commonplace.

Schools for women became more numerous and diversified; in the period the first schools of higher learning ("courses") for women were formed, providing instruction in history, literature, foreign languages, and medicine. Unmarried women increasingly worked and came to be financially autonomous rather than living as dependents within the extended family. Marriages based on love became more frequent, but were often confronted by resistance within the family. World War I, which took many men's lives and stimulated women to start working outside family, struck once more at the traditional order (Meyer 1991).

On the eve of the revolution, many occupations were still prohibited for the higher classes and could be practiced only as a hobby. The custom to opt for a traditional education and occupation (in jurisprudence, the military, or agriculture) was maintained to a large extent, but a modernist search for self-realization by profession penetrated the noble milieu. The circle of acquaintances of both landed and urban nobility became more socially mixed. University students, professionals, and artists were received willingly as guests. The fusion of different milieus of the Russian educated strata was very active.

Despite the evident crisis of the noble estate, it continued to exist; and not merely de jure. Prestigious schools and various mechanisms of social protection continued to reproduce social inequality and impede the rise of educated commoners in society. A large section of the noble estate tried at all costs to maintain their habitual lifestyle. Faced with economic decline and the rise of the new elites, symbolic markers creating appearance of nobility became extremely important. The instrumentalization of the past played a crucial role in the justification of the nobility's social status. The noble families mobilized all forms of memory in order to validate their privileges. At this time a noble was increasingly defined by how much he or she was anchored in tradition—by the influence of this tradition on his childhood, education, life path, and biography.

As difficult as the economic and political crises in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, the symbolic superiority attached to the representatives of noble estate and their own sense of distinction had not been seriously challenged before 1917. The wealthy bourgeoisie and non-noble bureaucrats attempted to copy the aristocratic lifestyle; the alternative bourgeois capitalist identity had not yet formed, therefore the bourgeoisie in Russia did not yet represent a social class with political clout (Mironov 1999; Clowes, Kassow, and West 1991; Balzer 1996). The October Revolution brought about a total change in the symbolic order of Russian society. Former distinctions like a title, a famous family name, a graduation paper from a prestigious educational institution, the possession of real estate and landed

property turned into forms of “negative capital.” As a rule, the wealthier and more notable the family was under the old order, the more persecuted it was under the Soviet regime. Consequently, after 1917 gentlemen who did not emigrate and stayed willingly or unwillingly in the Soviet Union faced the problem how to survive, how to adapt to the new regime, what to be, with whom to associate, how to feel, and how to bring up their children.

Negative Symbolic Capital and Reconversion Strategies Among the Adults in the 1920s–1930s

The Legal Status of a “Former Noble” in Soviet Society

In early Soviet society, a “former noble” was not only a negative propagandistic image—it represented a lawful social status. From 1918 until 1936 the welfare state policies of the Soviet Union were characterized by legal discrimination of some groups of the population on the basis of social background. The disfranchisement of the “former exploiting classes” was inscribed in the constitutions of 1918 and of 1926.⁴ The representatives of those negatively privileged “classes” were designated as “former people.” The latter were granted full rights in Soviet society only under Stalin’s constitution of 1936, but *de facto* discrimination continued in the late thirties, and only the Great Patriotic War put an end to it. Belonging to an alien class was defined on the basis of biographical information reported by a person himself and recorded in official identifying documents. Biographical questionnaires and autobiographies, which had to be filled out at every bureaucratic installation, served as powerful tools of the Soviet regime, controlling how one was identified and could self-identify. Facing this inquiry in their daily life, every individual had to find a compromise between loyalty to family, to their own circle and narrative, and loyalty to society and the new political order. For more than twenty years family name and family history were at the center of the state’s attention and were subject to manipulations by Soviet citizens.

If the whole population of Russia was more or less concerned with accommodating their social background to ideological dogmas, it was a particularly painful problem for the former nobles. They had to navigate a path between fear, repression, and discrimination springing from their class origins and their traditional pride in the very same. The rejected past persisted in many ways; it survived in objects and in the people themselves—in speech, manner of being, and corporate habits.

The problem of a “loud name” and of everyday discrimination was not lived in the same way by all the former nobles. In the Russian language there is no particle equivalent to French *de* or German *von*, which reveals the noble origins of the family name. Therefore, only a handful of families of high aristocracy whose names were widely known faced the problem of social background systematically. They indeed faced unjustified repressions much more than the average gentry families who migrated to the big cities from the provinces. Indeed, as both historical research and memoirs show, throughout this period of discrimination titled aristocrats were arrested systematically at each wave of repressions and spent much of their lives in prisons all throughout the Stalin’s times (Ivanov 1997).

The titled aristocrats were very numerous among emigrants abroad during the civil

⁴ The early Soviet ideological notion of “class” is not to be confused with sociological notion of “class.” It rather resembled an estate, while the belonging to Soviet “classes” was ascribed on the base of biographical information in the questionnaires. This peculiarity of the Soviet system of stratification is explained in the article by American historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Ascribing class*.

war (1918–21). Speaking foreign languages fluently, having relatives in the other countries, and sometimes also possessing real estate and accounts in foreign banks, they opted for exile more often than the less-fortunate gentlemen. However those who had not emigrated before the mid-1920s could not effectuate their emigration later on. Even the old and helpless persons who were invited by their émigré relatives were refused departure and were forced to remain in the USSR.

An average noble family could to some extent assimilate themselves into the urban population. The “ordinary former people” hoped to survive and to succeed in the Soviet society, the more so as according to the official propaganda, the useful members of society (“toiling elements”) had the chance to be valorized by the state. The memoirs, interviews, and letters show that disregarding their possible disgust towards the Soviet regime the majority of adults tried to work and become full-fledged members of society.

In spite of the high unemployment of the 1920s and the ideological directives against class aliens, nobles were employed willingly. The postrevolutionary society was characterized by mass illiteracy and disorder, and every person having a certain level of education (who could write, count, effectuate administrative work) was valued in the labor market. The attempts to overcome illiteracy and to organize “cultured leisure” for the workers also presupposed the participation of educated people; thus, many nobles were employed by workers’ clubs, libraries, theatres, cinemas, schools, kindergartens, museums, universities, and other institutions. Others worked as typists, bookkeepers, or accountants. Nobles occupied different occupations, both prestigious and humble. Those who had the diplomas of elite prerevolutionary institutions had much more difficulty in professional integration than those who had more neutral university diplomas. But in general everyone could find a professional niche in this dynamic society, especially so beginning with the first five-year plan (1928–32). However, if it was relatively easy to find employment, it was also easy to be fired during a purge. Therefore a typical biography of adult men and women of noble origins is characterized by frequent change of occupations and even professional spheres.

To review, the most common way around the problem of social background was to succeed in the Soviet labor market, eventually disassociating from one’s social origins. A successful career served as a kind of expiation of ancestral sins. If the former people were needed at their workplaces, their background was forgiven or forgotten. Thus the former gentlemen and gentlewomen exploited any means available in order to find a suitable niche and to earn their living, working in those places where they were irreplaceable and where they might be surrounded by other employees of the same milieu. Those who succeeded had enough material resources to live on, their everyday life was relatively stable, and they tried to introduce some elements of their prerevolutionary lifestyle at home.

