

THE ADAPTATION OF RUSSIAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

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The emotional tasks of adaptation for Russian immigrant families can be divided into time periods. A focus on the past requires the mourning of losses, and may be experienced as nostalgia or depression. In the present, the tasks are identity modification and adjustment to the altered family power structure, as different family members adapt at varying rates and in different ways. Issues of language, work skills, family communication skills, illness and death of loved ones all play a role. The future focuses attention on the sense of hope, which is dependent on ego strength, motivation, and modification of culturally determined expectations. Failure in any of these tasks may intensify prior maladaptive modes of coping and relating. It is the task of caregivers to comprehend the multiple interpenetrating factors involved in adaptation and respond empathically to the varied experiences and feelings of different individuals.

In a recent newspaper interview, Andrei Makine, the Russian emigre author now living in France, spoke of the differences between French, his adopted language, and his native Russian. "The French language has 26 tenses," he said, "but in Russian there are only three—a nostalgic past, a vague present, and a hypothetical future" (*New York Times*, October 8, 1997).

His answer, of course, goes beyond questions of language; it is an especially apt description of the predicament of Russian immigrants and their families. An immigrant is aware, more than anyone else, of the sense of time—leaving one's homeland is an indelible event, the date of arrival forever fixed in memory, with the remainder of life divided into the time before and the time after. Keep in mind Makine's observations as I consider the theme of loss (the nostalgic, sometimes tragic past), the issue of evolving an indeterminate identity in the present, the role of language in the ordering of social and psychological experience, and the influence of character and culture on the nature of hope. These themes are deeply interconnected; examining them more or less sequentially does not imply that the others are not acting simultaneously. In fact, it is their very simultaneity that makes this process so unlike any other,

with its complex cultural, psychological, social, and linguistic facets. This article is based on my five years of working as a psychiatrist with members of the Russian emigre community, both in private practice and in hospital clinic settings.

THE THEME OF LOSS

Listen for a moment to these words taken from the letter of an elderly immigrant to a friend written soon after his arrival in a new country. Like many others, this man had suffered from anti-Semitism and the rising dangers of perverse nationalism. He writes, "The feeling of triumph at liberation is mingled too strongly with mourning, for I still very much love the prison from which I have been released" (Gay, 1988, p. 9). His ironic distance, the awareness of his ambivalence, and the "triumph" mingled with sadness are moving. The letter is from 1938, and the tired and frail man who wrote it had just fled from Vienna to London to escape Nazism. His name was Sigmund Freud.

Clearly, Freud's loss led him to appreciate that, for all his problems there, Vienna had nonetheless been his home. He is mourning, and he poignantly describes this conflicted inner state. Such powerful mixed emotions

are inevitable in migration. As I hardly need to add, the distance from Vienna to London, in all possible ways, is shorter than that from Odessa, Minsk, or Tashkent to the United States and, unlike most Russian immigrants, Freud was already fluent in the language of his new home, had visited previously, and had arranged for many of his belongings to be brought with him.

For Russian immigrants, however, many things, tangible and intangible, cannot be brought to their new homes. Speak patiently to them about which items they decided to bring and which to leave behind, and you will be quickly transported to some of the most sentimentally meaningful parts of their lives. The intangibles, such as a sense of place and of meaning, or powerful emotions of friendship and trust often ventured at great risk, and yes, even the suffering, may be relegated forever to a nostalgic past. Obviously, an adequate chance to mourn these losses is essential. Yet as critical as that is, to be *stuck* in that past state, without making room for new attachments, severely hinders adaptation to the new reality. It also burdens the lives of those nearby, who are themselves negotiating the same difficult road. Individual circumstances, character, and personal history all determine the success of this process. Only a certain amount of preparation can be done in advance, which is why we first see a period of culture shock upon arrival, which then invariably evolves into a mourning process as the full reality of the change sinks in.

