

## Some Observations on Resettling Soviet Jews\*

RICHARD A. DUBLIN

District Administrator, Jewish Family and Community Service, Chicago, Illinois

*The fact that the Soviet Jews are immigrants and not refugees makes a profound difference in their level of expectations. They are not basically struggling for survival but people hoping for a better future.*

In a recent issue of *The Evening Moscow* there is chronicled the story of a Soviet Jew who returned to Russia from the United States. In his despairing tale he makes the following point: "I have read about how many unsuccessful heart transplants there have been in the world. A heart is not able to live in a foreign organism. And man? Is he different than a heart? Can he, after one lives here, live in America? He who says yes, lies."<sup>1</sup> We, the staff of the Jewish Family & Community Service of Chicago, must be liars then because we say yes. We say yes, that the Russian heart can live in America and that we can and must help in this transplant. It is our historical and moral obligation to help the Jewish immigrants that come to our city.

As many communal workers have undoubtedly experienced, the process of helping the Soviet Jewish immigrants resettle has been exciting, frustrating, depressing, exhilarating; it has been stimulating to say the least. I'd like to trace fairly briefly some of our experiences in this process: focusing upon how we started, some of the difficulties we encountered, and finally to develop some of the theoretical and practical rationales behind a joint project with the Rogers Park Jewish Community Center. How this collaborative project developed out of our increased understanding of the Soviet Jewish immigrants will be outlined.

When we first learned of the expected arrival of Soviet Jewish immigrants, we faced the prospect with some excitement as well as a

degree of confidence. We had a developed philosophy of immigrant resettlement; we had practices and procedures to deal with new arrivals; and we had trained staff with many years of experience in working with immigrants who, fortunately, spoke Russian.

Our philosophy is based on two fundamental social work values of self-determination and the promotion of independent functioning. Our goal is to integrate the new arrivals into the Jewish community as quickly as possible. To quote Burton S. Rubin, "The basic life-supportive services in our resettlement process—the provision of housing and furniture, maintenance, clothing, medical needs—are all geared to the concept that these tangible forms of assistance are time-limited emergency services moving toward casework goals and objectives of independence and self-support. We see the accomplishment of these goals as a sign of health and growth of individual adjustment."<sup>2</sup>

Along with these basic life-support services, we see as essential the connection of the immigrant with the Jewish community plus the provision of a whole range of information both practical and philosophical about the process of living in the United States. The caseworker's role then in the resettlement process includes a large educational component. I must stress again that our philosophy and our policies and procedures have developed over many years of successful work with many immigrants from many different countries.

<sup>2</sup> Burton S. Rubin, "The Soviet Refugee: Challenge to the American Jewish Community Resettlement System," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LII, No. 2 (1975), p. 198.

As many others now know from experience, things did not go as easily as we had anticipated. With what seemed like overwhelming suddenness, we faced an avalanche of angry, frustrated, dissatisfied clients. Shouting matches were interrupting the tranquility of our offices daily and sometimes, it seemed, hourly. It quickly reached the point where it appeared as though everyone was feeling frustrated and dissatisfied; the Soviet immigrants, the staff, both professional and non-professional, and the community. What became obvious as well as crucial was that we needed to re-examine closely the immigrant resettlement process to discover what was causing this serious obstacle in providing service.

We began an examination of our methods as well as our staff. We reviewed our philosophical ideas about the resettlement process, and these continued to seem valid. The staff appeared competent and well aware of the methodology for resettling immigrants. They recognized the need for firm, caring support as well as structure and direction. It seemed, then, that we needed to look beyond our role and take a closer look at the clients with whom we were working.

What became clear was that we simply did not understand the Russian immigrants, their motivations, their expectations, and their relationship to the Soviet culture. With time and with considerable effort, we have arrived at a better understanding of the Russian immigrants and some of the difficulties that we were experiencing during the initial resettlement period. It seems worthwhile at this point to look in some greater detail at our newfound understanding of the Russian immigrants as this understanding provides a major part of the theoretical rationale for our joint programming with the Jewish Community Center.

A significant realization was that the Russian Jewish immigrants were truly immigrants and not refugees. No one questions the existence of repression and injustices in the Soviet system, but "the typical immigrant is

not so much a political refugee as a migrant of choice. Despite the real problems of being Jewish in the Soviet Union, most of the new arrivals were not targets of persecution prior to their application for exit visas. In this respect there is a contrast with the influx after the holocaust and with the great emigration from the Russian pale....they were not driven from their homes; they chose to leave what they describe as good jobs, good homes, good economic conditions."<sup>3</sup> The fact that the Soviet Jews are immigrants and not refugees makes a profound difference in their level of expectations. They are not basically struggling for survival but people hoping for a better future. As we grew to understand the implications of this difference, we were able to initiate efforts very early in the resettlement process to clarify expectations. We worked to clarify what our agency could and could not do, to anticipate potential distortions with which the immigrants might arrive, and to begin the process of bringing together the Russian Jews' expectations of us and ours of them. Previously, an unspoken part of the resettlement process was that we had expectations of the new arrivals. It was only when we recognized this and eliminated our unrealistic expectations of gratitude and compliance were we more effectively able to help. It is only when we can make our expectations clear to the immigrants and they can make their expectations clear to us that, together, we can sort out what is real and what is fantasy.

A second issue which became clear was that we were having major communication problems with the Soviet immigrants. These were not primarily because of the differences in language, but more because of our lack of understanding of the values of the Soviet system and their lack of understanding of ours.