If before the revolution the noble estate was stratified economically, culturally, and politically, the life paths of the former nobles after the revolution were characterized by a far wider diversity and variety of choices, circumstances, and chances. The experience of reconversion of a social status was one of the few experiences common to all generations of former nobles living in Soviet society. It was a compulsive, painful, and inevitable effort of using their skills and knowledge acquired in their previous life to eke out a decent existence in a new context.

The elderly came to serve as the image of aristocratic decline in Soviet newspapers. Especially spectacular was the poverty of old women who lived without pensions and could rely only on relatives, old acquaintances, or on themselves to

survive by engaging in the shadow economy—giving lessons, sewing, making decorations for clothing and interior, while a few managed to find official employment by schools and libraries. These elderly women of the old regime represented the prostrate grandeur of the old regime.

The middle-aged nobles undertook multiple efforts to find a more stable professional niche, but the frequent change of occupations was typical for their professional trajectory due to persecution, migrations, and temporary work in seeking a better-paid and socially more acceptable position. As for the younger representatives of the former people, they faced discrimination in applying to educational institutions, entry often being refused to them because of their alien social background. They were forced to seek sustenance in the shadow economy or to opt for working-class jobs in order to obtain a status of a “toiler.”

While discrimination of the former nobles in the labor market and education was pervasive, it was neither systematic nor logical. It depended on local authorities, the personality of decision makers, and eventual requirement of certain professional profiles. However, the necessity to prove that you were a “toiling element,” a useful member of society, was nearly equal to physical survival. To solve the problem of housing shortage, the “nontoiling elements of alien social background” would be evicted from their housing in order to accommodate workers who came to be cadres in nearby factories. Some former nobles resided in large communal apartments, often trying to share housing with their relatives, living not much worse than other demographic groups, according to the miserly norms of the era. But these conditions were humiliating compared to their previous life situation, and the feeling of relative deprivation, of spiritual and material losses, of general decline of their milieu was very painful for them.

In the first years following the revolution and the civil war the attitude of the former nobles towards the Soviet regime was far from uniform. Some of them hated the new power, whereas others felt neutral towards it and were ready to be loyal citizens, to live and work in Soviet Russia. Whatever opinions different individuals had held previously, by the beginning of the 1930s, after the show trials against the engineers and academicians, the general attitude of disenfranchised old elites towards the Soviet regime was a mixture of fear and distrust. This distrust sprang from groundless purges at educational institutions and places of work, resettlements, exiles, and arrests. Denunciation from a hostile neighbor or colleague or even the naive utterance of a child at school could be sufficient to cause major problems for the entire family. Thus, fear and a guarded attitude towards any unknown person resided in everyone ascribed to an “alien” class.

If everyone was forced to try and find a means of existence and to assure a secure professional niche, the degree of his or her integration into Soviet society varied greatly. The subjective factors, for example, attachment to certain principles, to religious feeling and practices, to one’s own and family’s past, played a very important role in the trajectory of an individual and family. To facilitate the analysis that follows, we can classify the multiple efforts and choices in three ideal types, different in their attitude to the past and to the present.

The “Conservative,” “Progressist,” and “Passeist” Strategies

The most widespread strategy, which I have labeled the “conservative” strategy, was to integrate into Soviet society accompanied by one’s extended family—i.e., being a “Soviet specialist” in public and a “former noble” in private. It was the most

natural way of adaptation that reconciled the inertia of habits with the challenge of external circumstances.

The “progressist” strategy of integration into Soviet society was a rupture with the milieu of origin, necessarily accompanied by migration to another town, dissimulation of social background or public repentance, and the beginning of a new life; that is, persons who accepted the idea that the Soviet regime was progressive and adhered to demands of the Soviet ideological order. It was typical for those following this path to act according to the requirements of Soviet ideology. This meant no association with the milieu of nobility, backed by fear (or by the conviction) that the values of nobility and of the tsarist society did not have any chance in the future. “Progressists” were ready to effectuate a complete transformation of one’s own private life, getting rid of the elements of the old lifestyle at home and raising their children as Soviet children, rather than nobles.

On the opposite end, there was the “passeist” integration path, which consisted of ignoring whenever possible the surrounding reality in order to live in the memory of the good old days. The label “passeist” comes from the French word *passéiste*, which means a person attached to the past. This term was sometimes ironically used by the Russian nobles themselves, who tended to speak French. This path was more common among the elderly, and relatively atypical for middle-aged former nobles, especially those with small children. Passeists refused to work in Soviet institutions, earned money only in the shadow economy and only within their own milieu (giving lessons, effectuating work for church, translating, working as editors, sewing, typing, etc.). The passeists frequented churches and impressed on their descendants the necessity of doing the same. They maintained an archaic outward appearance, refused to be informed of current events and Soviet society (e.g., ignoring newspapers and radio), limited their circle to those whom they had known before, and cultivated the distinctions of the old regime (e.g., the superiority of nobility over bourgeoisie). Accepting the idea of themselves as being marginal and, as they said in the French manner, *déclassé*, they were proud of it and sought self-realization in the private sphere, reconstituting with fervor an old-fashioned world of their own.

Our research shows that both progressist and passeist strategies served to impede intergenerational transmission and caused conflicts with descendants in their adolescence and youth. The strategy of rupture with the milieu of origin was related to dissimulation of many facts of history and personal biography, and these secrets proved painful in the communication between children and parents (Rosenthal 2000; Semenova 2000; Tisseron 1996). The passeist path also did not facilitate the intergenerational dialogue, because the descendants, unable to seek advice from those adults resolutely turned to the past, often were under the influence of Soviet educational institutions and ironically became in the end fervent Komsomol members and communists. The less parents were integrated into society, the more the society could influence their offspring.

As for the conservative strategy of integration and its impact within the family as a whole, it contributed to the ability of adults to influence their own children; these adults were well integrated into society and capable of orchestrating the education of their offspring. The conservative strategy allowed for control over both private and professional choices. The effective transmission of cultural heritage, norms, and values, as will be shown in the following sections, contributed to a “natural voiding” of noble origins and the construction of a new identity among future generations. At the same time it contributed to their reproduction as a social milieu in Soviet society.

In the next sections we will investigate the mechanisms of sociostructural functioning of collective memory within conservative families.

“Happy Childhood” and “Golden Youth” Restoring the Collective Memory of a Scenario

On the surface the life of former nobles during the Soviet period did not have much in common with that of the tsarist period, but the community based on common socialization and values was gradually regrouping. The sociostructural function of collective memory and its role in the reconversion of social status is particularly apparent in the process of raising children and adolescents.

Providing an appropriate education of their children and grandchildren was a difficult task for adults. Not all parents were able to control what sort of education their children received. Employment was often irregular and daily life very difficult; as a result a certain number of former nobles were forced to sacrifice their descendants' education. To provide a noble education required relative stability in regards to employment and housing, a presence of a certain number of family members, i.e., grandparents, and at least one employed man in the family. The full and extended families that managed to maintain affluence were relatively rare, and the periods of stability were often short-lived. But those adults who were well integrated into society, finding some level of affluence and maintaining the image of loyal “Soviet specialists,” tended to reproduce the “old school” education pattern at home. They managed to transmit some of their cultural heritage, practices, views, and moral principles of their milieu of origin.

