

Initial Experiences in the Resettlement of Soviet Jews in the United States*

LEON D. FISHER

Executive Director, Jewish Family and Children's Service, Miami, Florida

THE American Jewish community should be given recognition for responding to the task of resettlement of Soviet Jews. There has been a national acceptance of responsibility, a commitment to provide whatever funds and services are needed to assure an effective and speedy process of arrival and resettlement in the United States. Our communities have provided the necessary financial assurances and have mobilized their human and organizational resources in coordinated programs geared to meet the needs of these Russian refugees. These programs have included such basic services as financial assistance for maintenance, housing and special needs, vocational counseling, job training and job placement, intensive English language instruction, medical and casework services.

It was at the end of 1969 that we began to relate to the arrival of Russian immigrants into the United States. But only recently, since August 21, 1973, when revised governmental procedures facilitated the admission of Jewish migrants from Russia, has the American Jewish community experienced the impact of a significant increase in Soviet arrivals. The nature of this experience is deserving of some comments.

Most important is the fact that the Soviet Jews are quite different from earlier Jewish migrant groups. Consequently, our understanding and approach to them have to be different.

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They are much more self-reliant, resourceful and determined than earlier refugees of the post World War II era — qualities that undoubtedly contributed to their success in finally leaving Russia. They are energetic and highly motivated to achieve. Many are professionals. The job has profound meaning as it represents status and personal identity. Learning the English language is key to their independence and self-functioning. Because of these characteristics, and in spite of political, social and cultural differences, they achieve, as a group, a high degree of adjustment and self-support in a relatively short period of time.

Yet the local communities report that their accomplishments in this resettlement program, productive as they are, have not been without considerable problems. There is first and obviously the language problem — which is more difficult than with some earlier immigrants. There is the entirely different outlook regarding employment. There are issues around the nature and extent of financial aid, housing, medical care and special needs.

The case situations reported by our local communities reflect the scope of these problems. The refugees frequently insist that they need to attend school full-time to learn English before accepting employment. During this period they expect full, ongoing financial support. The concept that they should study English while working is resisted by many. Partly this is because they do not understand the American pattern of job mobility — the opportunities for self-

advancement and promotion as one develops increased skills and competence. To the Soviet Jew, job placement is something one is "locked into," permanently assigned to. Therefore one should learn English first in order to get the best possible job. Incidentally, this is defined as a job having at least the same status as the position held in Russia, except at a higher salary or income.

The refugees are often critical of the level of the maintenance grants, the nature of the housing provided on arrival, and the agency budgets for special needs. The refugees engage in considerable "comparison shopping" with refugees in other communities. They cite the dollars and assistance others reportedly receive as leverage to secure higher and broader allowances. While the data is usually incorrect, this is a source of pressure, and pressure has been an effective tool in their achieving emigration from Russia.

The refugees also have high expectations as to their acceptance by the communities after arrival. They are disappointed and often outspoken when there is a lag in the immediacy of their reception. They eagerly wish to make use of the community's social, cultural and religious resources and institutions. They seek personal contacts and offerings of friendship. However, communities vary in the degree and spontaneity of their responsiveness to these basic human needs.

The executives of the family agencies, who have primary responsibility for the administration of the refugee resettlement program, convey additional concerns. The executives react to the refugees seeming manipulation and exploitation of the community lay leadership to achieve their demands. Especially so when the family agency sets limits and expectations based on valid professional casework practices. Again, we are experiencing the Soviet Jew's use of pres-

sure and his appeal to a higher level of authority presumably with the power to order change.

The involvement of the lay leadership is equally understandable if not always disciplined. For it is the lay leadership that has provided, as a community, the opportunity for these refugees to come to the United States through the legal guarantees of community support. It is they who make possible the facilities and services that are necessary in an effective resettlement program. And it is they, the lay leadership, who are reaching out to help their fellow Jews in distress.

In the course of doing so, there is for them great joy and happiness, a deep sense of worth and accomplishment, a responsiveness to a noble cause. This is the personal meaning of this experience for many of our American Jews, and in the course of it all there is also at times publicity and display which enhance the community image and further its campaign goals. The refugees are often apprehensive and suspicious about such coverage in the media and the sponsored affairs in their honor. They feel that personal anonymity is necessary to protect the safety of family and friends still in the Soviet Union.

Lastly, there are the problems that result from not receiving fuller case information, regarding personal data, educational background and employment experience, skills and special interests, medical history. The reasons for these lacks are known; they lie in such factors as the briefness of the refugees' stay in transit and the insufficient number of personnel to obtain this case information through individual interviews. Nevertheless, the availability of more complete case histories would significantly contribute to every community's ability to properly plan and prepare for the refugees' arrival and subsequent adjustment.

The case situations indicate that a basic

factor contributing to these adjustment problems is a lack of clarity and understanding between American Jewry and the Soviet refugees.

We need to understand the meaning and dynamics of the refugees' behavior, and use our understanding and their energy and motivation to achieve our mutual goals.

The Soviet Jews have lived in an ordered, structured society. Jobs, housing, health care — to mention just three basics of daily life — all were provided for them. This afforded a sense of stability and security for them in their living, but it also resulted in external controls. It is this regimentation that they have reacted to, seeking freedom of individual expression and alternatives in living patterns. In a sense, they have sought the best of two worlds, the security of one and the choices of the other.

Yet they do not really comprehend the freedom of choice that is the American way of life. Personal selection and decision making were not ingredients in their past life experiences. There is for them in America, for the first time, the opportunity to release long repressed feelings and aspirations. Sometimes the refugees over-react and their behavior should be viewed in their need for developing internalized controls, self-discipline, in a free society.

The pressures the refugees exert for their demands may also be viewed in their lack of familiarity with the workings of a free society. The Soviet Jew sees

and relates to the agency and its executive as he has to the bureaucracy and the commissar in Russia. Protests, petitions, demonstrations are regarded as continuing means to an end. If unsuccessful then he feels it necessary to appeal higher up to a more powerful authority, the Federation. And ultimately to the community, the lay leadership. The absence of this bureaucratic structure, the inappropriateness of this measured approach, the limitations of our voluntary society — these are tenets only time will bring to reality for them.

A final comment on our initial experiences. Hopefully, this report emphasizes the need for more than an improved understanding of the characteristics and background of the Soviet Jewish refugee. We need to also define our expectations. What do we wish to accomplish? What are we prepared to offer? On what terms? Within what time limits? What involvement and cooperation do we expect?

Conversely, the Soviet Jewish immigrants need to be oriented to the American scene. They should be more informed regarding our way of life — the nature of our society, the facts about jobs and housing, some specifics concerning the particular local community they are going to.

Both we and they share this obligation. To the extent we succeed we shall mutually experience the satisfactions and benefits of a speedy and effective resettlement program.