

Soviet Jewish Resettlement: Operationalizing Jewish Consciousness Raising*

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Although the awakening of Jewish consciousness among the Soviet Jewish immigrants resettling in our communities has been an explicit goal, operationalizing this has proved to be elusive. This article presents one community's approach toward operationalizing this goal. The process, program approach, and logistical resolutions are discussed.

Introduction

After working for several years with increasing numbers of Soviet Jews, clearer policies, practices, and philosophies have evolved to aid those of us involved in carrying out the assimilation task in a fairer, more cost-efficient, and humane manner. In most communities, the Jewish family service agency has assumed or has been given the major responsibility for administering and coordinating the resettlement efforts. It is not too surprising that this particular agency of the Jewish communal service system has been tapped for this mission considering its historical precedents. As Sprafkin has pointed out:

It is noteworthy that the larger Jewish family agencies were organized by the various Jewish communities during the 19th century by immigrants and for immigrants. The family agencies that originated during the 20th century were usually in small communities. In practically all instances their organization was occasioned and motivated by the need of the United HIAS Service and its predecessor organizations, the United Service for New Americans and the National Refugee Service, to help carry out its resettlement program.¹

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¹ Benjamin R. Sprafkin, "Refugee Resettlement in the American Community," this *Journal*, Vol. XLVII, No. 1 (1970), p. 54.

The myriad resettlement tasks to be accomplished, however, extend beyond the current Jewish family service agency's scope and expertise. This article will be addressing the absorption task of enhancing the new immigrants' Jewish identity, describing a process and approach used in a smaller community. The Jewish family service agency's role in this endeavor has been primarily supportive and catalytic, encouraging the types of linkages with community supports that are already available, or developing new ones.

The challenge in understanding Soviet Jewish immigrants and the response and effects of the Jewish communal and institutional efforts to resettle them have appeared in several articles in this *Journal*.² Also, studies related to the social absorption of the Soviet immigrant into our communities are beginning to be documented.³ Little, however, has appeared in the literature on methods or approaches for raising

² For example, see: Burton S. Rubin, "The Soviet Refugee: Challenge to the American Jewish Community Resettlement System," this *Journal*, Vol. LII, No. 2 (1970), pp. 196-201. Richard A. Dublin, "Some Observations on Resettling Soviet Jews," this *Journal*, Vol. LII, No. 3 (1977), pp. 278-281. Ethel Taft, "The Absorption of Soviet Jewish Immigrants—Their Impact on Jewish Communal Institutions," this *Journal*, Vol. LIV, No. 2 (1977), pp. 161-171.

³ For example, see: William Feldman, "Social Absorption of Soviet Immigrants: Integration or Isolation," this *Journal*, Vol. LIV, No. 1 (1977), pp. 62-68. Zvi Gitelman, "Soviet Immigrants and American Absorption Efforts: A Case Study in Detroit," this *Journal*, Vol. LV, No. 1 (1978), pp. 72-82.

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Jewish consciousness in the adult immigrant.

Although most communities are explicit in their value stance and goals with respect to enhancing the Jewish dimension of the Soviet resettlement program, operationalizing these goals has been elusive. Many communities provide free synagogue membership for some period of time as well as scholarships for children to attend Hebrew day school. For many of the immigrants, however, there is still a disconnectedness between themselves and their potential Jewishness. Perhaps part of this might be related to the negative connotation of what having been "branded" Jew meant for them in the Soviet Union, as well as the hostile, authoritarian environment of that country which nurtured distrust and rejection of religion. Also, unlike the previous waves of immigrants that came to this country during the turn of the century, most of the Soviet Jews arriving now had been assimilated into the Soviet mainstream, devoid of any Jewish content in their lives and without dynamic Jewish institutions.⁴ They enter our communities knowing that the reason they are here is because they are Jews, and that we will help them, but most don't really have a Jewish consciousness.

Although communities which have been working with Soviet Jews for some period of time are becoming more adept in implementing and administering concrete services towards the end of helping our new Americans to become self-reliant, it is this writer's belief that the goal of Jewish consciousness raising has to be given more attention. The Jewish family service does have an important role in seeing that this goal is actualized, but should not administer this program. This writer agrees with Dublin that because of the immigrants' preconceived negative and suspicious view of the agency as being the official bureaucracy and authority, action toward this goal should be initiated outside of the Jewish

⁴ Ethel Taft, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.

family service purview.⁵ The Akron Jewish Family Service, however, did play an important advocacy and facilitating role with other community lay and institutional leaders toward developing an approach to raising Jewish consciousness among our new Americans, an approach which seems to be meeting with success.