Especially, though certainly not exclusively, for the elderly, who may spend more time looking back than looking ahead, the loss may be so overwhelming that it can lead to severe depression (when the process of mourning sinks of its own weight), or it can become expressed somatically, as if their bodies are doing the weeping for them. Of course, more than the losses of their former lives are sustained by the elderly. They may learn of previously undiagnosed illness on their first medical exams, face the death or illness of a spouse precisely at the time when

the mutual supportiveness of that relationship is most essential, or find themselves geographically removed from easy access to children and grandchildren once they arrive here, in sad contrast to their hopes and expectations. Given the strong tendency for somatization of emotional problems among Russian immigrants, along with the natural predisposition to illness in the aged, plus their painstakingly maintained pride, many physicians are not always quick to recognize these psychological expressions of loss and conflict or are hesitant to do so. This difficulty is further complicated by the emotional distancing on both sides that occurs when working through an interpreter, the immigrants' mistrust of authority (they often mistrust the interpreters as well), and their lack of comprehension of a new style of medical care.

This is a sensitive issue, one that deserves its own discussion because it touches on the matter that the capacity of the caregivers is itself a critical factor in the immigrant's adaptation. Since institutional relationships in the medical system, the schools, the labyrinthine social welfare network, and federal immigration services are so much a part of the newly arrived immigrant's experience, the influence of the helpers' attitudes, skills, and compassion cannot be exaggerated. The frequent bewilderment and subsequent helplessness of our clients should come as no surprise; even sophisticated natives cannot figure out this system. On the other hand, the degree to which relationships can be personalized and invested with meaning, and connections made to a stable social structure, are long-proven factors in the primary prevention of medical and psychiatric illness, and of social breakdown. Jewish resettlement agencies are best poised to provide this care.

Let us return to the Freud episode. His move to London may have revived the sadness of his earlier emigration at age three from Moravia to Vienna, when he described himself as changing from a "happy child" to a time when "nothing was worth remembering" (Freud, 1899). A similar story occurred

with a woman referred to me for depression and memory loss that, on examination, turned out to be an amnesia that could be dated precisely to the day of her arrival in the United States.¹ She had come only reluctantly, at the urging of her husband, because little was left for them in Ukraine, where a lifetime's experience of anti-Semitism had come to seem routine, and out of fear of the increasing effects of "the pollution." "Pollution" is a code word for Chernobyl, but often comes to stand for the whole unstable political and economic situation as well. She, like Freud, had experienced an earlier migration, when she was evacuated from her home during the advance of Hitler's army and was relocated to Central Asia for the duration of the war. Upon her return she learned that her father had disappeared, a victim either of the Nazis or of their Ukrainian sympathizers. How tragic again that conflict with her only son, who arrived in the United States earlier, kept them apart and rekindled the earlier loss. Even without this, the unresolved ambivalence with which she left her home had already exposed her to a greater risk of depression. Her nostalgia, if we can call it that, was so profound that she psychologically disowned all cognizance of the present and lived *only* in the past. Painful as that past was, she had at least known who she was then. In comparison, the vague present threatened her with even greater trauma, such as the loss of role and of meaning and the fear she had made an irreversible error; thus her psychological rejection of it. *In the past, the future was clear.* Ironically, as is the case with many others, the unanticipated advent of freedom overturned the order of things and caught her unprepared. In addition, she was living in a Russian language past that hindered her absorption of new experiences. It was easy to seal off a world in which she did not understand a word of what was being said around her and despaired of ever being able to. In my experience, for the elderly, the *motivation* to study English is more important than the

ability to do so. It is a better prognostic sign for adaptation, because it incorporates such factors as hope, energy, alertness to surroundings, interest in social interaction, and more.

