

ISSUES IN ABSORBING AGED RUSSIAN JEWISH IMMIGRANTS: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE CURRENT ISRAEL EXPERIENCE

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Israel is developing an expertise in serving aged Russian immigrants from which we in North America may benefit. Two principles that may be derived from the Israel experience are the extensive use of volunteers and trained Russian-speaking social workers and the recognition of the importance of conducting programs in the Russian language for the immigrants.

This article reports on the experience of elderly immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union as seen through the eyes of Israeli social workers and other professionals specializing in immigrant absorption and/or gerontology. A body of literature concerning aged Russian immigrants to the United States is beginning to develop (Althausen, 1991; Dorf & Katlin, 1983; Gelfand, 1986; Hulewat, 1981; Zahler, 1989) that reflects a growing awareness of this population and its special needs. Insights obtained from Israeli colleagues engaged in similar absorption activity can offer useful perspectives for work in the United States.

BACKGROUND

Fully 100 years after the massive waves of Jewish immigrants from Russia began their efforts to enter American society, the Jewish community of the United States is, once again, engaged in absorbing yet another, albeit smaller wave of Russian Jewish emigres. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the release of thousands of Jews, as well as other citizens, from the entire former Communist world, the absorption of large numbers of new immigrants poses new challenges to the established Jewish welfare system. (In fiscal year 1991/92, another 47,300 immigrants from the former Soviet Union came to the United States, and in fiscal 1993/94, another 40,000 are expected.) To these numbers may be added Russian

Jews who originally emigrated to Israel and are now seeking to enter the United States. The immigrant of 1993 is not the immigrant of 1893, and Jewish service organizations are reorganizing to adapt their programs to meet the new needs.

Jewish federations, primarily in the large population centers, have taken on this task through the establishment of a variety of special programs, agencies, and consortia devoted to the needs of these new immigrants. Understanding who the new immigrants are, how 75 years of Communist rule have influenced their personality and behavior, what sorts of intervention are needed, what techniques used by social workers and others are likely to be effective, and what sorts of programs and services are required are among the issues examined by those charged with this critical task.

A subgroup of this immigrant population that poses a unique challenge is the aged. Generally identified to constitute about 15% of the immigrant population, the aged Russian Jewish immigrant is far more likely to exhibit physical illness and dependency, isolation, and emotional dependency. He or she may show less readiness to accept outside help and may experience greater difficulty in coping with the demands of adjusting to a new culture, new language, and new environment. The aged immigrant therefore requires special understanding and techniques that may not always be part of the expertise of the staff engaged in absorption activity.

Since 1990, the state of Israel with its population of 5 million, has absorbed over 400,000 new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, about 18% of whom are over the age of 65. Government ministries, the Jewish Agency, health and welfare offices, the schools of social work, community centers, the religious establishment, as well as many other national and local organizations, have become involved with this massive absorption effort.

For years, the Israeli social welfare community has drawn heavily upon the American experience in the development of programs. American professionals regularly consult with Israeli institutions and organizations, Israeli scholars come to the United States for advanced degrees, and many services are modeled on American methods and practices. However, with the absorption of aged immigrants from the Soviet Union, Israel is developing an expertise from which we may learn.

It must be noted that the immigration policies of the United States and Israel are quite different, with a consequent differing but significant effect on the absorption experience. The Israel Law of Return grants automatic citizenship to any Jew wishing to live in Israel, and the government is committed to help all who arrive. Many Russian immigrants, particularly the aged, have come with little or no money, one suitcase of belongings, and often with no relative or other person committed to give assistance. The U.S. policy, in contrast, has not only limited the numbers of immigrants who may be admitted but also requires proof from the emigre, in advance, that there will be an adequate source of income, available housing, and a person or agency to serve as a responsible sponsor. The effect of these restrictions is to produce a group of immigrants to the United States that is smaller in number and with greater available resources than the immigrants to Israel. The Israeli welfare system therefore has a far greater absorption burden than does its American counterpart. It is indeed the need to re-

spond to this greater burden that may evoke creative and effective ideas with useful application to the American experience.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

During the winter and spring of 1992, the author conducted 25 in-depth interviews with aging specialists in the main Israeli university schools of social work, researchers at the Brookdale Institute of Gerontology and Adult Human Development, staff members of the Ministry of Welfare, and social workers in community centers. This relatively small key informant sample of the country's social welfare professionals was developed by continuously eliciting suggestions from subjects regarding persons involved in absorption and aging. The interviews were open-ended and wide ranging. The interviewees expressed appreciation for an opportunity to contribute to the American absorption effort through their experiences and observations—a change from the usual pattern of receiving advice from American experts.