Few of us realized the ramifications of dealing with people who had developed and lived in an "administered society". This is a

<sup>3</sup> George E. Johnson, "Which Promised Land? The Realities of American Absorption of Soviet Jews," *Analysis*, Vol. 47, p. 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Borisovich Melamed, "There Under a Foreign Sky," *The Evening Moscow*, 3-28-75, p. 3.

society "in which an entrenched and extraordinarily powerful ruling group lays claim to ultimate and exclusive scientific knowledge of social and historical laws and is impelled by a belief not only in the practical desirability, but the moral necessity, of planning, direction, and coordination from above in the name of human welfare and progress."<sup>4</sup>

Let us consider, for a moment, some of the implications of living in an administered society. Nikita Khrushchev described it as "an organized socialist society where the interests of the individual conform to the interests of society and are not at variance with them."<sup>5</sup> Another author described how "extraordinary was the near completeness, if not actual totality, of the invasion of society by the Party and State. The efforts to regulate in minute detail cultural activity, patterns of material consumption and taste, attitudes toward love and friendship, professional routine and aspiration, scholarly research, moral virtue, recreation and leisure, informal social relationships, sex and child-bearing and child-rearing—these efforts, though far from always successful, had the most profound effects in creating a condition of unfreedom."<sup>6</sup>

And finally, from another source, "Since the Soviet society's focus is on people in or as groups, there is hardly any official recognition of individual differences."<sup>7</sup>

So, we may conclude that the Soviet immigrants come to us from a society of unfreedom. There individual differences are not acknowledged or are seen as being at variance with the society. All aspects of life—material, spiritual, and intellectual—are administered and regulated. How foreign and confusing is our emphasis on self-determina-

<sup>4</sup> Allen Kassoff, "The Administered Society: Totalitarianism Without Terror" in Joseph L. Nogee, ed., *Man, State, and Society in the Soviet Union*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 559.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 561.

<sup>7</sup> Jerome M. Goldsmith, Ed.D., "In Praise of Teenage Turmoil," *The JBG Bulletin* (Summer, 1974), p. 4.

tion and independent functioning! In recognizing this we became aware of the very different premises upon which we and they operate and which hinder effective communication and problem-solving.

Even after gaining an understanding of this aspect of the communication difficulties, we were confronted with more practical aspects of the cultural differences. The most basic problem is the tendency of the Soviet immigrants to view the family agency as simply an extension of the State. The immigrants have no frame of reference with which to understand the voluntary sector of our economy. Adding to this confusion is the fact that the family agency, by necessity, had to deal with many of the same aspects of their lives with which the State deals in the Soviet Union: housing, medical care, education, and so forth. Viewing us as an extension of the State, the immigrants tend not to trust us and to disbelieve a great deal of what we say. As others have noted, Russian Jews seem to take official pronouncements as either being untrue or diametrically opposed to the truth. They simply cannot believe that we tailor a resettlement plan specifically for each individual family.

Finally, it needs to be noted that the Russian immigrants are used to debating or arguing with bureaucrats. "In the Soviet Union they live under a negotiating system which causes many people to challenge or resist Government authorities in order to gain the slightest advantage."<sup>8</sup> It took time, but we learned that these Soviet immigrants are not simply angry and hostile in their dealings with us but rather they are operating with learned patterns which had served them in good stead for many years. As we became aware of this, the staff began to feel less personally attacked, less depreciated, and as a result (feeling less angry in response), they became better able to deal with the immigrants and their need to negotiate.

To summarize our observations about the Soviet Jews: We see a people transplanted to a

<sup>8</sup> David Zeff, "Soviet Jewish Immigrant: An Expert's Viewpoint," *The Jewish News*, December 12, 1975, p. 20.

new culture with differing values and expectations, leaving behind a society controlled by a powerful authority to which they resentfully complied but frequently challenged. This transplantation to a new society can be compared to the identity crisis experienced by the adolescent whose identity is fluid, changing and not yet crystallized. It is a potential growth experience to be mastered by the immigrant as well as the adolescent through utilizing relationship with peers, rebelling against the domination of the authority, and consolidating a sense of new identity and self-worth in the new culture. To these ends, just as with adolescents, we must use our relationship with our immigrant clients to foster this growth process through the use of a structured and benign use of accepting authority.

Another factor entered into our consideration at this point—the wish on the part of many members of the Jewish community to volunteer and to be helpful to the new arrivals. We struggled with the issue of what was the best way to utilize this impressive resource in the interest of the Soviet immigrants in their new identity crisis. It became clear that because of the immigrants' view of the family agency as being the official bureaucracy and authority, it seemed wise not to contaminate

the volunteers by association with us. Some other vehicle needed to be found to direct this potent force in the resettlement process, something which would also tap their dependence on peer relations and need for group support.

Because of the cultural and dynamic factors mentioned previously, we found ourselves particularly concerned about providing the Russians with the enormous amount of factual information necessary for survival in this society. Because of their suspicion and need to rebel against us, they experienced difficulty in accepting information from us. We were not being very effective in our task of educating and socializing new arrivals.

It is with this task of education that our previous understanding of the Soviets fell into place. We decided to pool our efforts with those of the Rogers Park Jewish Community Center to develop a joint program. This program provided a vehicle to mobilize and utilize volunteers, to provide a forum for the provision of vital information to the Russians, to avoid the contamination with the "bureaucracy," and finally, to use for its positive values the group orientation which exists in Soviet immigrants.