Understanding that they were to prepare their offspring for an adult life in Soviet society, they nevertheless extolled the virtues of the familiar educational model in which they themselves had been raised. The collective memory of the prerevolutionary times, in fact, found its creative realization in the attempt to give to children a “happy” childhood and a “golden” youth in spite of the times of troubles and to construct from the remnants and shadows of the past a coherent, useful, and updated present. To do so, it was necessary to reconstitute a larger circle of families with similar social background. Indeed the desire to educate their children stimulated the reconstitution of a social network that had suffered the attrition of war and emigration.

To explain sociologically the phenomenon of reconstitution of the “happy childhood,” we refer to the concept of “collective memory of a scenario” suggested by French sociologist Roger Bastide (1970). Assessing the theory of Halbwachs from the perspective of the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, he remarks that the notion of collective memory as a collective representation lacks corporal and dramaturgical aspects. Under certain circumstances the communities that habitually organize a common *mise-en-scène*, be it a ceremony or everyday life rituals, will reproduce them in a new context if a certain number of participants remembering an old scenario are present. They will perform that scenario, “repairing” it, replacing the missing elements with new ones, inventing fresh elements more adapted to current realities. After some time, they will forget the original scenario, but they will be able to reconstitute a robust spiritual community with its own mythology and rites. The reconstitution of such a community impacts the social structure of society, because instead of disappearing, a declining social group reemerges. This process allows for the survival of multiple immigrant communities throughout the world, and as my

research shows, it is the same pattern followed by “internal emigrants” who are strangers in their own country.

The prerevolutionary education model called a “happy” childhood held tremendous weight among the nobles and is described in Russian literature, for example, in Lev Tolstoy’s *Childhood*. Originally it presupposed the upbringing of a noble child in an ancestral estate, but by the end of the nineteenth century this pattern of education became typical for all strata of educated Russians, not merely the nobility and gentry, but also the urban educated middle classes. But there were still some slight differences in the education of the nobles and non-nobles. These differences were invented and cultivated by the noble families themselves. Childhood was seen as a formative period of life, which had to provide the foundation of all aspects of a personality—moral, cultural, spiritual, and communicative (Wachtel 1990). My research shows that the postrevolutionary upbringing reproduced, in fact, the two major foundations of elite education: the filtration of acquaintances and construction of a sense of social exclusiveness.

Home Education and Control over One’s Circle of Friends

I was kept in absolute isolation, in the isolation of the nineteenth century. And from this nineteenth century in 1930 I came to school, where there were red pioneer ties. I went to school at age twelve. They did not want me to go to school, because of contacts with other strata of the population

Thus Nina Platonovna Panaeva, born in 1918, described her adolescence. Her father perished at the front during the First World War; her mother, a young widow, became a teacher of foreign languages at a university in Leningrad. Nina and her mother were living with Nina’s grandparents. Her grandfather, a well-reputed doctor, had many patients “from good families.” Nina’s circle of friends was entirely orchestrated and controlled by the adults, and consisted partly of children of their acquaintances, partly of her grandfather’s patients.

Up until 1930 all parties took place in our flat, because we still owned a sixty-five-meter long hall. I remember, once there was a ball, organized for a girl for her sixteenth birthday. We not only organized parties, but also dancing lessons at home. . . . By the age of twelve I knew all the ballroom dances. And I loved them for their plasticity, melody, and dresses.⁵

Public schools were the object of all manner of communist experimentation and were incapable of delivering a systematic education. Those parents who were not satisfied with school programs tried to organize alternative teaching at home with the help of grandparents and private teachers. In such cases, as Nina’s case, children had to pass state-held exams every year. This alternative teaching was possible until the year 1930, when schooling became obligatory for everyone. Those adolescents who were taught at home and then went to school found out that they were better educated than their classmates. On the other hand they were not integrated into the social life of their peers and felt themselves strangers in public institutions. Those respondents who came up under experimental teaching in the 1920s told amusing stories about the school programs, but regretted later on in life shortcomings in their education. New methods of teaching, like the “complex teaching method” and the introduction of

⁵ Interview with Nina Platonovna Panaeva (b. 1918).

“polytechnic elements in education” (Berelowitch 1990; Geiger 1968; Figs 2008) left deep impressions on the memories of the children of the 1920s–30s.

Free time away from school was filled with different activities, educative and entertaining, sportive and intellectual. Grandmothers tried to teach foreign languages and read fairy tales from their home libraries in English, French, or German, while the reading aloud of more serious books was practiced with adolescents. All manner of knowledge and skills—poetry, music lessons, drawing, history, geography—were taught wherever possible by members of the older generations. Parents would sell all their valuable objects (furniture, jewelry) in order to pay for private lessons or courses.

Leisure practices were formative, and they were an important part of education. The grown-ups tended to entertain themselves in the old fashion. They played cards and games of high society, played the piano, staged theater pieces and charades. In the 1920s, when many families still had adequate living space, they managed even to organize relatively large receptions. Ekaterina Voschinina⁶ remembered that in the most difficult years of the Civil War (1918–21), they organized dancing evenings in order to forget their daily troubles. Her mother made cakes out of the available products, her grandmother played the piano, and the young ladies and gentlemen came to dance. They were happy even if some of them were not properly dressed for these occasions because of shortages of clothing. The imitation of the high life came closer in the 1920s to its prerevolutionary analog than in the 1930s. In the thirties the rupture with the old times became more evident.

Communication between the former nobles was complicated by the presence of hostile neighbors in communal apartments who observed their life and could denounce the “alien conduct” of the “former people” (Gerasimova 1999, 2002). That is why those families who could afford it tried to rent a country house for the summer. Several families tended to rent rooms for summer in the same village. Those who could not afford it (for example, passeists’ families) were invited to pass some time in the country by their more fortunate friends. Far away from eavesdroppers the “former people” could communicate more freely, reproducing to some extent the habits of the estate country life; benefit from a socially suitable neighborhood; and organize for their offspring suitable company. Thus, the effective parental control and the orchestrated friends’ circle prevented the descendants of nobility from exterior influences. They spent time with children and adolescents from similar families who shared with them this particular pattern of socialization.

Exclusiveness and Exclusion Constructing of a Sense of Social Difference

If socialization and education of the children of former nobles was influenced by the collective memory of the old times, it was no less influenced by the contemporary context, and especially by fear and by the stigma that this milieu bore.

Communication between immediate family members sharing the same household was subject to strict discipline and measures of safeguard in the face of the eventual presence of neighbors or other strangers.⁷ Emotions and opinions were rarely expressed directly. Most families developed a special language of parent-child communication in the postrevolutionary era. It became common to express opinions

⁶ Interview with Ekaterina Iljinichna Voschinina (b. 1909).

