[FEM]power
in Finance - skills to thrive

Dignity grows with understanding

Natalia*

Country

Germany – immigrated from Russia

Introductions

Natalia is 67 and came to Germany in the late 1990s with a degree in biology and a folder of references that did not translate into recognition. Her husband, a musician, found irregular work; she moved between cleaning jobs, kitchen shifts, and brief contracts that began and ended without building a pension record. The couple now lives on social welfare in retirement, careful with every euro, grateful for a roof, and still carrying the quiet grief of a life that never matched their skills. What stands out in Natalia's story is not failure but adaptation. She learned to navigate an unfamiliar system with limited German, seeking help where trust existed: neighbours, church groups, other immigrant women who had walked similar paths.

* Name changed for anonymity

Your Story

From the beginning, Natalia kept a notebook. Every incoming amount and every outgoing cost had a line. She preferred cash for controllability: when the envelope was empty, the month was finished. Bank letters felt intimidating; technical language masked simple facts and small mistakes spawned fees. Rather than risk the unknown, she narrowed her circle to what she could master—rent, food, utilities—and minimised exposure to anything that could spiral, especially credit.

The years passed in careful increments. Children's shoes, winter coats, a dental bill—all absorbed through micro-planning. There were no city breaks, no investment experiments, no purchases beyond reach. Yet there was pride: despite everything, there was no debt, no eviction, and no broken promises to landlords or friends. When her children advanced through school, she counted that as wealth that no statement could show.

Describe the main financial challenges you have faced in life

Natalia's qualifications were not recognised, her earnings were intermittent, and language barriers made formal guidance hard to access. Missing years of contributions led to minimal pension entitlements, and fear of misunderstanding official rules kept her away from products that might have helped, such as simple savings plans or subsidised schemes. In fact, the social security system actually prevented her from saving for the future. Larger savings would have resulted in lower social security benefits.

What Tools help you managing Personal Finance?

A handwritten budget, a basic current account, and community knowledge remain her anchors. She sets dates to review bills, keeps envelopes for predictable costs, and asks a trusted acquaintance to glance over official letters when wording seems unclear. These habits reduce surprises and replace anxiety with a manageable routine.

What helped you overcome those challenges?

Mutual support within migrant networks filled the gaps left by formal institutions. Practical wisdom—when to call, how to contest a charge, which documents to bring—saved both money and confidence. Over time, Natalia learned enough German financial vocabulary to stand in an office and ask the right question. Each successful interaction made the next one easier.

What interventions or support would have been useful?

Natalia wishes there had been early, translated orientation sessions covering banking basics, pension rules, and tenants' rights, delivered in familiar community spaces. Clear pathways for recognising foreign degrees, or structured re-entry routes into related fields, would have preserved skills and earnings. She believes women-only workshops, led by peers with lived experience, could have transformed survival strategies into a stable financial foundation.

Top Tip

Learn the new system early and ask for help—dignity grows with understanding.

Co-funded by the European Union