I use this example to emphasize that each immigrant has a unique story to tell that is always worth hearing. It enriches both narrator and listener, restoring for the narrator some sense of who one was, who one is, and perhaps who one can be, if told in the company of someone who values the telling. For us as listeners, whether lay or professional, hearing these stories is both priceless and moving. Beyond their usefulness for our clients, they can often serve to deepen our own understanding of ourselves, clarify the motives for our commitment, and strengthen our personal bond of continuity with the collective past. For immigrants coming from a society in which the very notion of memory and thus truth was perverted into a political commodity, dictated at will and commanded by force into a false conformism, the need to restore its value is essential for the working through of problems both at the level of the community and of the individual. The exodus from Russia is a major chapter of the Diaspora; it is living history, and it is good that it be told. If we are open to change, as we request of our clients that *they* be, then we cannot but be enriched by bearing witness.

Loss is experienced differently not only by each individual but also by each generation. Immigration occurs at the crossroads of a person's individual stage of psychological and social development, and a profound change in the external physical and sociocultural environment. These stages determine the nature of the age-appropriate psychological and social tasks involved in each person's adaptation, the nature of the fantasies and their associated affects (such as hope and fear) that accompany arrival, and the developmental and intellectual skills available to the person to weather the challenge. Thus, each person adjusts at a different rate and in a different way, for a multitude of reasons.

Mutual interactions within the family are often strained by this process, which may

¹All clinical excerpts are disguised.

continue indefinitely into the future. This is compounded in cases of pre-existing latent family conflict, especially if there were poor problem-solving skills, and when the loss of the extra-familial network of friends (a key factor in Russian life) throws a family back onto itself in ways it has never experienced before, at the height of a stress it has never faced before.

It is very common to find in some families a threat of secondary internal migration (Landau, 1982) when conflict arises as the parents try to keep their adolescent children from "emigrating" from the family itself to the superficial values of American culture picked up in school and elsewhere. This reignites separation anxiety and threatens the parents' sense of the cohesiveness of the family unit, which in Russia was a refuge from the physical and psychological cruelties of the outside world. It puts pressure on both the adequacy of the parents' identity as role models and their self-esteem, which has already been challenged by other factors such as language acquisition, loss or downgrading of profession, and lack of that knowledge of the world that children count on their parents to have. Adolescents are the most ready to absorb the new culture, given the conjunction of their natural developmental task of leaving the family with the temptations of the new and markedly different social world made available to them. This situation is ironic of course, because opportunities for the children were major reasons for the parents' decision to emigrate in the first place. Now those parents find themselves in a restraining role, stranded between two cultures, defending values of the society they left behind.

It is important to view this situation in a flexible light. It is not a case of one side trying to adapt while the other resists. Rather, each has its own notion of what adaptation means. It is easy for us to fall prey to the temptation to blame one side or another—the parents for holding back their children and being slow to join in the new society themselves or the children for going beyond that limit that we feel allows for the reasonable adolescent ex-

pression of assertiveness and individuality. Such judgments fail to penetrate to where the danger is felt: Both generations are dealing with the ever-present influence and pressures of their new environment, but can only respond according to their different abilities and knowledge, such as, for example, the different notion of adolescence prevalent in Soviet society. For that matter, we ourselves will disagree as to the relative value of what is offered here, of what is best about being an American, or Jewish-American, or urban-American, or any other kind of hyphenated American. Though we are obviously guided by good intentions and knowledge of the culture, success is not to be measured solely by the immigrants' fulfillment of our pre-existing idea of what is best for them, but rather by the ability of the family system to resume working in its own optimal way to cope with this stress.

Adolescence is already a disorienting and destabilizing time. Add to it the burden of being different by virtue of accent or dress or custom, and the already shaky balance may be thrown off kilter. I have found it to be a time of potentially incredible loneliness and confusion in the Russian teenagers with whom I have worked. Parents who are used to responding by a set of automatic rules that may have worked in a foreign cultural backdrop that reinforced those rules (such as the demand for conformism), or who in desperation rely on an authority that is no longer theirs because of their own displacement and confusion, may despair even further of mastering the centrifugal forces pulling the family apart, which their attempts at repair only worsen. On the other hand, for some, the new role of quickest-to-speak-English and quickest-to-absorb-the-new-culture may give the adolescent an enhanced esteem that solves many of the conflicts of this period in a fruitful way and helps even the other family members adjust, if they can manage their roles and retain their self-esteem in the altered family power structure.