⁷ Orlando Figs in his book *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* shows that whispering and fear of neighbors were typical for the whole Russian population, not only for the former people.

concerning public or social events without putting them in words. To share an opinion about public and social events, family members used elaborate communicative instruments like irony, grimaces, euphemisms, sarcasm, humor, and foreign language idioms, all of which served to consolidate the family. The interviewees recalled that they did not remember discussions about political events at home, but they knew the attitude of their parents towards the Soviet reality. Similarly, they recalled that their parents did not instruct them as to how to behave at school, what to say or what to hide, but the children of former nobles revealed that they clearly understood how to behave in public. In conclusion, children and adolescents knew what their parents thought and understood why they thought so, despite the fact that they could not recall any concrete discussions. These measures of safeguard were useful, so that the adolescents could not reproduce any dangerous discourse at school or in someone's home. Nina Platonovna Panaeva⁸ recalls:

I was not brought up with hatred towards the Soviet regime; rather, I would say that by their own behavior they directed me to ignore it, ignore it whenever possible. So, I had a notion about that, but no one taught me, no one imposed it on me. . . . We had a feeling, that the walls had ears. That was why even in French we did not discuss all that much. And most important, we understood that these discussions were useless. If even we would not be exiled to Solovki after such discussions, we would not change anything anyway. And last but not least, we did not know anymore what was bad and what was good.

In this family special secret codes were used to inform family members about danger:

When my parents said in French *les trois lettres*⁹ that meant that someone was probably listening to what we were saying, and we immediately switched to French, which was not understood by this public.

Some families used the opposite strategy and stopped using foreign languages. For example, Natalia Borisovna Vetoshnikova¹⁰ remembers that her parents did not teach her French, which was spoken by all adult family members “probably because they did not want me to be *rara avis* at school.”

If ever words were used to discuss political and social events it was in the form of jokes and anecdotes. As Ekaterina Iljinichna Voshinina¹¹ recalled: “After the October revolution, the attitude to the regime was critical, with humor. Humor we had not lost. Lots of anecdotes were circulating.”

Only an initiated person could decode these anecdotes. For example, one sarcastic joke from the noble milieu dates back to 1935, a time of mass exile of people of noble origin. Sometimes nobles had to leave the city in twenty-four hours; therefore the exiled persons had the right to buy tickets without waiting in line. A dialogue in line: “Comrade, why are you buying tickets before me, you were not in the queue!” “Because I am a countess.”

Regarding family history, the most dangerous was to reveal the high social status of ancestors, which the Soviet regime measured by titles, ranks, and possessions. These formal details of the biographies of ancestors were most carefully “forgotten.”

⁸ Interview with Nina Platonovna Panaeva (b. 1918).

⁹ They referred to GPU, secret police of the early Soviet period, predecessor of the NKVD and later of the KGB.

¹⁰ Interview with Natalia Borisovna Vetoshnikova-Samarina (b. 1921).

¹¹ Interview with Ekaterina Iljinichna Voshinina (b. 1909).

The grown-ups tried to dissimulate all the dangerous information that a child or adolescent could by chance tell to a stranger.

The decision to dissimulate social background in the official documents was taken most often by individuals living separately from their relatives, but sometimes such a decision could also be taken collectively, according to mutual consent. Dissimulated information usually concerned parents' origins, their prerevolutionary profession and incomes, and relatives in emigration. One of the strategies consisted of stressing the insignificance of the rank that their grandparents held; for example, it was typical to write about one's ancestors "a poor landowner" or "a petty landowner," "a low-ranking officer," "a low-ranking official," "an impoverished noble."

Another possibility was to elaborate on a cover for one's whole life and to forget the truth. Irina Evgenievna Gedroits¹² remembered: "My parents died. My grandmother burnt my birth certificate and got a new one. There it was written father—soldier, mother—medical sister."

Irina Vladimirovna Arnold¹³ also hid her social background in the mid-1920s:

I entered the Pedagogical Institute in 1924. In my questionnaire I wrote that I came "from the lower middle classes." For some reason they did not check. And there was one more circumstance—my aunt worked in the geophysical observatory and could help me through her trade union. And my sister Tanechka tried to enter next year. She wrote in her questionnaire that she had issued "from nobility" and she was not accepted, although she passed all the exams well. . . . But she had her own difficulties. . . . The noble background she could not hide anyway, because she married a descendant of Dostoevsky, and the social background of Dostoevsky was well known. . . . At that time a questionnaire with Dostoevsky was a bad questionnaire. . . . As you know, at that time he was not taught at schools. Having such a famous family name did not help; on the contrary, it impeded. . . . A person with an obstacle in the questionnaire was in trouble. The questionnaires asked family history in great detail: "Where is your grandmother buried?" "Are your parents alive?" "What are they doing?" or "Where is their grave?" "Do you have relatives abroad?" I always kept a questionnaire in my writing desk and always copied very attentively everything, all that was there, so as not to contradict myself.

If members of the former noble families themselves were eager to forget about their social background, the state kept on reminding them about their family roots. All former nobles born before 1920 faced discrimination more than once in life—either at school, or entering institutions of higher learning and the Komsomol. As Ksenia Dmitrievna Medvedskaia¹⁴ put it:

We tried not to use the word *nobleman*, to hide. But we were forced to write it in the questionnaires. They asked about social status and social background. "Social status"—"employee," and "social background"—here you are, you had to write "noble."

Some of the bearers of such names tried to use their being descendants of well-known families or persons in critical situations. One such story was told by Ekaterina Iljinichna Voshinina. In her youth she had a friend, Tanya Perwolf, whose mother's

¹² Interview with Irina Evgenievna Gedroits (b. 1915).

¹³ Interview with Irina Vladimirovna Arnold (b. 1908).

¹⁴ Interview with Ksenia Dmitrievna Medvedskaja (b. 1910).

maiden name was Bestuzhev-Riumin, a famous name dating back to a well-known participant of the Decembrist Uprising in 1825. In the critical situation (arrest) they tried to declare themselves the descendants of “a first Russian revolutionary.” E. I. Voshinina recalled the life of this family in the 1930s:

I was impressed by their awfully neglected flat—a consequence of the helplessness of the elder generation of the family and of general poverty. Dust everywhere. And despite that, the coziness of ancient furniture and dark portraits on the walls. One portrait of a chancellor of the times of Tsarina Elizabeth—Count Aleksei Petrovich Bestuzhev-Rumin. Another one, a darkened portrait of the Decembrist himself. . . . My first thought: “Why aren’t they afraid?” In my family all portraits of ancestors were hidden or destroyed. Later on I got to know that it was the Decembrist Bestuzhev-Riumin who helped the old Perwolf out of trouble. And how!!! His immediate savior was his wife, who produced an impression of being so helpless and maladapted to life. But when her husband was taken into prison during one of the many waves of arrests, she collected all the documents of her great-grandfather Decembrist and managed to persuade the representatives of the regime of the absurdity of their attack towards the descendant of a first revolutionary. The officials stood agape, impressed by the stream of her words, and freed Perwolf.¹⁵

Another case was reported by Varvara Vasilievna Burlakova, who had been married in the 1930s to Prince Petr Andreevich Gagarin. She remembered:

The family of my husband, though they were aristocrats, could also be counted as Russian intelligentsia, because the father of my husband was a left-winger. He had founded the Polytechnic Institute in St. Petersburg. There he had defended all the revolutionary students. . . . And that was why Lenin gave him a safeguard document. The following was ordered: “Do not disturb Andrei Grigorievich Gagarin, and always give him enough kerosene for his scientific work.” This paper was taken to the Lenin Museum, and we possessed a copy of it, and once it helped us. . . . In 1935 my husband was arrested for the first time. I went to the academician M., who had known Peter’s father very well. And I said that Peter was arrested, and asked for help. He asked me if I still had this “Lenin’s kerosene paper,” as we called it. I brought it. He took it, and he helped us. In three days Peter was freed.¹⁶

These manipulations with name and origins, measures of precaution in the families, coded communication, secrets, and silence, as well as discrimination at school, contributed to a construction of a feeling of social exclusion and at the same time exclusiveness of the younger generation.