In addition to these scheduled interviews, site visits were made to community centers in Bet Shemesh, Beersheva, and Haifa where programs for aged immigrants are conducted. During these visits, the author had an opportunity to meet with small groups of aged Russian immigrants and to observe them in several programs.

The observations and impressions obtained from the in-depth interviews and site visits were augmented by the fortuitous convening by Tel Aviv University School of Social Work of two meetings of 15 social workers from around the country specializing in service to aged Russian immigrants. These meetings provided a rich addendum to the data being gathered on this particular absorption issue.

A broad range of opinion was elicited from the subjects of this study, and it is difficult to presume that there exists a single definitive view of the absorption experience of aged Russian immigrants in Israel. However, there did seem to be several areas of

broad general agreement among the various professionals interviewed, and it is these areas of agreement that can be identified as findings.

STUDY FINDINGS

Obstacles to Optimal Service

There was general dissatisfaction with the policies and practices of the government's Ministry of Absorption. Service to aged immigrants was seen as a low priority, and any programs for the aged were perceived as occurring more in spite of the Ministry than because of it. The Absorption Ministry was seen as preoccupied with employment for the working adult immigrant, school and health care for immigrant children, and religious instruction for all immigrant families. Governmental allocations for absorption were seen as inadequate for the need.

During the first year of the new immigration wave, arriving immigrants were transported from the airport to one of 41 absorption centers in the country's traditional method of housing and acculturating all newcomers. These centers provided housing, language training, job counseling and placement, schooling for the children, and health services. New immigrants might live for a year or more in the center while awaiting relocation. In February 1991, the government shifted responsibility for meeting immigrant needs from absorption centers to local municipalities (Cwikel et al., 1992). New immigrants were now given cash allotments, advice on initial apartment locations, and the address of the nearest office of the Ministry of Welfare. The welfare office became the coordinator of immigrant services, and health, educational, employment, housing, and language training needs were to be met by the municipality.

The professionals interviewed generally favored this direct-absorption model, but viewed the resources available to the municipalities as inadequate. Aged immigrants receive a monthly pensioner's allot-

ment as do all Israeli elderly, but the government provides no other specialized geriatric services. An additional burden for the community-based programs occurs because the resident elderly Sephardic community members do not mix easily with the Russian newcomers, making separate programs for each group necessary.

Russian immigrants come to Israel with no prior experience with social workers since the profession did not exist in the Soviet Union. They tend to presume that a governmental worker, no matter how cordial and sincere, is a potential agent of coercion. Levav et al. (1990) reported that less than 20% of Russian immigrants seek help with personal problems from social service agencies. Aged Russians, with a longer ingrained wariness of government agents, are even more resistant to social work interventions. Israeli social workers engaged in direct service to aged Russian immigrants reported their aged clients to be elusive, manipulative and generally resistant to any efforts to discuss personal issues.

As might be expected, the new immigrant is preoccupied with such essentials of survival as employment, income, and housing. Housing for immigrants is generally seen by most of the professionals as inadequate, and costs for housing may consume more than half of a family's income. Several families may occupy one apartment. Aged parents frequently share the household of their children, not out of tradition or preference, but because the family needs their monthly pensioner's income from the government. These relationships are frequently conflict-ridden and in need of professional intervention, requiring precisely the sort of personal disclosure neither the family nor the aged parent is willing to consider. Many aged immigrants without families have chosen to live with younger acquaintances. The aged person receives companionship and other support, and the younger householders receive in return a major portion of the aged person's government assistance money. These relationships

are often also reported to be conflict-ridden. When suitable housing and employment are found, the younger family leaves and the aged roomer is left alone.

