

# NEW BEGINNINGS, OLD PROBLEMS

## Psychocultural Frame of Reference and Family Dynamics during the Adjustment Period

IRENE BELOZERSKY

*Clinical Social Worker, Jewish Family & Children's Service, Boston*

*Immigration, with its accompanying feelings of uprootedness and numerous losses, is a powerful stressor, disrupting the functioning of even the strongest families and individuals. Adjustment to a new society takes the form of a spectrum of physical and emotional reactions. As a rule, families and individuals who functioned well in the Soviet Union will have an easier adjustment in the United States. Age, educational level, and English-speaking ability also influence the ease of adjustment.*

Cultural and social differences play a prominent role in the current literature dealing with the problems and difficulties of adjustment of Soviet Jews in America (see Suggested Readings). Various maladaptive patterns of behavior exhibited by Soviet immigrants are described that are based on their past experiences in a totalitarian society. Yet, despite these cultural differences Soviet Jews have been one of the most successful refugee groups in recent American history.

Immigration, with its accompanying feelings of uprootedness, vulnerability, and numerous losses, acts as a powerful stressor. In varying degrees all immigrants experience this stress. For Soviet Jews, as for other refugees from Communist countries, transplantation to America can be especially difficult because of the great differences between their old and new social systems.

For many Soviet Jews adjustment to the new society and culture takes the form of a spectrum of physical and emotional reactions: from initial euphoria and idealization to confusion, anxiety, anger, depression, and illnesses. Usually only the most severe cases of negative adjustment reaction come to the attention of caseworkers in resettle-

ment agencies. Awareness of important psychocultural characteristics of Soviet Jews may be helpful in providing more effective services to this refugee group, in dealing with "difficult" behaviors, and in facilitating the process of adaptation.

In examining cultural and social characteristics of Soviet Jews one should bear in mind that such analyses involve inevitable generalizations and that Soviet Jews are a very heterogeneous group with strong ethnic and class differences. Age and educational level are also extremely important factors in determining the degree of influence of cultural differences in the process of adjustment.

### COMMON PSYCHOCULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

This article examines these common psychocultural characteristics of Soviet immigrants:

- unrealistic expectations
- sense of entitlement
- loss of the sense of security
- identity by status
- overdependency
- perseverance
- manipulative behavior
- difficulty in establishing trusting relationships
- strong reliance on family and friends
- ambivalence about Jewish identity

---

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Philadelphia, June 4, 1990.

### **Unrealistic Expectations**

Typically, Soviet citizens have an extremely idealized view of the United States as a country where everybody is rich and where technological and scientific advances are beyond one's imagination. One of the most popular slogans of Soviet propaganda after World War II was "Catch up with America and Leave It Behind." This story further illustrates Soviet misconceptions about life in the United States: A woman returns to the Soviet Union after visiting her relatives in America. Her friends are eager to hear about her trip. "They are so rich there," she says wistfully. "Each has a car and \$100,000 of mortgage in the bank." Because Soviet citizens tend to regard official information as untrue or diametrically opposed to the truth, often they do not believe Soviet newspapers when they describe social problems in the United States.

Upon arrival in America and discovery of the realities of unemployment, crime, and prohibitive housing costs, some immigrants feel cheated and disappointed. Medicine is the area of greatest disappointment, especially among older people. Many immigrants come to this country hoping to be cured of their illnesses by advanced American medicine and are instead hit hard by high costs, lengthy periods between doctor's appointments, and no cure in sight.

### **Sense of Entitlement**

Until very recently the Soviet government tried to make the process of emigration as difficult as possible for Soviet Jews. They were harassed, fired from jobs, and made social outcasts. At the same time they were given tremendous support by American Jewry, human rights organizations, and Western governments. This placed Soviet Jews in the double role of victims and heroes and made them feel "special." After immigrating to the United States, some of them expected to continue enjoying this special status and to be rewarded for it. In

everyday interactions with resettlement agencies this sense of entitlement is manifested in angry, demanding, and manipulative behavior and is a great source of frustration to caseworkers. Caseworkers need to understand the roots of such behavior and to clarify continuously for their clients their expectations and roles. However, they should be extremely careful in how they word these clarifications because often immigrants swing from anger to serious depression upon discovering that "nobody needs us here."

### **Loss of the Sense of Security**

Often, dramatic emotional changes occur between Soviet clients' first and second meetings with their caseworkers. From being happy and even euphoric, the immigrants become increasingly anxious, confused, and tense. These changes occur when immigrants begin to deal with the tasks of daily living: looking for an apartment, enrolling children in school, learning the basics of job hunting, etc. These tasks are new and frightening and trigger extreme emotional reactions. On the rational level Soviet immigrants know the differences between Soviet and American social and economic systems, but emotionally they come unprepared for the loss of the sense of security that they derived from the Soviet system. The Soviet state, although oppressing and controlling, provides for its citizens' basic needs, such as housing, employment, free medicine, and education. Without realizing it, many Soviet immigrants relied heavily on this total care by the state.