The Process

Toward the end of the summer of 1979, with the Akron Jewish community having decided to double its quota of immigrants (20 people in 1979 to 40 in 1980), the chairperson of the Education Committee of Akron Jewish Community Federation asked the Jewish family service "Is there a need to provide Jewish education for the Soviet adults in our community?" At that time, the community had resettled 24 adults in Akron and to the best of anyone's knowledge, none of them had been exposed to Jewish education in any formal systematic way. It was decided that we should explore this further through an ad hoc committee composed of the rabbis from the three congregations in Akron, as well as the directors from the various relevant local Jewish organizations: the Federation, the Center, the Family Service, the Community Relations Department of the Federation, the Community Jewish High School, and the Federation Education Committee. The chairperson of the Federation Education Committee assumed responsibility for convening the initial meeting.

At the first gathering of this group, the purpose for calling the meeting was elaborated, as well as a brief presentation on the history of the Soviet Jewish Resettlement experience in Akron. There was a high level of interest and participation demonstrated at this meeting, along with the cooperative spirit and desire to grapple with the issue of Jewish consciousness-raising among the Soviets living in the community. It was acknowledged that this issue was relevant

⁵ Richard H. Dublin, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

at this time, especially since the Jewish family service program seemed to be providing adequately for the basic survival concerns of these people. Some of the questions raised were as follows:

1. How might a closer relationship between the new families and the synagogues be established?
2. What was the new immigrants' level of readiness to engage in a Jewish educational process?
3. What was the new immigrants' perception of American Jewish life, and could we effect a positive helpful transition.
4. What knowledge, if any, did they have of Jewish communal institutions and obligations, and how might information about these best be imparted?
5. Are they really interested in exploring their Jewishness and going through a process of Jewish consciousness-raising?

After several opinions were given, it was felt that the last question, are they interested in expanding their Jewishness, should be posed directly to the Soviet families in our community. A second meeting was held with invitations sent to all of the Soviet families who had been resettled by the Jewish family service, as well as a few others who had moved to Akron. The meeting was held in the home of the Federation Executive Chairperson, and the ad hoc committee members were also invited. The Jewish family service provided the secretarial and coordinating back-up for this endeavor, and its volunteers were available to transport those people who needed it. Much to our pleasure, eleven of the thirteen families (22 people who had been resettled since 1976) attended this meeting.

After everyone had formally introduced themselves (people were seated in a circle on chairs and on the floor), the chairperson described the purpose of the meeting. She explained that several Jewish community leaders had gotten together to explore whether there was a need and a desire for

Jewish education for the Soviet adult immigrants in our community. These community leaders had decided it might be appropriate to explore this directly with our Soviet families and seek their input and guidance.

After some initial awkwardness and questions which related more to other needs (e.g. more English language courses), the group began to focus on the issue at hand. Before structuring the process, there was a period of open questioning and commentary. One man, for example, asked what the Jewish Federation was and how it differed from the United Way. The executive director of the Federation responded to this question, providing a simple overview of the purposes and differences of these two organizations. Another man said he would like to know more about Jewish history, especially about Israel and Zionism. A woman asked questions about the upcoming holiday of Sukkot. One of the rabbis responded to this question with a brief historical explanation of the meaning of Sukkot, as well as a description of some of the customs celebrated during this holiday. When another woman asked what a sukkah was, the rabbi invited them to see for themselves, and told them he would be pleased to have them visit the sukkah at this congregation. (Although there was little done to formalize this invitation at the meeting, a postcard reminder of the rabbi's invitation brought almost all the families to a special meeting at the sukkah the following week. The rabbi, elated at this turnout, later reported that for the most part, all who attended seemed to be highly interested and asked him many questions.)

With interest heightened and the mood more relaxed and open, this initial meeting moved into a more structured phase. Cards were passed out and people were asked to list those topics, Jewish and other, about which they would be most interested in learning. After a brief period of time, all were asked to share their topics with the group. Most were quite comfortable and

eager to do this. Those who spoke little English presented their list in Russian, with someone in the group translating for those who needed it. Those topics most mentioned included Jewish history, Israel, American Jewish life and American history and government.

When asked about format and approach, most preferred the informality of meeting in people's home and having lecturers address the different topics, with opportunity for questions and discussion. Although the chairperson suggested these educational "parlor" sessions be held once a month, the group wanted them to be held on an every-other-week basis. All of this was agreed upon and the meeting came to a close. Since the host and hostess had prepared desserts and coffee, everyone stayed considerably longer, furthering the early discussions on a very informal and social basis. This social interaction at the end of the more formal educational session was felt to be an extremely important dimension, and has been incorporated as a regular part of all the meetings.