An article in the *New York Times* (January 4, 1988) describes the tragic situation of one

Russian immigrant family. It was entitled "Immigrant's Medical Career is Now Just a Memory." This was a sad case, and not just because of lost dreams about a medical career. George Petrenko emigrated in 1990 with his parents and children, after suffering multiple privations and indignities for many years as a refusenik, and being harassed for ten years more—for being a Russian speaker—in the Georgian Republic where they moved hoping to gain exit visas sooner. In this country, he started from scratch driving a limousine, his father doing handyman work. Within eight months, the family had passable skills in English, were doing reasonably well, and could even afford a vacation. Despite hardships, his mother could proudly say, "We wanted freedom, so we made sacrifices"—a sentiment initially shared by all. But then Mr. Petrenko's wife died of breast cancer, and he himself subsequently suffered a heart attack at age 35. Unable to work, he and his sons moved in with his parents. Despite assistance from UJA-Federation, he now suffers from depression, his heart condition limiting his ability to work and his surgery plunging them into debt. The eight-year-old son was traumatized by the death of his mother. The eighteen-year-old son has now started to do poorly in school. Asked about this, Mr. Petrenko reflected, "In Russia, I had status, I had respect. Here I am nothing... How would you do if you had a nothing for a father?"

The severity and combination of problems suffered by the Petrenkos require a multi-system, multi-disciplinary approach. These problems are the sort that occur not in the first stage of adaptation, but in the years following, which are more crucial for ultimate success than the first year when the basic necessities of life are what command attention. The *susceptibility* to psychological despair and defeatism remains great after the initial period, even with heroic efforts at assistance and even when certain early hurdles have seemingly been overcome. Therefore, one must not lose sight of the precarious context of an immigrant's adaptation over the course

of many years and of the tendency for situations to remain delicate even when, on the surface, ultimate adaptation seems assured.

There will often be a difference of opinion in the family about the decision to emigrate, for reasons related to age, transportability of profession, relatives left behind, and the like. In general, with more recent arrivals, these differences are more common and are likely to be the very reasons for their not emigrating sooner. The current wave of emigres are no longer the trailblazers, though the personal challenge each faces may be no less formidable for them than for those who arrived earlier, those whose manifest courage was an inspiration to us all. Serious pre-existing problems drastically complicate the process of adaptation for families, since the differential rate of adaptation can be used by the more hesitant partner as a way of getting back—not necessarily consciously but by falling ill or in one way or another retarding the adjustment. One key to addressing these problems is an early alertness to the situation. However, when emigration *itself* is thought to be a solution to the pre-existing problems between spouses (as opposed to emigration for the more customary reasons of enhanced opportunity, the fleeing of oppression, or family reunification), then there is almost certain to be an intensification of the problem after arrival, with divorce or serious acting out by the children as the not-infrequent outcome. In this case, new problems are added, rather than old ones being removed. Many conflicts that are not overt early on become manifest only after a certain stage in the acculturation process is reached that highlights the issue more specifically, but the above situation of "emigration as misguided conflict resolution" usually emerges quickly.

IDENTITY MODIFICATION

The core challenges in immigration are more fundamental than what is commonly understood by the word "adjustment," actually coming closer to the task of *identity modification*. This task is not accomplished by a simple substitution for a former identity,

rather, it is the slow amalgamation of identity elements from many sources and periods in one's life, a preservation of still-valued parts in concert with the assimilation of new ones. The process places many demands on the psyche and, while it is occurring, contributes to the sense of an indeterminate, even disorienting present that Makine's comments allude to. In psychologically susceptible individuals or those with a prior history of traumatic loss or dislocation (like my amnesic patient), the stresses can lead to the recrudescence of serious pathology—psychosis, major depression, or severe psychosomatic states. The frequency with which this occurs is a testament not only to the stress of the immigration process but also to the amount of early childhood stress and assorted psychological traumas experienced in life in Russia.