### **Identity by Status**

Among the many losses suffered by Soviet Jews as a result of immigration, one of the most devastating for many is the loss of their social status. In the Soviet Union, social status—education, occupation, position—is the main source of feelings of self-worth and identity. For professionals

especially, the loss of social status may be very threatening and demoralizing. Often they refuse to accept the popular American value of starting at the bottom and working one's way up. Ironically, they sometimes prefer to stay on welfare, rather than to accept a low-status job, since the institution of public welfare is new to them and is not associated in their minds with a negative social status. Rather, they perceive it as the familiar care by the state.

#### Overdependency

Among numerous differences between Soviet and American cultures, one of the most important for understanding immigrants' behavior is the difference in cultural values. American culture places strong emphasis on self-reliance and independence, whereas Soviet culture strongly encourages Soviet citizens to subject their individual interests to the interests of the collective. The Soviet system encourages obedience and dependency and discourages autonomy and initiative. These values are also to be found in the Soviet family where children are usually overprotected and are expected to please their parents. Individual responsibility and the necessity to make choices are very threatening to some Soviet immigrants, which may trigger in them a childish, clinging behavior toward their caseworker. Very often Soviet immigrants are puzzled and angered by the need to make choices in the area of their health. When their physician outlines for them available options and suggests they make a decision concerning their treatment, this goes completely against their Soviet experience where they were always told what to do and came to expect such behavior from any authority figure, including health care professionals.

#### Perseverance

This article has so far presented psychocultural characteristics of Soviet refugees that contribute to difficulties in adapting to a

new life in the United States. However, despite these difficulties, Soviet Jews demonstrate remarkable perseverance. After the initial shock of encountering the realities of American life many immigrants are resolved "to make it" and spare no effort in working toward this goal. The majority of Soviet Jews become self-sufficient and even successful relatively quickly.

Their Soviet experience of daily struggle for survival comes in very handy in their new homes. Many immigrants comment that, after what they have experienced in the Soviet Union, dealing with American institutions and bureaucrats is easy. Their expertise in these matters brings us to another Soviet characteristic.

#### Manipulative Behavior

In dealing with Jewish and governmental agencies and institutions, many Soviet Jews exhibit patterns of learned behaviors that were extremely useful and adaptive in the U.S.S.R. In a system in which an individual has very few rights and constantly is at the mercy of small and big bureaucrats, one must learn to manipulate this system to survive. When faced with survival tasks upon their arrival in the United States, many immigrants almost instinctively begin to employ the only methods they know. Because they have no frame of reference for which to understand the difference between state and voluntary agencies, any resettlement agency is seen as a continuation of the state and any caseworker as a bureaucrat who must be manipulated.

#### Difficulty in Establishing Trust and Reliance on Family and Friends

This view of a caseworker as a state bureaucrat interferes with the workers' efforts to establish trusting relationships with their clients. In the Soviet Union individuals are forced to split their personality and to present one face to the world and another one to their family and friends. There is a strong cultural prohibition against sharing

private thoughts and feelings with strangers. That is why counseling may be very difficult with Soviet refugees. On the other hand, these people are very warm and giving with their families and close friends. Friendship is valued very highly; favors expected from and done for friends routinely would be considered an imposition by many Americans. Soviet Jews often complain that it is impossible to be true friends with Americans and that social ties between people in the United States are too shallow. New immigrants rely on this informal friendship network and receive invaluable support and assistance from it.

#### Ambivalence about Jewish Identity

To be a Jew in the Soviet Union is to be a member of an ethnic minority that has traditionally been the target of discrimination and harassment. During the 70 years of the Soviet regime Soviet Jews, particularly those from large cities in Central Russia, to a great degree lost their religious and cultural identity. Ukranian, Baltic, and Bukharan Jews were able to preserve more of their identity and heritage. Many Soviet Jews became assimilated and identified strongly with Russian culture and language. On arrival in their new land, many have eagerly embraced the opportunity to exercise their newly found religious freedom, others have relegated this task to their children, and still others have opted to remain on the fringe of the Jewish community. Yet, the key word here is "freedom," and all Soviet refugees are aware of it.

#### FAMILY DYNAMICS IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS AFTER ARRIVAL

Specific reactions to adjustment tasks by a family system and its members depend on a multitude of factors. The most important of these factors are family composition, existing marital and intergenerational problems, age, level of English-speaking ability, type of occupation, and expectations of

each other by family members and of their new life in the United States.