Even if the reconstitution of the “happy childhood” and “golden youth” were based on the collective memory of an old education model, many elements of it, of course, could not be reproduced in the Soviet context. Good manners, pride in one’s ancestors, multiple rites related to religion, rules of self-presentation in high society, and ethical principles of “noble conduct” were no longer valid or realizable. As a result, the reconfiguration of social practices took place. In the course of social transition the most practical elements of home education came to the forefront,

¹⁵ Ekaterina Voshinina, *Tanya or The Deserted Home of the Descendants of Bestuzhev-Riumin*. Unpublished essay manuscript from the private archive of the author.

¹⁶ Interview with Varvara Vasilievna Burlakova (b. 1913).

whereas the other ones, dangerous or useless, were gradually forgotten. Indeed, the only elements that survived the Soviet period were the cultural skills and practices that were useful and safe under the new conditions.

The noble practices were not entirely suppressed by circumstances, but they gradually adapted to these circumstances and, as will be shown in the next section, this adaptation had important sociostructural consequences. Instead of upbringing a “noble man” (which meant originally “man of honor”) this home education contributed to the upbringing of “a man of the old culture.” In that sense the home education of a former noble became identical with the home education of anyone who came from the prerevolutionary educated strata.

The Formation of a Social Milieu: The “Old Intelligentsia”

Even though parents effectively controlled the education process, the descendants were under the influence of Soviet schools and communist youth organizations. Although membership in these organizations was generally refused to them, it was often sought as a means of social acceptance and capital. In fact, the interviewees stated that their primary concern in youth was to overcome stigmatization and to assimilate into society. Their status as “descendants of nobility” was a stigma that they wanted to get rid of. If concern for elder members of the family obliged them to respect their origins, they themselves were more interested in the future than in the past, which was to them utterly useless—in fact a heavy burden. They gradually reconciled themselves to both “being noble” and “being Soviet.” In discussions and disputes with their parents they voluntarily used the clichés of Soviet propaganda. Intergenerational conflicts existed in nearly all families, despite the climate of mutual respect; young people were obliged to live and to think differently than their parents had.

Meanwhile, the home education received by the generation of the 1910s proved to be very useful for their social integration and professional life. In spite of multiple difficulties that they faced in the beginning, their solid cultural capital and social skills consistently helped them adapt to unfortunate circumstances. For example, being refused admission to a university because of “alien social background,” former nobles gave private lessons, as did their parents. The enlarged circle of acquaintances and the training in communication with peers and grown-ups formed good communicative capacities. But if this education model was useful for professional and social reconversion, it also favored a certain cultural inertia, in a sense that it impeded full assimilation. A taste for exclusive leisure; the habit of specific verbal expression, including citations and foreign words; a certain sense of humor based on common experience reduced their relations with the classmates and fellow students of the same age. But if their circle was limited to “good families,” this did not at all mean exclusively “noble families.” To feel oneself “noble” even among the descendants of nobility was the same as to “be old fashioned.” The postrevolutionary situation united the descendants of the prerevolutionary educated strata, independently of the estate status of their parents. If the fusion of educated milieus was rather active already in the 1910s, it was complete by the end of the 1930s. The old social groups and boundaries were forgotten, and the new social milieu, which had been formed by the descendants of the educated strata, was confronted by the new elites who had come up through the rapid promotions of the Stalinist era and since the beginning of the 1930s occupied administrative positions (Fitzpatrick 1979).

The formation of a new social group necessitated a new language of self-description. The descendants of the old elites faced the problem of self-identification. In fact, since the early twenties the former nobles began to use the language of Soviet newspapers in relation to themselves, inverting it and giving new positive meanings to propagandistic clichés. In the 1920s they used ironically in relation to themselves the expression “the former people.” In the 1930s they began to use for autodesignation the term “old intelligentsia” that was used by the newspapers to describe Soviet specialists of alien social background. The newspapers juxtaposed the “old intelligentsia” to the “new Soviet intelligentsia”—thus designating the newly educated people of working-class origins.

The formation of the milieu of “old” (later on, “true” or “real”) intelligentsia in the late 1930s from descendants of the prerevolutionary educated classes can be explained by the persistence of the pattern of home education and the efforts of parents to reproduce their milieu, but also by the confrontation with the newly educated proletarians at educational institutions and the workplace. This confrontation could lead to a semicomplete assimilation of a young noble, or, on the contrary, to the construction of the social boundary “we”—“they.”

Factories and institutions of higher technical education contributed greatly to both the education of workers and the reeducation of the descendants of the old elite and consequently to a rapprochement between these groups. Young people with a working-class social background constituted the majority in the engineering professions by the beginning of the 1930s (Fitzpatrick 1979; Bailes 1978). But the representatives of the other “classes” could also easily assimilate in the industrial world due to hard work. One interviewee of noble origins who went to work in an enterprise remembered getting so attached to his plant and to his colleagues that he did not regret the difficulties he had to live through to become an engineer and to earn a living. Born to a noble family in 1908, in a questionnaire he confessed his being a nobleman and as such he was admitted neither to a technical college nor to the Young Pioneer and Komsomol organizations. His main goal in life was “to make a good engineer” and “to do good work,” and finally he managed to achieve these goals. The obligation to work harder than others was taken as a challenge and as an opportunity to show his loyalty and attain exceptional professional qualities. Later on, in the 1950s, he was admitted to the Communist Party and remained a devoted Communist despite the fall of the regime.

Some descendants of noble families, following family traditions, chose military professions and joined the ranks of the Red Army. Backing their choice by the idea of “serving the Motherland in all circumstances” and by respect to authority in general, they obtained the new positive identity of a Soviet officer.

The moral and intellectual climate was very different in the humanities and natural science faculties. Students of proletarian and peasant origins felt extremely uncomfortable at such educational institutions and workplaces, and as a rule they avoided entering them. The resentment felt by the people of working-class background towards the humanities and natural sciences was justified by the rival attraction of an industrial milieu, but also by their inability to fulfill the requirements of the curriculum.

In the natural sciences and humanities faculties of the universities both able students and professors unanimously ranged against poorly educated people. As reported a student of philological faculty of the university in Leningrad, herself a daughter of university professors:

Our attitude towards the “working-class intelligentsia” was, I am afraid, rather snobbish. This working-class intelligentsia was very poorly educated. It had nothing in common with what I had seen since my childhood. They were people who wanted to get a quick higher education, an education that was not backed by any basic knowledge. After some years of rural or factory school they applied to the universities and were admitted.¹⁷

The old traditional educational institutions played an important role in cultivating an academic style of communication. But there were also other places that were the “nests” of the old intelligentsia. The enclaves of science, literature, and culture (e.g., libraries, museums, theaters, foreign language schools) also maintained the spirit of the hereditary educated class. They attracted and accumulated, as employees, many descendants of the prerevolutionary elite, and created an atmosphere that encouraged the cultivation of traditional hierarchical systems and approaches.

