The Last Wave Of Jewish Immigration From The USSR

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Simcha Goldberg
Community Services Consultant
Council of Jewish Federations

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Background

While approximately 25,000 Soviet Jews emigrated to the U.S. in the five-year period of 1972-1975, it was understood that this was a mere trickle. Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands more, were anxiously waiting behind closed Soviet gates. This understanding propeled an advocacy movement which bore substantial fruit in 1978-1980. During this three year period, over 57,000 Soviet Jews poured out of the Soviet Union and into the United States.

The American Jewish community was as surprised by their success in 1979 as it appears to be in 1989.

The acculturation phase usually occurs two-three years after arrival. However, because the immigrant flood of the late 1970s was so brief, communal energies were soon diverted to the struggle inside the USSR, with the result being a dearth of literature on Soviet Jewish acculturation. In total, there are only ten empirical articles (Cardin, 1979; Carp, 1988; Chikvashvilli, 1979; Cohen, 1979; Feldstein, 1989; Friedman, 1988; Goldberg, 1980; Kaufman, 1979; Khait, 1979; Zukerman, 1979, 1988), two research projects (Lachman et al., 1985; Simon et al., 1982), and one policy article (Task Force on Jewish Identity, 1980). Furthermore, the vast majority discuss Soviet Jews who had been in the U.S. for less than five years. Observations in these pieces were therefore made tentatively, although many patterns and trends had already clearly established themselves.

Ambivalence Toward Russian Jewish Emigration

The Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) Task Force on Jewish Identity expressed the pervasive ambivalence graphically in their 1980 report:

> The "Save Soviet Jewry" banners still strung across the facades of many Jewish institutions are reminders of a highly idealized effort on the part of the whole American Jewish community. This effort, to our great credit, achieved significant success, but for many, its very success was a "cold bath in reality." A mass of Jews in front of the Moscow synagogue on Simchat Torah simply did not characterize the immigration we confronted in our agencies.
>
> In some communities there was an unstated sense of being "taken in," and consequent anger against the Soviet Jews who appeared at our doorstep -- demanding, independent, aggressive -- and who were not, in fact, some argued, refugees at all (Task Force on Jewish Identity, 1980, p. 8).

The reaction to new immigrants on the part of the "established" Jewish population is cited as a "problem to be surmounted" in much of the literature on Soviet Jews in the U.S. Zukerman (1988, p. 1), observes that "Like all people, we American Jews are uncomfortable with difference, with strangers. The Soviet emigres spoke a strange language, and behaved in different, sometimes unpleasant ways."

In short, Jewish immigrant acculturation can be viewed as having two sides which are continuously interacting with each other: (1) the immigrants and who they are and (2) their American Jewish hosts, and who they are.

Anita Friedman (1988, pp. 5-6) writes:

> Cross cultural tensions have always characterized the immigrant experience. It has never been easy for a host population. Jewish or otherwise, to uncritically welcome and absorb newcomers. The attitude of the establishment German Jews towards Russian Jewish newcomers at the turn of the century has been well documented. And some of the same complaints which are expressed about Soviet Jews today were also expressed during the last large wave of Jewish Holocaust survivors. Today, survivors are accepted and sometimes even seen as "heroes." But in previous decades, many American Jews found them to be sometimes, brash, demanding or even suspect as to how they survived the war.

Soviet History and Anti-Semitism

The history which formed Soviet Jews is full of enormous ironies which shaped the character of the immigrants we have received.

With the 1917 Revolution, Jews were declared a nationality distinct and apart from the White Russians, Georgians, Ukranians et al. among whom they lived. Consequently, the third largest Jewish population in the world (after the U.S. and Israel) was left without any religious or cultural expression while simultaneously was held apart as a separate national group.

Even in the relatively enlightened post-Khruschev period, the consequences of even incidentental Jewishness were devastating. Witness this quote from Goldberg (1980, p. 155):

> Recent Samizdat disclosures report that not one Soviet Jew may have been allowed to enter the prestigious Moscow State University since the academic year 1977-78. Jewish enrollment in all institutions

> of higher learning has been reduced from 111,900 in 1968-69 to the approximately 44,000 today. While Jewish professionals constituted 11 percent of the Russian professional class in the late sixties, today's level has been reduced to around 5 percent.