Leo Tolstoy said that all happy families are alike, while each unhappy family is unhappy in its own unique way. In the context of this article, one can say that families that functioned well in the Soviet Union will, as a rule, have an easier adjustment in the United States, whereas less functional families will face a significant intensification of all their problems leading, not infrequently, to the disintegration of the family. Yet, all immigrant families, even the strongest ones, go through a period of disruption in family functioning. Different families deal with these problems differently, although there are a few common reactions, such as depression, physical symptoms, blaming others, or feeling guilty. There are positive reactions as well: sticking together, relying on friends for support, focusing energy on overcoming difficulties, and re-examining their expectations and values. Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that immigrant Soviet families suffer an increase in the divorce rate in the first few years after immigration.

The same anecdotal evidence suggests that young married couples with no children or one young child demonstrate the most successful and the shortest period of adjustment. Such couples tend to have a better education and better English skills. Most important, their developmental task as a new family does not contradict the task of adjustment, of beginning a new life in a new country. Sometimes, the immigration seems to have helped such couples to complete the process of separation from their families of origin. Because of specific Soviet conditions, such separation can be extremely difficult in the U.S.S.R.

The situation can be very different, however, for couples or single parents in their forties with teenage children. In this case their developmental tasks—reaching their full potential, achieving financial stability, and guiding their children toward separation and adulthood—come into conflict with the tasks and realities of adjustment.

Instead of reaching full potential in their professional life, these people often face unemployment, retraining, and beginning on an entry level with little chance of reaching the same professional level they had in the Soviet Union. Financial difficulties replace financial stability, and feelings of confusion, disorientation, and incompetence often prevent parents from offering credible guidance to their children.

One of the most dramatic impacts of immigration on the family system is produced by the disruption of established roles in the family. Some of these roles have been determined by specific conditions of the Soviet system and culture. In the next section, three types of relationships in a Soviet family and how they are affected when the family arrives in the United States are presented.

#### Husband-Wife Relationship

Soon after the Communist revolution in 1917 and in accordance with Karl Marx's theory, Lenin promised total equality of the sexes in Russia. To a certain degree, the Soviet regime has delivered on this promise. Women's equal rights have always been a popular topic of Soviet propaganda, and women are represented on almost all levels of the government hierarchy, constitute more than half the workforce in the Soviet Union, and more or less enjoy equal pay for equal work. On the other hand, traditional Russian culture has never caught up with the official Soviet ideology, and after a day of "equal" work in the workplace, a Soviet woman has to do most of the housework while her "traditional" husband watches television or reads a newspaper. When at work, both men and women are robbed by the Soviet regime of their initiative, autonomy, and control of their destiny, but the woman's role in the family partially compensates her for these losses since she is usually in charge of all family affairs, including finances and decision making. The husband's role is usually reduced to earning a steady income and, for middle-class families, to advancing his career.

Under the conditions of immigration, the husband loses his role of a breadwinner at least initially while the wife continues to take responsibility for running family affairs. As a result, resettlement workers often find that women adjust better and faster while their husbands often lapse into depression and become demoralized, angry, and complaining. This behavior puts a serious strain on the marital relationship, especially if the couple had experienced problems before.

#### Adult Children-Older Parents Relationship

The extended family living in one household is still a very widespread phenomenon in the Soviet Union, even though in larger industrial cities more and more adult children live apart from their older parents. Yet, even these adult children maintain very close ties with their parents and usually live nearby. Older, often retired parents play a very important role in the family system. They help take care of grandchildren; this help is extremely valuable in a system where the alternative is poorly run state-owned day care facilities. Too, they provide a financial safety net for their adult, married, and working children. As a rule, the salaries of two young professionals are barely enough to make ends meet, whereas the grandparents usually have achieved some measure of financial security and can help their adult children financially.

When a family decides to leave the Soviet Union, the decision of grandparents to come with them is based on these two factors: strong family ties and their important role in the family system. In addition, they expect that they will maintain their financial independence through U.S. government assistance. However, these assumptions are quickly shattered by the realities of life in the United States. Grandparents lose their role of financial supporters, grandchildren begin to speak English relatively quickly, the family has to live in a crowded apartment because this is what they can afford, and grandparents become

a burden for their children because their lack of English and cultural disorientation make them totally dependent on their children. The resulting stress and disappointment intensify old problems. As a result, caseworkers often see increased animosity between in-laws, mutual accusations between parents and children, attempts to manipulate the system of subsidized housing in order to obtain a separate apartment for the grandparents, and an avalanche of physical symptoms in the grandparents.

