

Soviet Emigres in Saint Paul: A Study of their Absorption

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... the key to success in absorption of Soviet Jewish immigrants lies in a high degree of personal contact with American Jews. Most Soviet emigrés in the community have been here more than five years while many are nonAmerican Citizens. The task, therefore, is to ensure that the newcomers will remain Jews ...

DURING 1981, the United Jewish Fund and Council of Saint Paul, Minnesota undertook a study to ascertain the integration of Jewish emigres from the USSR in American Jewish life as well as the general problems they faced in absorption into American society. The aim of this project was not merely theoretical or scholarly. Rather it had the practical purpose of identifying significant Jewish concerns among Soviet newcomers so as possibly to solve them.

The first part of the overall study was a survey of the attitudes and behavior of American Jews toward Soviet Jewish newcomers. The results of this study have already been completed and published.¹ The second survey, the subject of this paper, was administered to fifty-seven newcomers who had been in the St. Paul community for at least two years. The survey was administered in person to participants by Soviet immigrants who had come to St. Paul before 1974 and who were fully integrated into the community. These interviewers were trained in interview techniques by agency personnel and it was generally

felt that they were able to ask questions and evoke responses that would not have been possible for American-born interviewers. The interviewers filled in the questionnaires. The questionnaire often took several hours to complete. It is believed that the personal approach in the survey, prefaced by a telephone call from the Russian speaking interviewer, accounted for the high level of newcomer participation. Only four of those contacted refused to be interviewed.

Part of the survey ascertained objective facts and part demanded some subjective analysis and discussion between the interviewer and the subject. This approach was found necessary since the newcomers had never before been exposed to a polling process and when contacted earlier by agency personnel, they had resisted the process. The questions were designed also to suggest to newcomers the optional levels of involvement in American Jewish life that they may not have been aware of or had yet to seek out.

Part I: Background of the Respondents

Soviet Jewish immigrants have been coming to St. Paul since 1972. Of the 57 newcomers surveyed, 47 were married, 44 had been born in the period from 1931 to 1950 and most had emigrated from larger Soviet cities—Kiev (38%),

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¹ Stephen Feinstein, "Surveying Community Responses to Soviet Jewish Immigration: the St. Paul Experience," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Summer, 1982).

Leningrad (33%), and Moscow (8.7%). Educationally, 54% had university or institute degrees, while 31% had finished trade schools and 14% had finished only secondary school. Vocationally, the Soviet emigres came mainly from professional fields: engineering, economics, medicine, science, and computer work and teaching. Only 5% of the emigres were employed in blue collar callings in the USSR.

Economically, there was every indication that the newcomers were doing well. The largest cluster of incomes was in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range, although almost as many had total family earnings between \$20,000 and \$35,000 annually. 36% of the respondents owned their own home and 96% owned one automobile (26% more than one). This is clearly a statement of economic success of the Soviet immigrant.

Part II: the Jewish Experience in the USSR

Their Jewish experience and exposure to Jewish institutions and culture in the Soviet Union form an acutely important base for judging later responses of emigres toward American Jewish institutions. The second part of the survey sought to evaluate briefly this background of the newcomers. An indication was sought of the level of Jewish identification while residing in the Soviet Union and the impact that identification may have had on the resettlement process.

In the survey sample, 94% of those surveyed had come from families where both parents were Jewish. Of the respondents who were married, nearly all had Jewish spouses, while only two had married non-Jews. Most indicated that their experience with Judaism while they lived in the USSR was at most casual, as indicated by Table 1:

Table 1.
Jewish Religious Identification of Newcomers Before Emigration from the USSR

	Percent
Attendance in synagogue generally:	33
Attendance in synagogue during High Holidays:	26
Celebration of Chanukah in the home:	33
Celebration of Passover in the home:	56
Considered self religiously observant:	18
Expressed desire for religious instruction:	12

These figures would seem appropriate given the tendency of Jews as well as other groups in the USSR to drift away from religious observance to which political and social stigmas are attached. For Jews, observance is made the more difficult by the shortage of ritual objects and books, as well as especially negative political connotations because of linkages in Soviet officialism between Jewish religion and the "racist" and "imperialist" character of "International Zionism."