Combined with the experience of having the gate opened for very brief periods before, this inbred (Jewish) fear is one of the most important causes of the Soviet Jews desire to leave the Soviet Union.

The Lachman et al. (1985) study done for the New York federation corroborates this assumption. It cites the respondents' desire to obtain <u>three</u> freedoms in coming to the U.S.

1. Freedom to upgrade one's standard of living;

2. The freedom to live in a democracy; and

3. <u>Freedom from anti-semitism</u>.

Indeed, respondents declared that anti-semitism was the leading reason for emigrating, followed by their children's future.

<u>The Russian Jewish Family</u>

Lachman et al. (1985) observe:

> The strength of the Soviet Jewish family must not be overlooked in an evaluation of Russian Jews. The family was the only milieu -- private, trustworthy and beyond the reach of government control -- in which Soviet citizens could proudly express their Jewish heritage withough negative repercussions.

The traditional family-centeredness of East European Jewry was deeply enhanced by the forces of Soviet repression. In the acculturation reports from communities which Goldberg edited for HHS (1979-1981), demontrates most frequent program successes as <u>family-centered</u>, such as Channukah celebrations, community seders, etc. Attempts at adult education that separated parents from children generally drew scant attendance. Therefore, one of Lachman et al. (1985) recommendations was as follows:

> Since being Jewish is something the whole family shares, and since most families look forward to spending their leisure time together, programs should be developed to include all members of the family.

Both the Lachman et al. study (1985) and the Simon et al. study for CJF in 1982 have data demonstrating that among Soviet Jews the traditional family was very much the rule. Seventy percent in the former and 89% in the latter report that Russian immigrant households have one or more children (Lachman et al, 1985, p. 14; Simon et al., 1982, p. 8). By comparison, about one-quarter of American Jewish households consist of a nuclear family, i.e., mother, father, and one or more children.

Another feature of Russian households which gives them special strength is that they are very often three-generational. Nearly half (48%) have parents or in-laws either living with them or in close proximity (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 14).

Family reunions appear as the most frequent response to the question, "Why did you settle where you did?" (56%; Lachman et al., 1985, p. 48). Conversely, being separated from the family (in the Soviet Union) is reported as the third major adjustment problem (62%) after "learning English" (75%) and "finding a good job" (74%; Lachman et al., 1985, p. 50).

Placing Jewish Hopes in the Children

Since a traditional family means adults rearing children, the Russians who were used to waiting for better times invested their hopes in their children. As indicated above, securing their "children's future" was the second most important reason for emigrating (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 13). It is therefore reasonable to assume that their Jewish hopes are reflected in their children as well.

Both the Simon et al. study (1982) and the Lachman et al. one (1985) asked about the importance of various Jewish beliefs and activities for their children. Simon et al. report that 79% would either encourage or actively encourage a good Jewish education (1982, p. 73). Lachman et al. found that 97% indicate that Jewish education and culture was important or very important for the children (1985, p. 26). Marriage to a Jew was also near the top of the list of behaviors wished for children in both surveys (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 26; Simon et al., 1982, p. 73).

Interestingly, 45% of Russian Jewish respondents indicated that they would actively discourage their children from settling in Israel (Simon et al., 1982, p. 73), and 45% would neither discourage nor encourage them. Given that the two great desires motivating emigration were financial betterment and personal security, this response should not be surprising.

Simon et al. report that 29% of Russian children attend day schools, while the Lachman et al. study, completed approximately two years later, shows Russians attending day schools or yeshivot in a higher proportion than all New York Jews (35% to 18%; Lachman et al., 1985, p. 36).

One reason for this phenomenon was certainly the vigorous efforts of religious groups to enroll Russian youngsters. However, Russian parents were also disturbed by what they viewed as the excessive leniency and soft curriculum of the public school system.