#### Parents—Teenaged Children Relationship

Problems of adolescence are almost universal, and this stage of development is as difficult for Soviet families as it is for American ones. In immigrant families the stresses of this stage are aggravated because often parents lose their role of authority in the eyes of their children while children themselves experience the double task of development and of adjustment. Children feel threatened when all of a sudden their parents stop being protectors and providers, and as true teenagers, they immediately begin to test and to push the limits of parental authority even further. In turn, parents feel threatened by the increasing independence of their children, especially because all Soviet parents live in mortal fear of their children falling victims to sex and drugs in America. They try to re-establish their authority, but instead often lose their credibility and strain the relationship with their children to the limits.

#### Vignette

This vignette of a family seeking help from the Boston Jewish Family & Children's Service illustrates how a resettlement agency can help immigrant families in their struggle to adjust to America.

Anna and Alex Orloff came to Boston with their 7-year-old daughter and Anna's retired parents. In Leningrad the grandparents lived separately and maintained a rather

strained relationship with their son-in-law. However, they spent a lot of time with the granddaughter, thus allowing Anna and Alex to pursue their careers as physicians. During the transition in Italy, relations between the grandparents and Alex began to deteriorate, and by the time they arrived in Boston they were not speaking to each other. Anna felt helpless and torn by this situation. The family managed to rent two apartments in Boston, and Anna's mother offered to have the granddaughter live with them so that Anna and Alex could concentrate on preparing for their medical exams. The grandfather, who had handyman's skills, hoped that he would be able to earn some money by doing odd jobs. Soon he discovered that he could not find such jobs due to his lack of English and poor physical health. While his wife was busy taking care of the granddaughter and attending English classes, he became increasingly depressed and despondent.

Anna and Alex realized that one of them had to work to support the other while he or she was preparing for exams. Alex, who was more career oriented, began studying while Anna worked as a cleaning lady. This loss of professional and social status was very difficult for her, and she resented the fact that Alex was staying home and studying hard, refusing even to help her around the house. They began to fight, and Anna became increasingly depressed; she felt worthless and unappreciated. Their resettlement worker became aware of these problems only when the grandfather stopped by one day to pick up some papers. On previous occasions the caseworker usually met with both couples, and they presented a united front in hiding their problems. This time, however, in reply to a simple question, the grandfather became tearful and began talking of his sense of loss and despair.

After this meeting the caseworker called Anna and asked her to come in to discuss the situation with her father. During this meeting it became obvious that Anna was also depressed and overwhelmed by all the difficulties in her family.

The caseworker began to see Anna regularly for counseling. She also found a volunteer for Anna who came to their house and helped both Alex and Anna with English. Eventually the volunteer helped Anna find

a better job. Simultaneously the caseworker helped the grandparents move to a bigger apartment that needed many improvements. That gave the grandfather an opportunity to use his handyman's skills and to feel needed again. While hunting for bargains at various home improvement stores, both grandparents came to know Boston better. They began taking long walks around Boston during which the grandfather started enjoying his old hobby of photography. Meanwhile Alex successfully passed his first medical exam and took over the burden of earning an income while Anna could concentrate on improving her English. Their relationship improved dramatically, and finally Alex and his parents-in-law began talking to each other again. Today the Orloffs live on the East Coast where Alex holds a prominent position in a large teaching hospital, Anna is planning to open her own beauty salon, their daughter is attending a private school, and the grandfather teaches photography to other Soviet elderly at a local Jewish Community Center.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

- Brodsky, B. (1982). Social work and the Soviet immigrant. *Immigration Today*, 10.
- Devore, Wynetta, & Schlesinger, E.G. (1981). *Ethnic-sensitive social work practice*. St. Louis: CV Mosby.
- Dorf, Nina, & Katlin, Fay. (1983, Winter). The Soviet immigrant client: Beyond resettlement. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 60 (2).
- Erikson, Erik H. (1964). *Uprootedness in our time: Responsibility and identity*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Gittelman, Zvi. (1982). Soviet immigrant resettlement in the United States. *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, 12 (2).
- Goldstein, Edgar. (1979). Psychological adaptations of Soviet immigrants. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 30 (3), 257-263.
- . (1984). Homo Sovieticus in transition. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 12 (1), 115-126.
- Green, James W. (1982). *Cultural awareness in the human services*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hulewat, P. (1981). Dynamics of the Soviet Jewish family. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*.
- Rubin, Burton S. (1982, May). Refugee resettlement: A unique role for family service. *Social Casework*, 63, 5.
- Sluzki, Carlos E. (1979, December). Migration and family conflict. *Family Process*, 18 (4).
- Smith, Hedrick. (1976). *The Russians*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Stutz, Rochelle P. (1984, March/April). Resettlement of Soviet emigres: How caseworkers coped. *Social Work*, 29 (2), 187-188.