The phenomenon of aged parents living in the household of their children is new to the Russian immigrant and has imposed an unfamiliar stress upon both generations. Where the older person in the former Soviet Union enjoyed a measure of status and importance in the family and society, the aged immigrant to Israel is now more dependent upon others, devoid of a meaningful role in the family or community, and isolated from previous sources of status and self-esteem. The professionals in this study reported many aged clients with anxiety, disorientation, and depression. Those immigrant aged without families are at even greater risk of exhibiting these conditions.

One feature of the Israeli absorption experience that has been successful with the general immigrant population over the years is the Hebrew ulpan, or intensive language program. This model of intensive instruction in the Hebrew language for 5 hours per day, 5 days per week has contributed to the speedy integration of new immigrants, particularly children, into Israeli society. Yet, aged Russian immigrants have been particularly resistant to learning Hebrew, and only small numbers avail themselves of the opportunity. Site visits to several centers for the aged found perhaps 10 or 12 aged immigrants attending a special twice-weekly 1-hour Hebrew class, whereas hundreds of others in the neighborhood had declined to participate at all. Social workers or other professionals, most of whom are not Russian speaking, must contend with the presence of a translator during private interview sessions, further complicating the already difficult effort to offer any psychosocial service to resistant clients.

Meeting the needs of aged immigrants is complicated by the presence of an uneasy mix of conflicting goals. Immigrant absorption carries with it demands upon the individual to adapt to a new culture, learn a

new language, take on new behaviors, and, in general, change to a way of life defined by the new society. The goals of services to the elderly are generally quite the opposite. Older persons, although encouraged to be active and engaged in their social world, require the security that comes from continuity with their usual customs and routines. Studies of relocation stress upon aged persons, although not always conclusive in their findings, nonetheless show the aged to be particularly vulnerable (Coffman, 1982; Hooymans & Kiyak, 1993). The move from one country to another places many demands upon the physical and mental capacities of even the healthiest of older persons. The desire and, perhaps, need to continue speaking Russian, observe Russian customs, and remain with one's own Russian community may reflect an older person's natural effort to reduce relocation stress, even as doing so results in thwarting the goals of absorption. Professionals working with aged immigrants must regularly confront and try to reconcile these conflicting goals.

Israeli Responses to the Obstacles

It would seem from the above array of complex problems that the lot of aged immigrants to Israel is bleak indeed. Yet, although virtually all of the professionals surveyed concurred that these problems do exist, they also asserted that the Israeli welfare community is responding to the challenges posed by them. Israel's many useful service models for aged Russian immigrants perhaps suggest at least some service responses that may have utility elsewhere.

The sheer numbers of Russian immigrants arriving in Israel daily, beginning in mid-1990 and continuing to the present, quickly overtaxed the existing system of health, welfare, and immigration services. Nevertheless, the excitement that this new immigration generated in the general population led to the development of a large informal network of volunteers eager to assist in the absorption process. Russian-speaking

Israelis who had been part of an earlier brief immigration cohort in the late 1970s, as well as many other Israeli citizens, responded to calls from absorption centers, welfare agencies, and community centers to serve as volunteers with the new immigrants. Many Israeli families have "adopted" whole Russian families or individuals, providing a much-needed social support in programs overwhelmed within the formal system. However, after the euphoria of the first year of Russian immigration wore off, the numbers of volunteers has declined. Agencies must now actively recruit volunteers where once they had a rich supply from which to choose. The professionals interviewed generally agreed that the formal agencies are inadequately staffed and funded, and the outpouring of volunteers has clearly enhanced the absorption process.

Several approaches to dealing with language problems were observed. As noted, only very small numbers of aged immigrants participate in the regular Hebrew ulpan language programs. Hebrew language teachers have been recruited by neighborhood community centers to provide less intensive (1 or 2 hours per session, 1 or 2 days per week) language courses for the aged, which do attract small groups of aged immigrants. Several of these classes were observed and seemed to be received enthusiastically by the students. They seem to be a reasonable alternative for elderly who would otherwise never study Hebrew.

