

**SOVIET JEWS
AND
AMERICAN REFUGEE POLICY**

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Among the truly historic events now taking place in Eastern Europe, the exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union must rank among the most remarkable. For over a century, Soviet -- and before 1917 Russian -- Jews have been subject to prejudice, political repression, ethnic and racial bias and more than occasional violence. Throughout this long period, World Jewry, with varying degrees of support from other communities, have prayed, agitated, demonstrated and pressured for their release. Suddenly, in the past two years, remarkable progress has been made in securing freedom for Soviet Jews. Yet serious obstacles to reaching this goal remain that require, among other initiatives, a continued major U.S. admissions and resettlement program.

As a representative of a major American Jewish agency, I want to present two perspectives on the rescue of Soviet Jewry, from Jewish and American points of view.

For Jews, the current movement is nothing less than historic. We see now the possibility for rescuing a major Jewish community that has suffered historical persecution and severe threats to its identity and survival. We do not see this as primarily a "Soviet" population, but rather a "Russian" one going back to the nineteenth century and living under a succession of rulers -- whether they be czars, commissars or comrades -- who have sought to harm them physically, deny their religious expression and bar them from participation in the social, economic and political spheres. Moreover, Jews look at Soviet Jewry in the perspective of twentieth century European history. We have lost far too many Jews in this

continent, whether to the Nazis, the Communists or nationalist anti-Semites. We see ourselves as having nothing less than a sacred historical obligation to make sure that this century and this region loses no more Jews. We will spare no effort to accomplish that goal.

Does this deep Jewish concern place any moral or legal obligation on the American government and people to respond to the plight of Soviet Jewry? We believe firmly that it does.

American law -- drawing on the international definition -- defines a refugee as one with a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality or membership in a particular group. At the beginning of the current exodus of Soviet Jews, some American officials, journalists and refugee experts questioned the degree of danger from which Soviet Jews claimed to be escaping. Some even charged that this population was in fact more of an economic or family unification flow than a genuine refugee movement. Even those sympathetic to the Soviet Jewish movement proposed interim parole arrangements or special immigration categories rather than refugee mechanisms as a means of facilitating migration for this group. In the current atmosphere of glasnost and perestroika, it was consistently said, there is little danger of political persecution and therefore of refugee movement.

Unfortunately, we have very recent evidence that proves this rosy perspective untenable. Soviet Jews are indeed in great danger. The proper perspective for measuring their plight is the

century of Russian attitudes toward Jews, not current and increasingly shaky initiatives toward governmental or social reform. They face significant danger and anti-Semitism and they merit refugee status.

Three types of evidence, all deriving from very recent events, make an indisputable case that Soviet Jews have well founded reasons to be afraid of current developments:

- Perestroika and glasnost have produced greater freedom in Soviet society, both for democratic movements promoting liberty and tolerance and for nationalists of various kinds preaching conflict and hate. The most prominent of the nationalist groups now emerging is Ramyat, an integral part of whose Russian national message is anti-Semitism. These movements have proliferated among significant segments of the population which have turned against Jews and other supposed "cosmopolitan" groups. While the government and mainstream press have been largely unaffiliated with these movements, some champions of nationalist ideology have risen uncomfortably close to the hierarchy. The recently announced Presidential Council includes one member close to nationalist circles. This fear goes beyond Russian nationalism. In other parts of the Soviet Union, resurgent ethnic movements and religious fundamentalism include anti-Semitic elements. There have even been rumors of pogroms, though these should not

divert us from other areas of concern. We should be very wary of pogroms, but even if they do not occur, there are still ample unfortunate examples of growing and pervasive anti-Semitism to warrant the closest scrutiny and great efforts to facilitate migration of Soviet Jews.

- The notion of a well-founded fear of persecution in the refugee definition turns attention to the subjective inner concerns of the Soviet Jews themselves. In this sense, we must consider a second consistent source of evidence of their condition. Numerous delegations of Jews from the West have visited the Soviet Union in the past two years and they all report the same finding: Soviet Jews tell them they are afraid of new developments and anxious to get out of the country. This reaction remains consistent among urban and rural Jews, those in Europe and in Asia, from larger and smaller communities. Soviet Jews are worried about their plight; we need to respond to them.

- These reports while compelling, are necessarily fragmentary. They rest on estimations of overall danger and first-hand accounts of encounters with Jews whose representativeness of the larger population is unknown. But we are now beginning to get systematic data on attitudes of average Soviet citizens toward the Jewish

community. Scientific surveys are now in place which can yield solid information about the conditions all Jews face in the Soviet Union. The first of these surveys has just been completed by the American Jewish Committee working in cooperation with scholars at the University of Houston. It examined political attitudes among a scientific sample of Moscow residents. The results on Jews are nothing short of frightening. Openly anti-Semitic organizations garner the support of close to a fifth of the population, and sympathy for them is widespread. Anti-Jewish attitudes are diffused throughout a wide variety of people. These data prove conclusively that Jews have well-founded reasons to fear their condition in today's Soviet Union.