The newcomers in St. Paul, however, did not appear to have strong Jewish national attachments either, as demonstrated by their reported activity with Jewish groups in the USSR prior to emigration:

Table 2.
Jewish National Identification of Newcomers before Emigration from the USSR

	Percent
Active in groups concerned with Jewish emigration:	5
Expressed desire for greater freedom as Jews:	84
Desire for greater cultural enlightenment:	49
Desire for opportunities in Jewish studies:	21
Desire for study of Zionism:	2

Most of the newcomers to St. Paul say they left the Soviet Union because of

anti-Semitism (52%) or because of perceived discrimination in education (24.5%). These answers seemed consistent with those in other surveys which have been done over the past five years. The overt anti-Semitism of Soviet policy is well known and has been intensifying since 1979. Soviet policy in the area of education has been one of systematic exclusion of Jews from institutions of higher learning. This philosophy is predicated apparently on the belief that most Jews have dual loyalties and are therefore, a poor "investment" risk vis-a-vis education. This systematic exclusion from the Soviet universities has been documented by William Korey in an ADL study.² It is interesting that only 3.5% of the respondents indicated they had left because of economic discrimination, and only one person indicated he had left for the desire of economic gain. Only 3.5% of those surveyed indicated that "desire for freedom" was the major criterion for departing the USSR. Therefore, the survey seemed to indicate by exclusion that discrimination and fear for the future of their children may have been important motivations for seeking emigration.

Parts III and IV: the Jewish and Absorption Experiences in America

The immigrants surveyed arrived in St. Paul between 1974 and 1980. A series of questions were posed to the newcomers regarding their absorption process in the St. Paul community. The Jewish Family and Children's Service (JFCS), and the Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) were the agencies primarily responsible for serving them.

² William Korey, *The Soviet "Protocols of the Elders of Zion": Anti-Semitic Propaganda in the USSR, August 1967-August 1977*. B'nai B'rith International Council. 1978.

Table 3.
Newcomers' Evaluation of Jewish Resettlement Services

	Percent
JFCS provided adequate personal assistance:	87
JFCS provided adequate apartment:	77
JFCS provided sufficient money:	96
JVS helped in finding employment:	49

These are generally affirmative responses—especially for maintenance provided by the JFCS which had the major service task in the first two months in America. The lower rating in the area of job possibilities is more reflective of the general problems of the job market and the particular fact that the Jewish Vocational Service cannot possibly fill every job need in an open market. However, coming from the USSR, a country where everyone is "guaranteed" a job and where it may be said there is a "soft floor" for everyone who is employed, the newcomer tends to dependence and expectations that the local "bureaucracy" has the obligation and will provide a job equivalent to that he or she held in the Soviet Union.

There were a few areas among the respondents where the local Jewish agencies did not fare as well.

Table 4.
Areas of Disagreement with Communal Absorption Policies

	Percent
JFCS and JVS provided opportunities to learn English:	43
JFCS understood immigrants:	43
JVS understood immigrants:	33
JFCS staff was able to communicate with newcomers:	40
JFCS made newcomer feel Jewish in America:	63

Thus, while the absorption process obviously has difficulties which are known to both agencies and newcomers, an en-

couraging statistic is the last one which indicates the Jewish quality of the agencies is indeed evident and experienced.

Becoming employed in American society is an area of obvious concern of most immigrants, especially because of the barrage of propaganda in the USSR. The United States is usually depicted in the Soviet press as strangling the poor and unemployed. St. Paul seemed to experience trauma in absorption into the job market not unlike those of newcomers to other American cities or to Israel. Of those surveyed, half indicated they were now working in the same occupation in which they were employed in the USSR, with 40% indicating they were now in different fields of employment. 61% were satisfied with their current employment while 22% were not. Most respondents felt they had sufficient command of the English language to work in their field (75%), while 64% of all of those questioned indicated that their level of English proficiency was acceptable (fair to very good, only 3.5% very good). One-third of the emigres, however, felt that their English language ability was poor or very poor. The language problem is significant and deserves more attention. Isolation along with other emigres, whether established by housing patterns orchestrated by the resettlement services or dictated by newcomers' preferences to be among other Soviet immigrants perpetuates the utilization of the Russian language not only within the family but in everyday social activity and in circles of friends. The failure to master English, in turn, causes difficulties in the work place as well as in the process of introduction into Jewish communal life. There are barriers to intensive learning of English, as their mutual social support mechanisms depend upon maintenance of the Russian language, and it can not easily be forsaken for the language of a culture that is yet somewhat alien.