The social backgrounds of those people who considered themselves to be representatives of the “new Soviet intelligentsia” varied considerably. Among them there were, naturally, engineers and other professionals, but there were also qualified industrial workers and all kinds of white-collar employees without any education. Faced by this mass of newly promoted workers and peasants, the “old” intelligentsia claimed its right to be regarded as the true, genuine intelligentsia in contrast to other groups who were mistakenly identifying themselves as the intelligentsia. The representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia were described by their opponents as poorly educated and uncultured. The boundaries of this milieu were straightened by a great deal of irony, sarcasm, and joking in relation to the “new intelligentsia,” generally portrayed as philistine and narrow-minded “commoners.”

Critical in relation to the uncultured new elites, the descendants of the old elites were skeptical in relation to themselves as well. In the 1990s the representatives of the “true intelligentsia” claimed to be in many ways different from the previous generations. Repression, difficulties in earning a living, and lack of free time were, according to the respondents, the main reasons for the intergenerational changes. They described themselves as being more practical and less idealistic, less educated and too hard working compared to their parents and grandparents. As one respondent put it, the fate of the “old intelligentsia” of her generation could be summed up in just two possibilities: *razgrom* (utter defeat) and *prisposoblenie* (adjustment, accommodation).

Being deprived of a voice and power, the adjusted *real* intelligentsia claimed its right to be the *moral vanguard* of society. The interviewees attributed to their circle such qualities as unselfishness, altruism, a striving for knowledge, an interest in “spiritual savings” (as opposed to material ones), exclusive cultural consumption, patriotism combined with cultured cosmopolitanism, professional honesty, and an understanding of other people’s points of view. They also sometimes claimed their superiority over Western intellectuals. The *real* intelligentsia also cultivated a special attitude to the state, an attentive and critical concern for the state’s actions. A specific “understanding” of what the state was and of what it was not became an important criterion of belonging to this strata and the construction of a “we/they” identity. Although the origins of these views of the real intelligentsia date back to the late 1930s, they were only fully developed in the post-Stalin era.

The social background of the “real intelligentsia,” especially in the postwar period, was relatively heterogeneous. The descendants of the “former people” issued from

¹⁷ Interview with Nina Yakovlevna Dyakonova (b. 1915).

nobility and other prerevolutionary elite constituted the majority of this milieu. But there were also some educated persons of other social backgrounds who were attracted by the old intelligentsia, learned from it, accepted its code of thinking and living, and eventually themselves came to belong to this group.

Apart from all that was related to culture, the feeling of social exclusivity of the old intelligentsia was very much related to the memory of fear and the habit of keeping silent. The art of silence was very important and had many different tonalities. Silence was different with people of a similar fate than with strangers. Communication with strangers had to be reduced to purely functional exchanges, whereas with peers it represented an exchange of codes, often nonverbal or indirect. Up to the end of the Soviet regime, even with close friends, it was typical to avoid certain subjects of discussion, and this mutual silence contributed greatly to the spiritual unity of that milieu.

Social Status and Narration Life stories and Histories of Russian Descendants of Nobility

Dimensions of Social Status in Biographical Interviews

The former nobles born in the 1910s who remained in the USSR left a record of their experience in memoirs, fiction, autobiographies, and family chronicles. In-depth biographical interviews conducted in the 1990s provide a spontaneous reflection on their life experience. In the course of the search for respondents for this project, a significant number of noble descendants refused to discuss their past. This was atypical of the elderly demographic—typically the elderly agree eagerly to recount their youth. Among former nobles who lived in the USSR, many refused to be interviewed, their refusal likely motivated by unwillingness to recollect the Stalinist epoch, a period of extreme hardship for them. Therefore, one can suppose that those interviewees who agreed to reflect on their lives in an interview and managed to construct a coherent vision of their biographies had a more optimistic outlook or wanted to leave a message to future generations. In general, it is obvious that the available oral and written autobiographic sources tell us more about those nobles who managed to effectuate a reconversion strategy than of the “declassed” ones.

Biographical interviews are not only profitable for their contents, but also for the form and type of the narrative itself. The analysis of a biographical interview from this angle helps to reveal the objective characteristics of memory—its length, minuteness, and spatial coverage.

Sociological research has shown that the representatives of different social classes remember in different manners. Life stories of workers, peasants, middle-class people, old elites, religious minorities, and migrants differ in their style of narration. In regards to social groups whose status is indefinite, the practices of remembering can help to sociologically define the social position of an informant. With this aim, I will analyze in this section the manner of narration, evocation of certain episodes, and absence of some topics in autobiographical sources, interviews, and memoirs, placing these topics in a comparative perspective.

As we have shown in the previous sections, an important change brought about by the October Revolution was that the status of the past among noble families changed significantly during the postrevolutionary period. The link of the past with the future, so important in the old days, was no longer forged with the same temper. The present, full of difficulties and contradictions, came to consume the thoughts of members of

the defunct estate. The conviction that the memory of their ancestors could be useful for the future had vanished. Nevertheless the past was present in the everyday life of the former nobles. Some of the elements of the past were useful; others were embarrassing and potentially dangerous. Aspects of the past were gradually adapted to the new realities, gaining new meaning and becoming part of the new life. For example, the postwar dachas of the intelligentsia were to a great extent inspired by the spatial organization of noble estates. The trajectory of noble families was characterized by a great deal of voiding of biographical facts, while social practices survived under new names.

The biographical interviews of the noble descendants born in the 1910s display significant voids, especially concerning ancestors or indirect relatives, which contrasts sharply with their counterparts in France. Usually the family memory of the old elites is “genealogical.” The narration is very detailed and precise and includes abundant knowledge of names and dates. The narrators tend to identify themselves with ancestors, stressing near resemblance in appearance, interests, aptitudes, talents, and shortcomings. They often explain their own merits through ancestral attributes and tend to honor those from whom they received certain traits of character.¹⁸

Some of my respondents had a vague grasp of prerevolutionary history, never mentioning their ancestors, limiting their family narrative to parents and grandparents whom they had known personally. Others valorized their ancestors with legends about the origins of their family name and their relationship to famous heroes of Russian history having a place in their life stories. But often they confessed that their knowledge of family history was incomplete; for example, they may only possess information about their maternal (paternal) line. Legends of a far away past were not related to the narrator’s own life; they were used as illustrations of everyday life, morality, and culture that no longer existed, not as something really connected to the narrator. Self-identification with ancestors was all but nil.

My informants reflected on the remoteness of their ancestors. As Irina Evgenievna Gedroits, whose father had been a prince, put it:

My grandmother told me that it is not important who you parents were; the most important is what you are yourself. I was very glad to learn, quite recently, that I had had famous ancestors. It is interesting, but it is a far away history.

To structure their story they often make allusions to the particularities of the historical context of the 1920s–1950s, to political and social events contemporary to their youth, but not to family history. In fact, the void between Soviet and tsarist realities was one of the leitmotifs of the interviews.

At the forefront of former noble narratives were unjust discrimination and repression. These subjects are broached in every interview. One can say that the reminiscences of discrimination form the collective memory of the former nobles. In this sense this social group is not at all unique, being just one of the many groups of the Soviet population for whom unjust repressions would be at the forefront of memories. Unlike their parents, people of noble origin born in the 1910s practically did not have a common foundation for collective memory, which would make their experience unique.