Program Approach and Logistics

Interest and enthusiasm having been aroused, the next task of the ad hoc committee was to develop a program approach and list of topics—a curriculum—that would be responsive to the Soviet immigrants' interests and level of readiness. The Chairperson of the Federation Education Committee and the Director of the Community Jewish High School took most of the responsibility in this area. Also, the logistics for organizing the informal meetings to be held at people's homes and engaging guest lecturers had to be worked out. The following is what emerged:

1. The curriculum would cover topics that related to different Jewish and American holidays or events that occurred during the year. Speakers and educational leaders from the community with expertise in selected topics would be tapped and sched-

uled to make a presentation coinciding on the calendar with that holiday or event. During periods of time when there was a void, different themes and concepts in Jewish history, religion, and American Jewish and secular life would be introduced.

For example, at the meeting following the visit to the sukkah, the religious and historical significance of Simchat Torah was discussed, along with some discussion about the place of the Torah as a unifying basis and framework for Judaism. Following this session was an introduction to American government and the election process, as the next event on the calendar happened to be Election Day. This presentation was made by an attorney and politician (who happened to be the President of the Jewish Family Service). With the latter part of November comes Thanksgiving, a traditional American holiday totally unfamiliar to most Soviets. A University history professor gave an overview, and explained the significance of this holiday. In December, a rabbi and his wife explored Chanukah, along with a demonstration of the traditional foods, songs, and games of this holiday. "Coping with the Christian Experience: A Jewish Perspective" rounded out the calendar year which also included a lively discussion of anti-Semitism. In January, with a void in major holidays, a three-part series on Zionism and the emergence of the State of Israel was presented and received with a great deal of interest. And so on through the cycle of the year.

2. Because of the above design, new immigrants can enter the cycle at any time since the topics presented tend to be mutually exclusive, requiring no prerequisites. Likewise, those who have completed the cycle can decide to continue or withdraw from the program. Anticipating greater numbers of immigrants and concerned about too many people encroaching upon the informal atmosphere designed for the experience, as well as the practical

feasibility of housing all these people in the living room of a host, plans are underway to build in a second phase of the educational process geared toward the special needs and interest of the Soviet immigrant. After having been exposed to Jewish holidays, customs, concepts, and themes via an informal and social process, mini-series or courses will be developed to expand upon these in more depth. For example, a mini-series on Biblical history is being developed to accommodate the interests of some of the immigrants. Two other series covering the "Second Commonwealth" and "Jews in the Diaspora" are being planned.

There has also been an expressed desire on the part of many of the immigrants to share with the community their experience as Jews living within the USSR. This kind of interchange, we believe, should be of great interest to many people in the community, and plans are underway to implement such a community program.

3. At present, the Federation Education Chairperson has taken major responsibility for finding host homes for these parlor sessions, as well as selecting and inviting the guest lecturers. Through personal contacts and advertisements in the local Jewish newspaper, she has received a very favorable response on both scores. Host homes are currently scheduled for many months in advance, and speakers are volunteering their services. The high attendance at these meetings coupled with the gratification derived by the hosts, immigrants, speakers, and other interested Americans participating in this endeavor has provided a much appreciated opportunity for dialogue and friendship between the new Americans and the community-at-large.

Logistical concerns have proved to be less problematic than originally expected. The Jewish Family Service's role has been to provide secretarial related support as well as other types of back-up assistance and consultation to the Federation Edu-

cation Chairperson in her coordinating function.

Summary and Conclusion

Although the awakening of Jewish consciousness among the Soviet Jewish immigrants resettling in our communities has been an explicit goal for most of us, operationalizing this has proved to be elusive. The purpose of this paper was to present one community's approach toward this end that has, up to this point, been successful. The process, program approach, and logistical resolutions were elaborated.

In conclusion, there are a few other observations and remarks that should be made with respect to this program:

1. It seems as though it has been beneficial and appropriate to promote this program outside of the Jewish family service purview. The inclusion of all the communal service directors, rabbis, and educational leaders in the brainstorming, planning, and implementation process established a broad base of input and support for this endeavor.

2. The decision to take "our problem" directly to the Soviet Jewish adults in our community confirmed that there was an interest and desire on their part to expand their Jewish consciousness. This led to a mutual problem-solving process. This process provided them with the opportunity for input into this program, as well as a responsibility for sharing in its success or failure. We assume that since they have had a stake in the development and implementation of the program, they have been more motivated to see that it succeeds. Success and commitment breed further success and commitment!

3. The process, in retrospect, seems to have captured the two basic social casework principles of: a) starting where the client is, and b) the client's right to self-determination. Respect for these principles seems to have had a positive effect on this program.

4. A by-product of this program has been to meld the Soviet Jewish community

more closely together, enhancing their natural tendency toward developing a mutual support system. Also, they have been exposed more directly to the American Jewish community (and vice versa) adding to the overall acculturation process.

5. The responsibility and obligation of

Jews toward *Tzedakah* and *Chesed* can best be learned through experiential means. If our program succeeds in its goal of awakening Jewish consciousness, then these new Americans, in the near future, should become vital, responsible, and contributing members of our Jewish community.