Both the St. Paul and Minneapolis Jewish communities utilize a "host family" program as an aid in absorption of immigrants. Each new family, upon arrival, is assigned a host family. In addition, newly arriving families might have other contacts in the community they may have made earlier in the USSR with Americans who visited as tourists, or through relatives already here. 66% of the newcomers indicated they had help in resettlement from outside the established Jewish agencies, mainly from host families. Host families, however, appeared to be useful only in the socialization and familiarization process, not in the area of employment. Only 7% of the emigres indicated that the host family had helped them find a job. In close to 70% of the cases, host families had introduced newcomers to Jewish life in St. Paul. 21% of all respondents indicated that the host family's help was most significant in resettlement. Host family support rated higher than similar services provided by family, friends and rabbis. A modest number of the children of immigrants who had host families were attending religious school (41%). However, the actual number of children enrolled was statistically inconsequential to make any definitive judgments. There was a definite correlation for newcomers between having host families and knowing and contributing to the United Jewish Fund and Council, the major St. Paul fund raising organization.

Table 5.
Perceptions of United Jewish Fund and Council by Newcomers with and without Host Family Experience

	Percent	
	Host families	No. hosts
Newcomer understood function of UJFC:	67	47
Newcomer contributed money to UJFC:	39	26

Thus it would seem that existence of the host family program was of benefit also to the *community* by promoting levels of Jewish consciousness and participation by Soviet newcomers.

There were some interesting contradictions in results on questions relating to employment and the establishment of friendships. For example, language and employment were rated by the emigres as the foremost barriers in the resettlement process, followed far behind by that of establishing friendships. 94% replied they had made friends, yet, 54% indicated that most of their friends were from the Soviet Jewish immigrant community itself, and a startling 79% indicated they had not made any friendships with American Jews. In a certain sense, this statistic was not surprising since the earlier survey of members of the American Jewish community indicated a wide disparity between their expectations and the realities of the immigration movement. On top of this, natives ranked last among four categories of community residents in their receptivity to newcomers. The new survey seemed to confirm this through another item. 78% of immigrants said they had invited American Jews to their homes as guests but only 19% indicated the reverse. Local American Jews appeared to be ignoring newcomers socially. This is a particularly devastating indictment of the local Jewish community and is definitely an area that demands more investigation and, in particular, the possible development of some educational programs among American Jews to increase their awareness of the patterns and problems of the social integration of their Soviet co-religionists.

The last part of the questionnaire dealt with aspects of Jewish identity among immigrants and their Jewish experience in St. Paul. Coming from an environment where the definitions of

Jewishness are shaped partially by anti-Semitism and partially by bureaucratic structures and terminology (i.e. Soviet Jews often refer to themselves as "invalids of the fifth category" because the fifth line on the Soviet passport contains the word *Evrei* for nationality) and less by the traditional expressions of Jewish religion, culture and education. Most of the immigrants defined Jews as a nationality which is the Soviet practice and a vehicle for assimilation of Jews within the multinational Soviet society. Things "Jewish" are considered not religious but only cultural, thus distancing the Soviet Jewish outlook from that of other Jews around the world. This foretold the difficulties Soviet Jews would have in identification with the American Jewish community. Only 5% felt that Judaism was a religion, while 22% felt it was a mixture of religion and nationalism.

Despite their own narrow definition of their Judaism, there was a perception by emigres that American Jews were mainly identified by synagogue affiliation, followed by their desire to pursue Jewish education, having Jewish friends and observing the holidays. Lower down on the list of Jewish characteristics as perceived by the emigres were: charitable contributions, volunteer activities and ritual practices. These are interesting perceptions by newcomers as they give clues to a possible behavioral pattern within the American Jewish community. They also indicate some naiveté in the Soviet Jewish perception of American Judaism. For example, ritual practices and volunteer activities, as well as contributions to the United Jewish Fund and Council might be regarded as high priority manifestations of Jewishness by American Jews over some of the other items given greater weight by emigres.

Despite limitations in perception of the American community plus their lack

of access to Jewish institutions, emigres exhibited a remarkable level of participation within the general Jewish community. Although statistics for general Jewish participation in all the events specified in the questionnaire are unavailable, one might speculate that the newcomers did even better than American Jews in some areas. For example, 86% of the respondents indicated they attended synagogue, with 65% having memberships. There is a question, of course, as to whether these are bona fide memberships in the dues paying sense. Many synagogues offered free access without dues for at least the first year, and possibly longer. Most newcomers were members of the Conservative synagogue, with only a few attending a Reform congregation. Others were distributed among smaller synagogues in St. Paul and Minneapolis. While most newcomers (72%) indicated the synagogue experience was a positive one, less than half had attended synagogal social, educational or cultural programs. Few had heard of havurah groups. This information suggests that more might be done to bring emigres into the synagogue. The question raised, of course is whether or not the attitude of Soviet immigrants is different from that of local Jews. The havurah, a new concept even to American Jews, because of its small size and informality, is an idea worth exploring for any new immigration. A havurah leader who can deal with emigres in their own language might be hard to come by. Instruction or even services in their native language is very important to emigres. Most of those surveyed indicated that utilization of a Russian prayer book would make them feel more welcome. 84% of the interviewees had been invited to attend synagogue events. So, something greater than a simple invitation appears to be necessary for some lasting results.