Non-Organizational Jewish Expression

Friendship networks and informal ties, rather than formal institutions or organizations, characterize the substance of Russian Jewish society.

Russian Jews often choose cultural pursuits and/or friends as a means of expressing their Jewishness. Eighty-seven percent of respondents in the Simon et al. study indicated that 80%-100% of their friends were Jewish (1982, p. 53). According to Lachman et al., 90% of New York Russians reported that their three closest friends were Jewsish (1985, p. 33).

It is important to emphasize that Russian Jews relate to traditional culture with a fervor that does not characterize contemporary American Jewry. Consequently, high percentages of Russians express Jewish interests by reading Jewish books and seeing movies and plays on Jewish themes (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 32).

Simon et al. support these observations: 60% owned books about Judaism, 26% have Jewish works of art, 50% have Jewish records or sheet music and 36% subscribe to at least one Jewish magazine or newspaper (1982, p. 71).

In contrast, affiliation with formal Jewish agencies and organizations has been consistently weak. The exception is the Lachman et al. report of relatively high levels of affiliation with a YMHA or JCC (1985, p. 37). This lack of formal affiliation, however, need not be seen as an act of disassociation from being Jewish:

> Individual Jews may demonstrate their identification with the Jewish people through their choice of cultural pursuits and/or friends. These "heart Jews" -- those who identify cognitively and affectively -- seek the knowledge of and feeling of belonging to the Jewish people on their own, with family and friends, either not knowing how or not wanting to formally affiliate with an organized group (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 32).

Despite the fact the 55% of Russian Jews claimed Russian as their native language, Yiddish remained a strong presence in their lives. This is particularly remarkable in that Yiddish schooling, theatre and literature had been purged from the Soviet Union for over 40 years. A large majority (68%) claimed either an understanding or speaking knowledge of Yiddish (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 11). One hypothesis for this phenomenon is that it stood as an act of Jewish resistance against Sovietization.

Jewish Identity

Since there was enough Jewish identity to resist the pressures of complete linguistic assimilation in the Soviet Union, there is a question as to whether this tough mindedness might survive the assimilatory enticements of a voluntaristic society, such as the U.S. Lachman et al. conclude that data relating to Russian children demonstrate that it was not the emigres "intention" (in coming to America) to abandon the feelings of Jewish "sentiment" and "nationalism" which many of them retained (1985, p. 26).

Both Lachman et al. and Simon et al. suggest that being Jewish is a large part of the identity of a large majority of Russian Jews. In the former, 71% of respondents express "their primary cognitive identity as being tied to being Jews" (1985, p. 20). "Jewish" or "American Jews" are the strongly preferred terms for themselves among the Russian Jews included in the Simon et al. study (1982, p. 56).

Holiday observances, while somewhat less regular than for American Jews, follow the same order of preference: Passover Seder, light Channukah candles and fast on Yom Kippur. The great majority of Russian Jews observe these "religious" obligations (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 29; Simon et al., 1982, p. 77).

Differences Between Russian and American Jews

There are obviously many differences between two populations that have had such varying histories over the past 70 or so years.

One key difference relates to the fact that the Russian Jew sees his Jewishness in national and cultural terms, while the American Jew sees it in terms of organizational affiliation and religious ritual.

> The data revealed that most Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union (79%) view this Jewish identity as belonging to a nationality, while just one quarter (24%) replied that they think of themselves belonging to the Jewish religion (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 21).

Finally, there are interesting similarities between American and Russian Jewish populations which could facilitate long-term integration. Like their American counterparts, Russian Jews have been highly mobile, moving from "distant outposts" in the Soviet Union to major urban centers (Lachman et al., 1985, p. 11). Similarly, they are urbanites who have constantly sought out where the cultural and economic action was -- and moved there. (Lachman et al., 1985, 11). Furthermore, most achieved a very high level of education and occupational status in the Soviet Union. According to Lachman et al., a large majority held professional or managerial jobs (66%) in the Soviet Union. That is, they were high achievers even before they emigrated to the U.S. (1985, p. 12).

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