The other approach to language is an increasing acceptance by professionals in the welfare offices and community centers that work with these aged will have to take place in the Russian language. Nearly every welfare office has a Russian worker, who is not usually professionally trained but is supervised by a staff member. Aged clients seem to be more ready to engage with these workers than with other staff who must rely upon a translator. The untrained Russian-speaking workers are viewed as "unsophisticated" and less "therapeutic" in their

work, but seem to be effective in helping with necessary concrete services and keeping the client connected to the system.

The struggle between absorption goals and service-to-aged goals seems to result in an "if you can't fight 'em, join 'em" outcome. As noted earlier, aged Russians have not joined readily in the activity programs conducted by the community centers for the general aged community. Therefore, at many sites, separate aging programs are conducted. In a typical program model, the established, usually Sephardic aged center users attend a morning program, Russian elderly arrive in the early afternoon for a joint meal where that is available, and programs are conducted in the Russian language in the afternoon. Russian language lectures, classical concerts, and other intellectual activities seem to be the preferred programs. Whereas early in the immigration history, workers actively strove to integrate the new immigrants into existing agency programs, there seems now to be an acceptance of the need for two distinct programs. Occasionally a special event or trip to a point of interest is an opportunity for the aged from the two cultures to come together, but the usual pattern of separate programs persists.

The government has recognized the need for professionally trained Russian-speaking social workers. Special grants have allowed the schools of social work in Haifa, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv to screen and select between 20 and 30 Russian immigrants at each university for a full, though somewhat abbreviated program leading to a standard Israeli social work degree. These students provide service in an agency field site during their training, generally in immigrant settings, and are expected to make a critical professional contribution to the absorption of Soviet immigrants in the future. The principle that seems to guide these programs is that immigrants will more likely be helped by Russian speakers who have learned social work, rather than expecting trained social workers to learn Russian or

assuming that aged Russian immigrants will learn sufficient Hebrew. One risk in these special training programs is that the students, after graduation, will leave the world of immigration and move on to other fields of social work practice.

Two additional educational innovations were noted. Schools of social work have included courses in immigration in their curricula where none had existed before, and continuing education departments of the schools are regularly offering courses to professionals on aspects of immigration and aging. In 1992, the Tel Aviv University School of Social Work convened the first meeting of social workers serving aged Russian immigrants. During the two meetings of workers representing agencies from a dozen communities throughout the country, many problems and creative solutions were identified. The need for special attention to this population was validated, and the creation of a permanent professional group to address these issues seems imminent.

Given the inadequate governmental attention to aged immigrant needs, a source of hope expressed by many of the professionals in this study was the evident increase in political activism among the immigrant population. For the first time an immigrant political party ran, albeit unsuccessfully, in the last national election. Immigration issues were visible during the election, and voting analysis showed the newly elected Labor-led coalition had received support from a majority of the new Russian immigrants. This group apparently saw a new government as more likely to meet their needs. Whether these hopes will come to pass and whether the anticipated changes will benefit the aged among the immigrant population will have to await future analysis.

One Community Illustration

In response to the suggestions of several of the interviewed professionals, a visit was made to the city of Beersheva. Several sites

were visited, and interviews were conducted with geriatric workers assigned to work with aged Russian immigrants.

The presence in Beersheva of a Russian immigrant community established over 10 years ago during an earlier immigration wave has attracted large numbers of new Russian immigrants seeking to connect with their relatives and countrymen. Of these newcomers, it is estimated that 20% are over the age of 65.

The professionals in Beersheva report that the same sorts of problems beset the aged immigrants in that community as have been noted elsewhere: many aged living alone or in crowded family households, poor health status, client resistance to and manipulation of social service intervention, and some conflict between the cohort of new aged immigrants and the already established aged Russians and other Israelis.

Despite these problems, the Beersheva professionals interviewed conveyed a strong sense that progress was being made. The existence within the welfare offices of separate budgets for established aged and for new immigrant aged has enabled programmatic responses to be geared to the different needs of each group. The large established population of former Russian immigrants has allowed for the creation of a substantial volunteer network to expand the limited resources of the professional workers. Without any formal governmental assistance, a number of centers for Russian immigrants have developed within the Russian community, offering Russian-language cultural programs, concerts, lectures, and the like.

The professionals from the three existing Ministry of Welfare offices who are assigned to work with the aged Russian immigrant population are assisted by Russian-speaking staff, as well as by students from Ben Gurion University assigned specifically to work with the aged.