Table 6.
Frequency of Synagogue Attendance

	Percent
Attended Weekly	7
Attended Monthly	9
Attended High Holidays	54
Attended Occasionally	16
No Attendance	14

Eighty-nine percent of the adult emigres in St. Paul have children. Only 54% said it was important their children have a Jewish identity, although the response to intermarriage by their children indicated a larger concern. Of the eighteen respondents with children in the University, only one-third attended events at Hillel House. 51% of those children below college level did attend religious school—meaning Talmud Torah (Jewish day school was not available at the time the survey was completed). An overwhelming number of emigre children did not belong to Jewish groups. But 75% of those of age to attend camps run by Jewish agencies had attended such facilities, and nearly all parents felt this a positive experience.

In trying to ascertain the intensity of Jewish identification, the survey asked some attitudinal questions:

Table 7.
Critical Jewish Issues Among Newcomers

	Percent
Important that child marry a Jew	88
Important that child remain Jewish	84
Charity a means of expressing support for Israel	84
Positive feelings toward Israel	89

While the desire to maintain Jewish identity appears very clear, there may exist contradictions in the approaches taken to youth participation in education and Jewish groups, which may lead to loss of Jewish identification. One of the things evident in several subjective

discussions during the questionnaire administration was that many newcomers felt simply that their children would follow them as Jews, but with no real body of evidence or educational history to support this expectation. Thus, desire for future family Jewishness may be more wishful thinking than reality.

The programs at the Jewish Community Center generally received high marks. Other community organizations did not have the same visibility.

Table 8.
Awareness of Jewish Community Institutions

	Percent
Awareness of JCC Programs:	88
Participated in JCC Program:	78
Utilized JCC Athletic facilities	67
Awareness of JCC volunteer programs:	24
Awareness of purpose of Community Relations Council (ADL)	21
Awareness of Soviet Jewry Action Committee	72
Attended meetings of Soviet Jewry Committee	14
Received Soviet Jewry Newsletter	19

The success of the Jewish Community Center is obvious. It is the logical center for immigrant social life, since most language classes, many volunteer efforts on behalf of newcomers and social events took place at the JCC. The free membership was also an incentive to take advantage of a full range of activities at such institutions. Jewish defense organizations such as the ADL were virtually unknown because of little effort by such organizations to appeal to newcomers, except with respect to the Soviet Jewry Action Committee.

The questions dealing with the social interaction of newcomers with members of the Jewish community evoked answers indicating substantial difficulties. While newcomers seem to have attended community events with American Jews, they did not find the socialization process easy nor did they develop close

friendships with American Jews. Indeed, most newcomers revealed that their social experiences had been better in their former homeland:

Table 9.
Socializing Experiences Among Newcomers

	Percent	
	Agree	Disagree
Attended community events with American Jews:	66	44
Socializing with American Jews was easy:	45	26
Got along well with American friends:	50	28
American friendships were close relationships:	38	35
American friendships were as close as soviet friendships (when living in USSR):	20	80

These figures appear indicative of real problems in socialization in America but not unexpected given the nature of Soviet society whence the emigres come. Newcomer expectations for friendships in a free society must be very high. Therefore, when friendships are less fulfilling there is obviously a high level of disappointment.

The survey also tried a self evaluation by newcomers of their degree of familiarity with Jewish-culture and history. Generally, the immigrants thought they were well-informed about Judaism, despite the limited possibilities for Jewish education in the USSR. This appears to be one of the great ironies of the Soviet immigration. The newcomers, despite all of the cultural limitations of Soviet Jewish life, do have a belief in their extensive knowledge of the general Jewish experience and, in particular, of their own, Soviet Jewish, history. Since so much of Jewish history and Zionism developed within Eastern Europe, Soviet Jewish familiarity with factual information would be expected. For example, 81% of the immigrants felt that they

were generally knowledgeable about Israel, Jewish history and culture, with 7% indicating extensive knowledge of the subject (17.5% were unfamiliar). This is a figure that might be compared favorably with the knowledge of American Jews who have open access to the documents of Jewish history. 50% of the immigrants had read Jewish history, while 40% had not. The survey, however, did not try to gauge the actual depth or accuracy of the newcomers' knowledge of Jewish culture and history.

