

Spotlight on Soviet Jewry; Absorption in the USA — Challenge and Prospect*

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The Russian Jew — Early Exodus West

THE 20th century began with the mass exodus of Jews from Czarist Russia to the United States. They arrived in haste, forced from their homes by unbearable conditions and persecution. It was an exodus that was to spread all over Eastern Europe and its password became "on to the goldena land." It was also mainly a movement of poor people.

Hias, historically, is the creation of those Russian Jews who began pouring into America following the last nineteenth century officially sponsored pogroms of the Czarist regime. It was founded because the large numbers coming needed help and no kind of service was being given.

With the arrival of the first Russian Jews at Castle Garden, the group known as the Hebrew Shelter, and later Hias, provided meals, carfare and advice on where to live and work along with a twelve dollar suit of clothing for every adult male.

When immigrant reception shifted to Ellis Island, Hias was there to welcome the new arrivals, prevent deportations and locate relatives. It also ran an unofficial employment service. The city editions of the English language papers were brought to Hias offices where members of the board stayed up all night

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scanning the *want ads* to advise immigrants in the early morning hours on where to get work.

Through Hias efforts, kosher food was made available on Ellis Island, as were daily religious services. Hias-sponsored Passover seders on Ellis Island became a noteworthy event attended by community leaders.

Between 1881 and 1920, two million Jews came to the United States.¹ Most of them were helped with one or more of the many migration and resettlement services of Hias, which developed a professional staff, supported and financed by the American Jewish community. This help also came from those very same early Russian immigrants who joined them in supporting this effort. It is this American community, largely of Russian national origin, which has given generously to the State of Israel, needy Jews throughout the world, and to the support of the emigration now taking place from that same part of the world.

Today, as in 1884, in an irony of history, Hias is again repeating its earlier involvements with the Jews of Eastern Europe. Fortunately, the world Jewish community today is better organized than it was when our parents and grandparents came.

To understand what the resettlement of Soviet Jews means to the American Jewish community today, we note first

¹ Mark Wischnitzer, *Visas to Freedom*, New York: The World Publishing Co., 1956, 32.

their numbers. There are between two-and-one-half and possibly three million Jews in the Soviet Union. In the past several years, one hundred thousand Jews have left the Soviet Union. Of these, the vast majority, over ninety thousand, have emigrated to Israel. About eighty-five hundred have come to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe. Hias assists those immigrating to countries other than Israel. The Jewish Agency, operating out of Jerusalem, brings them to Israel.

The Soviet Jew — Some Historical Perspective

The Czar's pogroms brought the Jews of Russia to our doors and the Bolshevik Revolution that followed carried with it hope and equality for all. Unfortunately, this was not to be, especially regarding the Soviet's Jewish population. From its early beginnings, the Soviet government imposed restrictions on its Jewish population in the guise of forced assimilation. The price for not assimilating was often harassment, trials, the closing of synagogues, sometimes imprisonment and death. The systematic elimination of Jewish culture and Judaism was clearly the goal. Yet, we witness in present day Soviet Russia, many national groups who are permitted to maintain their own republics, schools, newspapers and theaters. That is, with the exception of its Jews, who, Soviet officials insist, were not interested in pursuing their own national and religious culture.

Zionism, creating the State of Israel, became a good reason for excluding Jews from important positions in government, the party and the diplomatic corps. Inherent in this reasoning is the view that with the existence of Israel, there is potential for new loyalties. Therefore, the Jew cannot be trusted because he may be a Zionist.

There is no doubt that the Israeli vic-

tory in the six-day war of 1967, gave impetus to the Soviet-Jewish activist movement. It contributed directly to the Soviet government's anti-semitic stance, when in the following year, 1968, there was a drastic decline in the number of Jews permitted into institutions of higher learning. Since that year, there is clear evidence of a tightening of the quota system in university admissions and an even more dramatic drop in the number of Jews among post-graduate students. For those Soviet Jews who built their lives on professional achievement, it is clear that the future of their sons and daughters is at stake.

Evidence of life in the Soviet Union now available to us, through victims and their writings, indicate that Anti-Semitism pervades every level of Soviet society. This, coupled with a repressive regime, and the harsh penalties for speaking out, are the internal pressures a Soviet Jew is forced to live with. Added to these, are the world-wide campaigns for his right to emigrate which arouses his own consciousness as a Jew.

Exodus West — Who He Is and Why He Has Come

The Soviet Jew who chooses to emigrate does so for a variety of reasons:

His consciousness as a Jew has been raised by those dissidents who risked prisons and labor camps to demand their rights to emigrate.