When asked to account for the apparent positive reputation enjoyed by the Beersheva services to aged Russian immigrants, the staff members noted these factors:

- the presence of a cadre of well-trained and committed professional social workers
- the commitment to do community work, as well as traditional casework
- the creation of both government-supported and informally developed community centers for Russian aged
- a capable administration in the city's welfare department that apparently has good relationships with the city administration
- some well-designed and well-functioning physical sites

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE IN THE UNITED STATES

This study was a first look at the impressions and opinions of a small sample of social workers and other professionals working with aged Russian immigrants to Israel. The problems they have identified and the programmatic responses they are developing offer some useful perspectives for professionals in the United States who are engaged in the absorption of elderly Russian immigrants. These principles can be derived from the Israeli experience:

- The needs of the aged immigrant are no less critical than those of the young immigrant. Isolation, depression, poor health, and even death are the potential risks of inadequate attention to older immigrants' needs. Government and service agencies must examine existing priorities and raise the level of service resources commensurate with the needs.
- Aged immigrants require specialized services, and agencies concerned with absorption must provide aging specialists to supply those services. The problems of language are critical to successful service to the aged immigrant. Russian immigrants who have already made the adjustment to the new culture are best able to meet the needs of elderly newcomers. Therefore, these Russian "old timers" (though they can certainly be young) must be located, recruited, and trained to work with the elderly. The Israeli experience with special government grants to train selected cohorts of such workers in the established schools of social work is an approach worth considering for implementation in the United States.
- The need for continuity, to feel competent, and to maintain self-esteem in the face of both old age and relocation stress has led, in Israel, to aged Russian immigrants coming together for social and cultural programs in the Russian language. Perhaps in time, the aged immigrant may feel comfortable integrating with the established community. Yet, until then, the task of the professional is to provide frequent regular opportunities for cultural stimulation and social interaction in a language and setting that are familiar and secure.
- Professionals working with aged Russian immigrants in the United States are just as likely as their Israeli counterparts to confront resistance, manipulation, and all the other behaviors developed as survival techniques in a totalitarian society. There is a need for professional self-awareness and support, as well as sources of programmatic ideas from other professionals. In Israel, a new professional organization for workers with aged Russian immigrants is being created to meet these needs. There may be, by now, a large enough group in the United States to warrant a comparable professional association, certainly at least in the main population centers.
- The isolation of many newcomers in Israel and their resistance to receiving more than concrete services from professional welfare workers have required the use of community volunteers as family surrogates, friendly visitors, companions, and simply good neighbors. Therefore, a volunteer coordinator is a necessary job position in any absorption program, and the recruitment and deployment of volunteers, whether Russian-speaking or not, are vital to the program's success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The Israeli professionals interviewed for this study shared many opinions about the absorption experience of aged immigrants that convey a need for a further and more systematic look at factors associated with the adjustment of the elderly newcomers.

The professionals have an impression that these aged immigrants are vulnerable to relocation stress. A more systematic investigation is needed to determine the impact of relocation on health, mortality, morale, survival potential, and general adjustment. The government's policy of direct absorption to communities, bypassing the absorption center, needs to be evaluated for its impact on the aged immigrant. The training and deployment of a new group of Russian social workers may have a positive effect on the absorption process, and there is a need to study whether that training results in better service to aged immigrants.

Direct absorption to the communities has resulted in the development of a broad variety of programs and services in different towns and cities. Certain communities, such as Beersheva described above, have developed successful programs for the aged Russian immigrant. It would be useful to examine more carefully the components of these programs and the outcomes for those served to determine what methods of funding, professional resources, agency or community policies, and so on may contribute to a positive outcome.

The schools of social work have begun to provide special training for a cadre of professionals needed to help with immigrant absorption. Research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this training, factors related to recruitment and successful deployment of new professionals, and factors that may contribute to the implementation of accelerated training programs in other professions.

In all of this proposed research, there is by now sufficient experience with various service models to move from the examination of agency structures and processes to the evaluation of client outcomes. This study asked professionals what they thought aged Russian immigrants were experiencing and what programs seemed to be successful in helping them. Research is needed to test the hypotheses embodied in these impressions.

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