Some of the stories about discrimination were narrated in a tragic tonality, stressing the diabolic nature of the Soviet regime. Others were told in a pedagogical

¹⁸ The notion of “genealogical memory” was introduced by French anthropologist Beatrice Le Wita in her study of Parisian bourgeoisie, *Ni vue ni connue*.

way, stressing that by being assertive a human being can overcome difficulties. Often the interviewees were grateful to their parents for their readiness to make sacrifices in order to give an education to their descendants. However, interviewees gave the most significance to their own efforts and the necessity to overcome a multitude of difficulties. In that sense, their memory can be qualified as “memory of personal experience,” which is opposite to “genealogical memory,” when an individual talks about himself primarily as part of kin. Sociologically speaking, the memory of the former Russian nobles corresponds to that of the urban middle class and migrants, representatives of social groups that can count only on themselves and not on protection or symbolic capital (Le Wita 1984, 1998).

The interviews, as well as memoirs, also witness that the pattern of the private life of the former nobles underwent major changes in the twenty years following the revolution. In the tsarist period the life of hereditary nobility, more so in the provinces, but also in the towns and cities, was not reduced to the bourgeois model of “family life.” Most often the notion of “home” (“*dom*”) signified a pole of attraction for the extended family including multiple cousins, relatives, friends, hangers-on, dependents, and servants. They valued all types of kindred folk. This pattern of life in its reduced form continued to exist in postrevolutionary Russia. The gentry families came from the provinces with their servants and dependents and lived with them their whole lives in communal apartments. The old servants continued to fulfill their functions. Sharing a household with cousins, grandparents, and great-grandparents was also quite typical. But the spirit of home as a place of convocation for multiple relations had vanished, because of fear and precaution. It was considered useful or even necessary to be suspicious towards anyone. A multitude of subjects of discussion could not be raised with friends and far away relatives. The codes of silence had to be respected in order to preserve both family and milieu. This produced a durable effect—the closed nature of a family household in relation to an external world and the disappearance of typically noble sociability. During the Soviet period the former nobles lost (in many senses of the word) their relatives. The revolution and civil war, the repressions of the 1930s and then World War II caused a dispersal of kin because of emigration, migrations, deaths, arrests, exiles, and more overarching decline and depression. If the descendants of French nobility and high bourgeoisie count among their relatives around two to three hundred people, it is typical to find descendants of noble families in the USSR whose number of relatives is limited to dozens.

Family Chronicles

The memoirs of nobility of that generation can be divided into two groups that correspond to two earlier mentioned extremes of experience: “utter defeat” and “accommodation.” The memoirs describing defeat are resolutely pessimistic and have corresponding titles. The ones describing accommodation are relatively optimistic and have a pedagogical function. In this section I will analyze the specificity of family chronicles created in the late Soviet period that were intended to fill the gaps in family history produced by the October Revolution and the Stalinist era as well as to reconstruct an intergenerational continuity.

As was mentioned in the second section, in Russian noble families of the tsarist times as well as in the families of the European aristocrats the structures supporting family memory were numerous. During the Stalinist period ancient noble registers, photos, letters, and portraits were destroyed or hidden. Beginning with the thaw of the late 1950s, and more actively from the late 1970s, some former nobles began in their

old age to undertake modest attempts to re-create homemade family registers for internal use, describing the biographies, fate, and conduct of those members of their kin whose traces they could find. These records are intended to unite the kindred dispersed in Russia and abroad. It is necessary to mention that by the 1970s the notion of “former noble family” did not exist linguistically speaking, the social backgrounds of the younger descendants being very mixed. Often the fact that these ancestors were noble was mentioned, but not specially stressed, in these chronicles.

The authors of family chronicles were those who adjusted to life in society, who considered themselves to be a sort of moral authority and to be able to summarize the experience of the whole family. The social status of some authors was quite high. For example, the author of a family chronicle of the notable aristocratic family Vorontsov-Veliaminov, Boris, born in 1904, was the most well-known representative of that family in the 1950s—a distinguished astrophysicist.¹⁹ The title of this family chronicle written in 1955 is very telling: “From Varangians to the Constructors of Communism.” In this title he ranks notable princes of ancient Russia with the accommodated nobles of the Soviet period and constructs a continuity of family history throughout the history of Russia.

The authors of family chronicles often reflected on their enterprise. In creating these texts they were not at all certain that the society and the state approved of their efforts, or to put it another way, that this enterprise was safe. These reflections show that the authors support some postulates of Soviet ideology and that they are not seeking confrontation with the regime.

For example, the author of *The History of Streletsky Family*, completed before 1985, writes the following:²⁰

For a long time it was shameful to be interested in one’s pedigree. This interest was considered as arrogance and the morbid desire to prove a noble birth. Starting to write, I was embarrassed, as if I was doing something unfair.

Later on she finds a way to justify her demarche, finding a compromise between her will to retrace the history of her family and the would-be attitude of society:

Nowadays the pretensions of our ancestors who claimed the noblesse of their origins seem to us ridiculous. Today we valorize not the antiquity and the grandeur of our kin, but the moral qualities that we inherited from our ancestors, namely decency, responsibility for the lives of people whom we love, family in the whole and the Motherland. For us today it is not important, what [title] this person held, but what he could do in the service of others. Our epoch brings other criteria for the measurement of a human being.

Family chronicles are in general rather critical towards the Soviet regime, but they claim repeatedly their patriotism towards the country and the land. They contain episodes condemning members of the family who sympathized with Nazis because of hatred against communism or who deserted, or even sometimes criticizing émigré family members.

The authors do not strive to understand the action of the state, but they tend to discuss the experience of their ancestors, parents, and cousins from the point of view of morality and to evaluate their life choices, both in private and in public spheres. The authors show that the moral norms are stronger than the circumstances. The

¹⁹ Saharov, I.V. *Vorontsov-Veliaminovs* (47–56).

²⁰ Natalia Levitskaia, *Istoriia sem’i Streletskih*, an unpublished manuscript.

transmission of these norms by the evaluation of life experiences is actually the goal of such text. That is why family chronicles contain a lot of moral judgments. They divide their family members into positive and negative heroes, and describe in detail the situations of compromise. With the help of irony and lofty tone they show their attitude regarding one or another episode. This morality is the kind of foundation that unites the life histories of family members of different epochs.

These family chronicles as well as a large portion of interviews describe great difficulties, but nevertheless remain life asserting. Those who managed to realize a reconversion strategy wanted to transmit the knowledge of adaptation to the next generation. This optimistic tone of narration is also one of the traits of old elites in other countries. Sociological research has shown that the narratives of old people from underclasses are nostalgic and often sad. The higher one's social status, the more the stories tend to be neutral and objective, and the less they tend to explain the life events by fortuities. Their message is that it is necessary to be resistant in every epoch, and that the inherited traits of character and education have to be stronger than circumstances. So, we can conclude that the accommodated representatives of the Russian noble families possessed a point of view typical for reconverted old elites in other countries—attachment to the family, patriotism, morality, and responsibility. Those former nobles who considered themselves or their whole family as *déclassé* tended to leave bitter memoirs or refuse to remember their past at all.