Identity is a vague concept, even in psychoanalytic jargon (or especially in psychoanalytic jargon), though we all feel we know what we mean by it. Here is Erikson's (1968, p. 50) original description: "Ego identity... is the [subjective] awareness of the fact that there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods, [to] the *style of one's individuality*, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one's *meaning for significant others* in the immediate community" (italics added). If that immediate community is strange, inaccessible, or under duress itself, then the sameness of the world, which we count on to reassure us of who we are everyday, becomes fractured. The sense of psychological continuity is disrupted, and the ego's mastery is weakened. The ego not only fights a losing battle with the outside world but it also fights a losing battle with itself, resulting in a sense of depletion. *The immigrant is not only displaced; he or she is disarmed.* Though we customarily take it for granted, we are all constantly engaged in a mutually enriching process of interaction with the outside world, which alternates with a focus on our inner worlds that we are all occupied with when we *think* we are doing nothing. This provides the

cal safety, for confidence in who we are, for our "self-sameness." Disruptions in the reassuring ordinariness of this process can give rise to anxiety, phobic, and panic states; depression; and psychosomatic and psychogenic physical disorders with consequent disturbances in family and social function.

The frequency of such disorders among the Russian population is great and is related not just to the multiple factors outlined above but also to something peculiar to this immigrant group: the amount and kind of early trauma experienced in Russian society. That is, the violence, wartime horrors, frightful social deprivations of all sorts, denial of opportunity, tense emotional environments with the risk of political repression, and constant petty tyranny in all of life's venues. Totalitarian societies, in their nature, attempt to control child-rearing practices as they do everything else; hence, the *total* in totalitarian. This ideology is always inimical to child-rearing. It was especially so in the Soviet collectivist version, with its notorious indifference to the individual and an ideology that not only ran counter to common sense but that also mocked the logic of human nature, daring one to challenge the obvious contradictions between word and deed, between slogan and reality. It underscores the hopeful irony in the title of Victoria Tokareva's story collection, "Dyen ByeZ Vrania—A Day without Lies." Apart from conformism, living in Soviet society demanded secret-keeping within the family to protect still-innocent children from risky betrayals of the parents' views (just as the regime itself kept secrets from the populace), corrupting the natural environment of openness and trust that gives a child access to his or her aptitude and self-esteem, and instead preparing the child to accept without question similar distorted attitudes in the adult society at large. Most important of all, it imposed on the person an internalization of a dictatorial "other," encroaching upon the autonomy of the self and impairing the confidence and flexibility needed in potentially traumatic situations

(such as immigration); and instead substituting for it a withering or hostile dependency. This was one of the subtlest cruelties of Soviet society, a society that David Remnick (1993) has termed "one of the cruelest regimes in human history."

The effect on the individual of this combination of factors has led me to consider a new diagnosis among Russian immigrants, which I call PTSD—*post-totalitarian stress disorder*. It adds to the symptoms of *post-traumatic* stress disorder features stemming from an autocratic, repressive regime such as mistrust of authority, reactions of indignation or obsequiousness, apprehension about acting autonomously, and susceptibility to seemingly trivial disturbances in the daily pattern of life. Instead of one major trauma, the prevailing climate of fear and forced dependency imposed upon the population a more sustained traumatic environment. Compare this to the description of "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" in Judith Lewis Herman's (1992) *Trauma and Recovery*. Child-rearing enforced conformism and the stifling of autonomy, hindering the development of the natural confidence-building traits of assertiveness, individuality, and enterprise that are prized in American society.

In some individuals, another reaction to this prevailing tone in Russian society was an imperious, even forceful turn of character. In domestic situations this results in fruitless attempts at cooperation and problem-solving when problems arise—if indeed such a trait is not already the problem itself—attempts that are based on an unyielding stance rather than a balanced, unthreatened, and non-threatening approach to conflict. The added stresses of immigration may exacerbate traits, as they reflect another axis of the differential responses to the feeling of insecurity.