The future for his children is an uncertain one.

He wants a better life in a society less oppressive than the one he has known.

He emigrates for religious reasons.

He emigrates for a new life as a Jew.

Unlike the earlier exodus from Russia, this is not a movement mainly of poor people. In fact, large numbers gave up many comforts by Soviet standards, for the right to emigrate.

Seventy percent of those who went to the west and to Israel are academics, pro-

fessionals, and white collar. University-educated and highly trained, they have given up a familiar language, culture and a way of life that at least offered them the basic necessities of jobs, housing, food and medical care for a future of uncertainty.

The Soviet Jew, unlike the refugees of World War II or the North African Jew, has made the decision to struggle to emigrate. To apply for an exit visa, he has withstood job loss, ostracism, harassment and sometimes imprisonment. The decision to apply for an exit visa can only be viewed as a very courageous act which will affect the rest of his life.

Most Soviet Jews permitted to leave have exit permits stamped "Israel" and they travel to a transit country. In this instance, Austria first. From there, most go to Israel. But some indicate that they prefer to go elsewhere and are referred to Hias by the Jewish Agency. Family reunion, lack of deep Jewish identity, the fear of war, and climate are all given as reasons to live in a country other than Israel. For others, there is still the dream of the "golden land" called America.

A New Life in the U.S. — Cultural Conflicts

Eighty-eight Jewish communities in the United States participate in the resettlement of Soviet Jews. New York City is the destination for close to fifty percent of those arriving. Through the financial aid of the United Jewish Appeal and the Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, the family agencies, the New York Association for New Americans and the Jewish occupational services provide programs which include housing, English language instruction, vocational services, health care, day-care, Jewish education, synagogue and Jewish Center membership.

Volunteers, the liaison to the community, are being used in resettlement programs with success. They are particu-

larly effective in helping to facilitate social integration by providing the extras the professionals cannot, such as invitations to dinner, shopping trips, tips on parochial school enrollment, apartment-finding, English "Ulpans", visits to baseball games and social events, and help with resources for scholarships and university admissions. The most effective volunteer is one who has been involved in the beginning in planning for all phases of the resettlement program.

In all situations, after arrival in the community of resettlement, the immigrant needs the supportive services of the local Jewish family agency and the Jewish community if resettlement is to succeed.

Most agencies across the country indicate encouraging results albeit with growing pains for all concerned.

There is a diversity in approach in the resettlement of families showing a wide variety of innovative programs designed to ease the difficult first months.

The New York Association for New Americans reports that the care and maintenance of a family of four for a period between four and six months, requires four thousand dollars. The national average costs for the same time span is running slightly below that figure.

The downturn in the economy has had some impact on Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and other cities who have reported that "lay-offs" are occurring and families have returned for help. This does not appear to be wide-spread at this time. Also reported, are isolated cases of those who have lost jobs because of the recession and who qualify for and receive unemployment benefits.

The adjustment problems for these new Americans are unique. Unlike those earlier settlers from Czarist Russia, an unusually large number are professionals and academics. The licensing of professionals, like physicians, poses serious

problems because they have to pass rigorous examinations in English and because many have been out of graduate schools for some years. I am sorry to say there has been no massive commitment to involve the local Jewish medical community to help those doctors continue their practice of medicine in the United States.

Other professionals are anxious to make the transition to the level of jobs previously held in the Soviet Union. Although most cannot speak English, they are reluctant to take employment at what they view as less than what they had in the Soviet Union. If a person accepts the first job offered, from his Soviet point-of-view, he will not be able to move upwards out of it. Therefore, these newcomers need careful interpretation in understanding the differences between how we do things here and what once was true for them in the Soviet Union.

We have often heard that the Soviet Jew is more Soviet than Jew. Singled out for being Jewish in the Soviet Union, often he is aware that he is a disappointment to those helping him now because he is not Jewish enough. Many of our religious institutions have not begun to understand or deal with their own ambivalence in their response to the lack of Jewish identification of the Soviet Jews in their communities. Yet, recently in Brooklyn, the Lubavitcher community invited and welcomed over 2,500 Soviet Jews who participated in Purim festivities. Surely an indication that the Soviet Jew is searching for that "identity."

Freedom of choice about where to live, what schools to attend, what to read and what to buy are things Americans take for granted. These same choices can, in the beginning, overwhelm the immigrant who has not experienced these freedoms.

Looking for a job in a competitive market means interviews and resumes.

Resumes mean "putting things down on paper" which can be used against someone. In some instances, the immigrant decides to get around the problem by offering little or no information about his skills and himself. Later, he cannot comprehend why he is not called for an interview.