One of the more significant difficulties in dealing with immigrants has been in keeping them informed about local Jewish events. The most extensive source of information, according to the survey, was through the Jewish Community Center newsletter or through friends. Only a few indicated that the local Jewish newspaper, *The American Jewish World*, was a source of information. The problem with this local newspaper may lie with the nature of its publication policy in that it has made no special effort to provide a column in either Russian or Yiddish to reach out to newcomers. Mailings were also a significant source of information as well as a Russian language newspaper. The latter undoubtedly refers to a national newspaper rather than a local one, as none is published in the Twin Cities except a Lubovitch newsletter in Russian, although no one specified the Lubovitch newsletter as a source of information.

Most newcomers were generally satisfied with their life in the Upper Midwest. 70% indicated they were happy. A very high number, 87%, indicated that it was important for newcomers to become involved in American Jewish life, perhaps an indication that the general message conveyed to the Jewish community as a whole was seeping into the immigrant group. They responded favorably to some propositions for achiev-

ing a greater social integration, but were unenthusiastic about action or "cause" groups:

Table 10.
Reactions of Immigrants to Suggested Ways to Improve Social Interaction

	Percent
Holding events in Synagogues:	84
Participation in havurah groups:	28
Interest in attending classes:	75
Program about community organizations:	68
Films:	68
<i>Interest in Committee Assignments:</i>	
Resettlement of Soviet Jews:	35
Employment for Soviet Jews	16
Soviet Jewry Action Committee	12
Cultural committee	23
JCC or Talmud Torah Education Committee	9
JCRC Committee on Holocaust	3
JCRC Committee on anti-Semitism	16
JCRC Committee to support Israel	10
Aiding in UJFC solicitations	14
Self-help group	39

The above responses indicate more interest in areas closest to the Soviet immigrants' own needs, such as resettlement and self-help groups. Havurah groups, a recent experience even for American Jewry, did not score well with newcomers because of their lack of familiarity with the concept, even after an explanation by the interviewer.

Only 36% of the parents were interested in having their children in Talmud Torah and 51% were interested in having their children participate in a Jewish youth group. So, the inclinations of Soviet emigres can be summed up as their principal interest being in that which can be instrumental in their own adaptation to America, things which are not necessarily Jewish, despite anti-Semitism being a prime reason for their departure from the Soviet Union. Speculatively, had there not been an increasing anti-Semitism, in the USSR, they might have moved further toward total assimilation within the Russian

culture. Newcomers with higher incomes had a higher level of awareness of the function of the United Jewish Fund and Council (52% among the \$10,000–\$20,000 income range, 72% among the \$20,000–\$35,000 range and 88% in the over \$35,000 income level). Also, expectedly, contributors to the UJFC were larger in number in the \$20,000 and above categories:

Table 11.
Contributions to the UJFC by Newcomers

INCOME:	Contributors (%)	Non-Contributors (%)
Under \$10,000	0%	100%
\$10,000–\$20,000	21%	79%
\$20,000–\$35,000	56%	33%
Over \$35,000	67%	33%
Social Security	0%	100%

(Note: In cases where figures do not add up to 100%, some respondents ignored the question)

The higher level of contributors in the upper income brackets would suggest that Soviet newcomers will seek involvement, at least in this respect, when they have greater economic independence. Participation as givers, in turn, has the potential to generate other interests and is reflective of a normalization into American life. The big question, of course, is whether all newcomers will make the income leap. Chances are they will not. Therefore, the community must conduct its policy assuming relative stabilization of current income levels.

It appears that the key to success in absorption of Soviet Jewish immigrants

lies in a high degree of personal contact with American Jews. Most Soviet emigres now in the community are really not newcomers; most have been here more than five years while many are now American citizens. The task, therefore, is to ensure that the newcomers will remain Jews, and active ones if possible, rather than disappear within the greater American public. If the latter occurs, there has been no specific benefit for Jewry as a whole, and the Soviet Jewish immigration movement may need to reexamine its approaches to the problem. Certainly, the general principle of obtaining freedom for a single individual is a worthy goal in itself. However, if Soviet Jews, who have identities as Jews within the totalitarian framework of the USSR leave to become Americans and lose their Jewish identity completely, there is more than a touch of irony to the whole emigration movement.

Viewing the overall pessimistic emigration situation from 1984, one might conclude that the results of this study, which generally suggest the need for a more active interchange between American Jews and Soviet newcomers, may never be called into play. However, the opposite may be the case if there is a change in the general tenor of US-Soviet relations and thus a renewal of Jewish emigration from the USSR. As Jews living in the USSR are more isolated than ever before, a more hospitable environment will be an utter necessity for those future emigres who are fortunate enough to leave the USSR and who opt to come to America.