Adolescents may emotionally flee such a situation, reacting to the sense of inflexibility or to the distress of parental conflict, sensing as well their origins in a world they had less to do with than their parents did. Or, they may be in rebellion due to the painful partings they were forced to undergo, such as their first

love, having been poorly prepared for emigration by parental overprotectiveness, or secrecy, or guilt, or the simple not knowing of what approach to take. Their best refuge is their peers, who come to the relationship with analogous experiences of pain and perplexity, likewise seeking to make the present less vague and uncertain.

A high degree of tension existed in many families back in Russia, some with histories of disappearances of loved ones into the Gulag, some with the stresses of communal apartment living, dead end control of opportunity, some with victims of anti-Semitic cruelties, and the like. The involution of families in the face of these threats created separation difficulties for the children at nodal points of development. Thus, recurring symptoms of separation problems—*anxiety, panic states, phobia, and pain syndromes*—can be found later on. Emigration ironically *revisits* these fixation points, introducing in the present a new separation, not from the mother but from the motherland, now in the name of opportunity—or is it in the name of danger? This is disorienting in the present and renders the future hypothetical; that is, unknown and risky.

Another effect of stifled autonomy is the later predisposition to feelings of shame, a common problem in Russians who speak with humiliation of not having mastered the idiom of the society or of the language. This in turn, of course, further inhibits them from practicing their new language. The errors I make in Russian provide an unanticipated advantage in bringing this conflict to the fore in treatment situations, by initiating discussion about our common struggle to learn a foreign language. Shame is uniquely problematic because, by its very nature, it is something not shared easily. This added burden of *private* suffering is sometimes difficult to uncover and thus becomes a significant part of what may escape the attention of even the best-qualified and best-intentioned helpers.

It is often difficult for Americans to comprehend the ambiguities and contradictions in the Russian character, the mixture of cour-

age, pride, persistence, and diffidence in their personalities. These traits stand out because the requirements for social survival in the country of birth are internalized, later to be exposed as ill-fitting or inappropriate in the new setting. Some will therefore see every bureaucratic delay as a willful and prejudicial interference to which they respond either with outrage or fatalistic acceptance; others sense the lack of hostile motive in the delay, shrug their shoulders, and say, "So what, it's nothing compared to back there." As an example, one day when I was helping to register a new patient at the clinic, there was a computer delay. When I mentioned to her that the delay would likely only last a minute, she responded, "You must have arrived here a long time ago, Dr. Goldsmith, if you think that waiting is difficult for a Russian woman." Her remark unwittingly addresses what she on some level knows is the task ahead of her; that is, a modification of her identity to fit the new culture, a change she had already seen me make. She faced the vagueness of her new situation with better resolve than most. Perhaps her future too was less hypothetical.

Another trait among a significant proportion of immigrants is that of fatalism, bred into the populace from years of powerlessness. The word "fate" (*sudbah*) is much more frequent in conversation among Russians than among Americans. Helplessness before fate can also inspire mystical or occult attempts for intercession, an endless search for the miracle cure, the remedies available in the everyday world being judged insufficient to deal with the problems. Thus in psychotherapy, the value of memory and narration often must be taught, since many have lost faith in their power to help, and because of the former controls on freedom of thought and expression. The outside world would not yield for people who had begun to make internal changes—doors were still closed.

Abetting the sense of fatalism, resignation, and powerlessness was the fact that even history and "reality" were controlled by the regime. There is an old Russian saying, well known in the time of the Czars, but given new emphasis under the Soviets: "In Russia,

although it may be difficult to predict the future, it's altogether *impossible to predict the past.*" It was not easy to know what was going on in the present either. A well-known anecdote describes people listening to the radio as it pours forth news about the latest "record" harvest, then opening the refrigerator only to find nothing to eat. What to do? Plug the radio into the refrigerator.