Because of these conditions, large numbers of Jews are streaming out of the country. Two nations have been willing to receive them in any systematic way, Israel and the United States. Several facts on the ground combine to shape this flow:

- The United States for this fiscal year will accept about 40,000 Soviet Jewish refugees. While some have characterized this as placing a new "ceiling" on Soviet Jewish entry, in fact this represents the largest admissions level of this population since the Refugee Act of 1980, and close to a third of all refugees authorized for acceptance. What has changed is the percentage utilizing the United States as their destination. While

as recently as two years ago, these numbers accounted for the great bulk of Jews securing exit, today, due to greatly increased outflow, they are a much smaller percentage. Whatever its proportion, American intake remains a vital and indispensable part of the system of rescue for Soviet Jews. But it is not the entire solution.

- While American intake has held steady for the past two years, inflow to Israel has grown enormously. Exact statistics are unavailable because the flow changes from month to month. Some estimate that it could reach over 100,000 per year. This places enormous pressures on the Israeli reception system, especially at a time of severe security concerns, economic stagnation and shortfalls in social services. Yet, Israel remains dedicated to receiving this population. The country was founded specifically to provide a home to Jews in need of refuge and, whatever the difficulties, sees this influx as an enormous opportunity -- and responsibility -- to fulfill this mission. World Jewry has also committed itself to aid in building up Israeli absorptive capacity, as have supportive governments, such as the United States.
- Yet, very recent events have threatened the rescue of Soviet Jewry. Before they can travel anywhere, these refugees need transportation. For those en route to

Israel, either direct flights or transit through Europe is required, usually, through Eastern bloc nations. But, in response to political pressures and terrorist intimidation, these modes of transport are threatened. It is necessary to be clear about the nature of these threats. A controversy has developed about where in Israel Soviet Jews are resettling, specifically whether they are being channeled to the West Bank at a time of dispute on the disposition of that territory. But this is an entirely different question from the issue of settlement in Israel altogether. Pressure on Russia and Eastern Europe to block paths to emigration to Israel arise not from concern about territories in political dispute (the U.S. shares these concerns, but strongly advocates movement to Israel). They are motivated by forces that do not want Jews in Israel at all. The viability of Israel as a major reception center for Soviet Jewish rescue and the continuation of its historical mission as a place of haven for any threatened Jewry are at stake in removing blockages to movement. The human right to leave a country where one feels threatened is meaningless without a viable channel for exit and entry into a place of freedom. It is necessary now to guarantee this route for Soviet Jews.

The potential flow of Soviet Jews is unknown, but surely large. It certainly exceeds half a million and could go far beyond

that. The long-term commitment of the United States will be necessary to assure this flow. Specifically, the following policies need to be maintained or undertaken:

- Pressure for continued exit needs to be steadily applied. The current level of exodus is a victory, among other things, for American diplomacy. While current exit levels are heartening, some problems still remain among potential emigrants who once worked in information-sensitive areas (although whatever "statesecrets" they possess are by now outmoded and of dubious use to the West), have parents who claim economic hardship would follow if their children were to leave the country (many of these claims are dubious) or are still under some political suspicion. Continued attention to securing full free flow is needed.

- The United States must aid in assuring that passage for Jews to Israel is unimpeded. This means both maintaining European transit points and advocating direct flights from Soviet Union to Israel. In particular, it is critical to assure that political pressures and especially terrorist threats do not interfere with movement of refugees to freedom. The integrity of the refugee system is at stake in this issue.

- The U.S. must continue to aid in building up Israel's

receptive capacity in every way consistent with its Middle East policy. This includes current humanitarian programs plus housing loan guarantees that will not entail new budget expenditures.

- The United States must continue to accept Soviet Jewish refugees at at least current levels. American participation in the rescue of Soviet Jewry has been critical to its success. This is a threatened population of clear humanitarian interest to this country. Admissions and funding can not lag at this point.

- Passage of new legislation sponsored by Sen. Lauterberg and Rep. Morrison served usefully to clear up definitional problems of Soviet Jewish refugees. Since this law set clear criteria for refugee designation, the acceptance rate has dramatically increased. This legislation needs to be extended to cover the next fiscal year.

- Finally, it is critical to assure that Soviet Jewish rescue does not come at the expense of any other refugee or immigrant group. The American Jewish Committee, for example, has been in the forefront of advocacy for Indochinese refugees, increases in intake from Latin American and Africa and immigration from all over the

globe. We will continue to press for generous policies both as a matter of national interest and as an expression of our community's deepest values. Continued U.S. support for Soviet Jews cannot be an isolated act, but rather a part of an overall enlightened immigration and refugee policy.

We believe we are now at a critical juncture in responding to Soviet Jews. Success will require prodigious and cooperative efforts by the private sector, by Israel, and by the U.S. government. To date we have achieved much, but much more remains to be done.