The Postwar Generations

For the descendants of nobility born in the 1930s or 1940s adult life began during or after the war. They did not face any discrimination because of their social background and grew up in the period when neither the state nor the family problematized their origins.

During and after the war, the Soviet state began campaigns against certain national minorities, and consequently being Russian became a privileged status as compared to being of non-Slavic ethnic origin, and the prerevolutionary distinctions fell into oblivion. But fear and a guarded attitude towards everyone continued to influence communication, children's upbringing, and attitude towards the past.

Elena Vladimirovna Shuvalova²¹ was born in 1930, while her parents were in exile. She remembered that she was told about ancestors only “if the stories were, so to say, not very interesting for society.” Of her communication about the past with her elder relatives she remembers the following:

We were not interested in our ancestors. In general, it was prescribed not to be interested. I remember from my childhood—once I asked something, they answered that the less I will know the better for me. I was quite astonished by such an answer. At that moment I was a schoolgirl, was quite little; it was at the end of the 1930s. And it was our style—to tell nothing.

According to Elena Vladimirovna's interview, in the postwar years not much has changed in her family. She remembers the absence of discussions about politics and the use of euphemisms and sarcasm by her elder family members. For example, instead of “Stalin” they said “our dear father,” and the October Revolution was called “this sad event.” When she grew up, all her friends came from similar families as her own. They never talked openly about current political events and about family

²¹ Interview with Elena Vladimirovna Shuvalova conducted in 2001.

histories and family members. In her opinion, she and her peers began to discuss these things in the mid-1970s, influenced by younger acquaintances, those born after the war, who discussed everything more openly.

The descendants of the “former people” born in the beginning of the century, those who attempted to forget their origins and were reminded about them by the state authorities, preferred to tell as little as possible to their children about prerevolutionary family history. They also tended to avoid talking about their own painful experiences in the 1920s and 1930s. But at the same time, along with their own parents, they tried to transmit to their offspring as much as they could—everything concerning the private side of life, tastes, knowledge, and culture.

Those born in the 1930s and later were not so particularly interested in their family history either, since knowing their roots in their youth served no pragmatic function. The family’s past was problematized neither by family, nor by the society, and this knowledge or the absence of knowledge had nothing to offer. In this sense, the conclusion of Russian sociologist Jurij Levada²² that those born in the 1930s represent the only truly Soviet generation in Russian history can be applied to the descendants of nobility. And it was this generation that felt acutely the crisis of social identity during perestroika. In the noble societies created in the 1990s people of this generation compose the majority. They are now very interested in their roots, and some of them frequent archives to get more information.

The comparison of life paths of people of noble origin born in the 1910s with those born in the 1930s shows the significance of the state and of social context in influencing the attitude to the family memory and the process of its transmission. In the prerevolutionary period family past was remembered by the nobles, because this memory was tightly connected with their lifestyle and the transmission of social status. In the 1920s–1930s, when social background served as a basis for discrimination, aristocratic origins were forgotten due to repressions. In the postwar period prerevolutionary family background was forgotten by the state as well as by the descendants of nobility. In the 1990s society began to look back to the past in the quest for new post-Soviet identities, and this influenced once again the communication between family members about their past.

Conclusion

The life paths of disenfranchised and stigmatized Russian nobility in Soviet society were governed partly by rational choice, but to a great extent by the immaterial heritage imported from tsarist society. Memory of their previous life shaped the possibilities, both in the private and professional spheres. Collective representations, moral and religious norms, corporate habits, attachment to certain daily routines, skills, hobbies, a specific education model—all that existed in spite of a dramatic change in life conditions and was transforming rather slowly. The noble memory contributed to a reconversion of social status of former nobility, in other words, their disappearance as “nobles” and reincarnation as well-to-do Soviet people. But it also favored cultural inertia and impeded total assimilation of former elite in Soviet society. The point of departure of this research was my surprise concerning the sudden appearance of the noble associations in the 1990s comparing to the total absence and void of nobility in the preceding period. My research shows that behind the disappearance as well as reincarnation of Russian nobility hid complicated sociostructural processes.

²² Quoted in Semenova, 2000.

The disappearance of former Russian nobility from the social scene took just twenty years, a rate unprecedented in other countries. If representatives of elder generations socialized under the tsarist regime by the end of the 1930s resolutely considered themselves as *déclassés*, even if they led well-integrated lives, the generation born in the 1910s managed to realize a complete reconversion of their social status. Having overcome discrimination in their youth, they later became full-fledged members of society. Important cultural and social skills acquired during their home education greatly aided them in adulthood. In the course of their social integration, they voluntarily lost the discreditable noble identity. A portion of the descendants of nobility lived a total assimilation, becoming true communists and eager supporters of the regime, others belonged to a critical but fearful milieu—that of the “real intelligentsia.”

Unlike their western counterparts who relied greatly on symbolic capital and material possessions for their reconversion strategies, Russian nobles relied mainly on cultural and social capital, the forms most useful in the Soviet context. As well as their parents, and to a great extent their own children and grandchildren, they found their place in the professional spheres related to the transmission of cultural tradition (in education, science, art, journalism, and publishing activities), but some of them opted for traditional military occupations or for engineering. The more diversified a family’s social network was, the bigger the chance to find a professional niche, to effectuate a migration in a critical situation, and to find aid in the case of arrest or exile.

The examination of life stories of descendants of nobility shows the ambivalent nature of their social status. Their family memory is not equivalent with that of the European old elites. More fragmented and less precise, it corresponds rather to a memory of representatives of deracinated urban middle classes. However, they managed to reproduce the major foundations of home education typical of old elite in other countries. The discrimination of former nobles contributed greatly to a formation of feeling of social difference and exclusiveness. Fear mixed with pride, typical for that stigmatized ex-elite, both stimulated and impeded their social integration and had long-term consequences for intergenerational transmission.

The creation of new cultural and social boundaries and new solidarities led to a disappearance of prerevolutionary identities for several decades or, more exactly, forever. Even if today interest in family history is growing, prerevolutionary history takes the form of invented history, rather than naturally transmitted family memory. The experience of adaptation of the nobility into Soviet society is not always perceived as a valuable one. It is more or less rejected by the former nobles themselves as something painful or even shameful, and they would not like to reflect on it in an interview or to discuss it with a stranger. Their descendants were brought up in the spirit of respect towards their origins, but nowadays they are generally more interested in the prerevolutionary history of their kin than in their course during the Soviet period. As Russian society at large, they try to reconstruct a historical and memorial continuity after the fall of the Soviet regime, and they tend to look for a faraway past in search for answers for today’s questions.

Those descendants of the noble families who felt the identity crisis in the 1990s and tried to reconstruct their new identity on the base of noble origins often had to opt for archival work in search for their genealogy, as in their family archives they could find only fragmented information, if any. While in France the historians turn to private archives of the proprietors of the old castles to learn more about the history of the region, in contemporary Russia the descendants of nobility turn to historians,

books, and museums in order to find new information about their families.

The history of ex-aristocrats' survival in the Soviet Union can now be written. This history, having its beginning and end, would not influence the present-day social structure. On the contrary, the body of memories of the group of "real" intelligentsia, the group which formed in the 1930s and consisted mostly but not entirely of descendants of old elites, currently plays an important role in Russian social life and is tightly connected with significant social identities, with politics, and with the formation of social groups.

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