The consequence of this abuse of the sense of reality and the social meaning of memory is great. Not only does it obliterate the information base for forming independent judgment, thus challenging the notion of individual identity, but it also affects attitudes toward authority such as trust,² compliance with even well-intentioned authorities, and confidentiality.

The amount of frank mental illness in the immigrant population has increased in recent years. It is of course a barrier to social integration, but by and large it has not been a cause of family disruption, since most families respond with incredible compassion and care to the disabilities of their loved ones. These immigrants often do better here psychiatrically than in the FSU because of the commitment of caregivers and the availability of mental health services and good medications, but they remain socially unconnected, and become consumers of our resettlement and other social services with diminished prospects for independent functioning.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN SOCIAL ADAPTATION

Language is not just a means of communication; it is also part of our identity, a refuge for intimacy and a sense of belonging, an echo of our parents' voices, a means for working out the possibilities suggested by our imagination, and in psychotherapy it is in addition the vehicle of the treatment. Eva Hoffman, an immigrant from Poland and former editor of

²While there may be an element of paranoia in some immigrants who require psychiatric treatment, the mistrust that so many feel is more accurately viewed as "conditioned suspiciousness."

the *New York Times Book Review*, in her autobiography, *Lost in Translation* (1989), describes an argument she had with herself in two different languages (Polish and English), each language coming from a different world view. Her example shows how different languages can crystallize around different introjects, with their associated affects and values. Thus one may develop a "Russian" part of the self and an "American" part, with each part being articulated by the corresponding language. It is not uncommon to hear an immigrant say, "I'm a different person when I speak English."

Consider this example of the role of language in adaptation and social experience. A former patient, 25 years old, had been in the United States for five years, and spoke English reasonably well. However, she was having problems getting along with co-workers at her computer job, felt isolated, and had made no friends there. A pattern could be discerned in the dynamics of her switching between the two languages as we talked. I became aware that she was using Russian, for obvious reasons, more emotively, while her shift to English marked a defensive move toward intellectualization when her pain became too great. Bringing this to her attention led her to describe to me for the first time a split in her attitude toward Americans, whom she saw as cold, versus Russians, who were warm and receptive. She had simply accepted this as fact. Now she could begin to see how this perception was conditioned by her expectation, which was reflected in how she used the language. This provided some leverage for dealing with the problems with her American-born coworkers. But it was only the beginning of our effort to understand her reasons for choosing a "cold" American psychiatrist such as me.

WORKPLACE ISSUES

I cite this example among many possible others, not to give a primer on psychotherapy but because it raises the question of workplace issues. This is a subject not frequently enough addressed by resettlement profession-

als, partly because we like to see immigrants who manage to get good jobs as successes and who, by virtue of this accomplishment, are able to carry themselves over future hurdles. This is not always true; the woman in this vignette, for example, was already on her third job in a little more than twelve months, for reasons that confused her and that seemed to me to be an outgrowth of the very miscues and misunderstandings of those around her. It was her very bewilderment about why things were not working at work that led her to seek help.

Business decisions and the customs of the workplace are a problem for many immigrants as they begin to enter the workforce. They will often make impulsive financial decisions, acting without a full grasp of how the system works and of what protections are available to them. At the job itself, they find it hard to intuit the patterns of collegiality that apply, creating mystification on both sides. Usually the criticism is that they work too hard seeing tasks through to completion, the reasons for which are not understood by their co-workers. They are seen as too competitive, too formal, and inflexible. But what they say to me is, "I'm desperate; I can't allow myself to fail."

This is part of their attempt to come to grips with that fearful "hypothetical future" that threatens to bring to naught the whole life-altering task of immigration. What follows now, however, may be surprising, as I venture to contradict all that I have described until now regarding the pernicious effects of loss, the disorienting present, and the terrors of an unknown future.