Some immigrants, when living in the Soviet Union, were able to afford the "extras" in their lives by "moonlighting" which under Soviet law can be interpreted as "speculation" and carries penalties. Therefore, there may be resistance to learning about banks, savings and checking accounts. Cash transactions were considered preferable in the Soviet Union as they cannot be traced by officials asking questions.

Some of the difficulties the Soviet Jews are encountering stem from the basic differences between our two systems of government and how things get done. For example, the "unknowns" to the Soviet Jew are: our stress on independence and individualism; a free and competitive job market; the role of religious institutions; the role of the voluntary agency; health care costs for those who can and cannot afford them; the differing role of government in our daily lives; job advancement and opportunities; and the freedom of movement from one place to another.

The casework professional and others who first come in contact with the immigrant can be critically important in his life. The professional, whose values are American, must be sensitized and made aware of these serious differences in the two systems in order to help the Soviet Jew become trusting and less confused about his new environment.

The professional is the client's advocate who needs be supportive, reassuring and patient. The professional has to understand the unusual time span needed by the Soviet Jew to settle into a new life. That new life, new friends and a "new"

Jewish identity will depend on the commitment of the American Jewish community in his behalf.

I think it is important to note that out of nearly 9,000 Soviet Jews who have come to the United States and Canada, no more than four persons have chosen to return to the Soviet Union.

I would like to end this report by sharing part of a letter that was recently received by the Hias country director for Italy postmarked Pittsburgh:

I don't know what it was that had an effect, but I was offered a job for a very decent salary \$17,400 a year. A new American friend helped me to find the job our morale is very high. We are very happy that

our fears with regard to crime and with regard to the rumors that Americans live in a "wolf-eat-wolf" world proved groundless. We live among wonderful, cultured people who are not compelled to lie at every step by the world they live in. I found what is in my opinion a very important difference between your country and the Soviet Union. In your country, as a rule, a man is believed on his word, and very often no documents are required from him to prove the truth of his words. On the other hand, in the Soviet Union, as a rule a man is not believed, and all your life you are obliged to prove to one and all that you are not a liar. And generally, everything here is clear as day: black is black and white is white and nobody forces you to think and say the opposite. I constantly feel that I have been reborn, and my greatest fear is that this feeling of 'purification' will pass and that all will seem normal.

The Soviet Refugee: Challenge to the American Jewish Community Resettlement System*

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And so it seems abundantly clear that our ability to adapt and redefine our social services, as well as our attitudes, are as vital and important for the successful immigration of the Soviet Jew as is his own ability to adapt and modify his value system to our own cultural milieu.

THE sophisticated and comprehensive network of Jewish communal services devised for the resettlement of refugees in American Jewish communities is a unique social service delivery system. It is based on a heritage and experience of 3,000 years in which Jews have fulfilled their traditional mandate to rescue and resettle into their own communities their fellow Jews. Biblical injunctions and Talmudic teachings are replete with detailed discourses on the manner in which this mandate can be fulfilled.

For over 100 years American Jewish communities have combined these traditional communal obligations with the evolving techniques and practice of social work — a professional practice that is special to the Western World's society and cultural milieu. This system, which has been continuously refined during the past four generations links up with the international immigration programs of United HIAS Service and other Jewish refugee organizations to become an effective program for resettlement of refugees. The local Jewish family service agency assumes the major direct service contact role.

Generally, despite the veneer of heterogeneous backgrounds and the extremes of culture, language, and economic differences, the refugee had a deep basic commonality with his fellow

Jews — a Jewish identity — a heritage strengthened by a traditional value system. There were obvious differences between the Russian immigrant at the turn of the century, and the German refugee of the Thirties, or the displaced persons of the Forties and Fifties, but, they all basically had a Jewish background and a sense of Jewish community to which they could relate. It is true that the horrors and tragedies of a hostile gentile world frequently strained and tested this identity and for some even resulted in a denial of their Jewishness. Yet even for those, as well as the others, there was always some tie that bound them to the American Jewish communities that were assuming their time-honored mandate of rescue and refuge. Although we have always had to adjust our services, these basic ties of "Jewishness" — religion, heritage, and at times culture and language — helped us to adapt to the challenge each new group of refugees brought, and enabled us to shape and further strengthen an effective system for the reintegration of the Jewish refugee into our community.

Who is the Soviet Jew?

Can the same be said for our current influx (and potentially our largest) of refugees — the Soviet Jew? First, let us try to understand who the Soviet Jewish refugee is. Certainly we must recognize that he is not the preconceived notion of our "shtetl" Russian. He is not the successor to the Eastern European so familiar

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