THE NATURE OF HOPE

The late Joseph Brodsky, the Russian immigrant and Nobel Prize-winning poet, declared that "displacement is the idiom of our century." He of course knew what that meant personally and could speak with authority. It is the same experience that allowed Erik Erikson, another immigrant, to become the theorist of identity. Likewise many Russian Jews, by virtue of their perennial outsider

status and the very mistreatment that led to their leaving, were forced into an ironic detachment that helped preserve a perspective on the savage political realities and maintain a sense of self-as-outsider that is uncannily repeated under a different star by their immigration. This perhaps accounts for some of their resilience and hope. In fact, it was in an address to the B'nai B'rith Society in Vienna on his seventieth birthday that Freud (1926, pp. 273–274) wrote of his “clear consciousness of Jewish identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction.” He then went on to say, “Because I was a Jew I found myself free from many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; and as a Jew I was prepared to join the Opposition and to do without agreement with the ‘compact majority.’”

Similarly, many Russian Jewish immigrants developed a double attitude to their society, part inside, part outside. The duality is also reflected in the fact that, in contrast to their fatalism and resignation, a sense of hope and optimism led them to undertake leaving their homeland to start anew. That balance between fatalism and hope is often what determines their ultimate success here. A further lifesaving attitude is reflected in the humor that was elevated to an art form in Russia; it enabled emotional survival in a crazy-making world and provided ballast especially for those to whom the “official” world was closed. It is this dormant resilience that many can count on (and that we count on in them) for weathering the pain of nostalgia, for overcoming the vague sense of having lost in the present the best of who one is, and thus for keeping alive a sense of confidence in the future.

Thus it is the very hypothetical nature of their future in the United States, the very fact that they are not doomed by prejudice or tyranny to a pre-ordained fate, that allows us finally to look at Makine’s remark about the future from a different perspective. Looked at in this way, the process of emerging from the mourning of the nostalgic past can bring a renewed sense of energy and creativity. Like-

wise the very indeterminacy of identity in the present is what allows room for growth and change via unimpeded access to one’s natural gifts, so as to bring to realization in the future one’s full potential.

Perhaps the two sides can best be illustrated by two brief excerpts. First, a quote from a man with a debilitating disease of late life: “It’s hard to find a purpose in all this. We struggled for years to come here, and now this illness. It offends my pride. God did a lousy job. Who can explain why we suffered in the Soviet Union? Who can explain why again I suffer?” But listen to the story of another man, similarly lacking in the opportunities that other elderly immigrants experience, similarly falling ill with a serious medical disease once he arrived. As a young man he promised himself that one day he would learn enough Hebrew to properly mourn the family and friends who disappeared under Stalin in the 1930s, and whom he lost in the war. In the 1970s his son, living in a different city, was fired from his job and arrested for owning a book the KGB considered anti-Soviet. When his colleagues at work found out about this, they suddenly dissociated themselves from him, and the father too was fired from his prominent academic job. The family applied to emigrate, became refuseniks, and were allowed to leave only several years later. Once here, before beginning to study English, this man fulfilled his 50-year-old promise to himself and learned the words of Hebrew he needed to say Kaddish for the many who died. He has made Russian and American friends at the synagogue, which he attends every day. He has coped with the changes in his life and found something new he had only dreamed of finding before. A kernel of his identity had remained dormant, ready to blossom only when the seasons changed. I am certain that this is what has enabled him to weather the treatment for his medical illness, without a return of his former depression. There is potential for growth even in old age.

I began this article with a quote about language and that is how I will end. It is our

task to find a common language, in the fullest sense of the word, with the Russian immigrants whom we help to resettle. The outcome of this effort can indeed make the present less threateningly vague and the future less threateningly, more *invitingly* uncertain. As one woman who opened my eyes said, in her attempt to unite the idea of psychotherapy, which she was attempting to understand, with an idiom that already had significant meaning for her: "Oh, I see, you mean it's like glasnost and perestroika." It was her take on the process of being open to the risks and rewards of uncovering the past, which would hopefully lead to a restructuring of her own self, her relationships, and her connection to her new country. Perhaps her insight can also spur us to openly review our past and to restructure our resettlement efforts so that they are maximally useful and mutually rewarding, in work with Russian and other immigrants to America.

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