

The Iranian Jews in Chicago; Service Through a Communal Team

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With bi-weekly meetings, weekly at times of crises, (of workers from cooperating agencies), it was possible to share information and experiences, solve management problems, coordinate our programs and study newly emerging issues . . . there were often daily contacts among members of the team. At times of crisis and extreme anxiety the team often reflected the feelings of the Iranians; this would bring about, in our team, crises that paralleled those of our clients. The team members have also helped each other regulate their own anxiety and thus free each of them to provide sound and realistic services.

Background

Some minority groups in Iran, including the Jews, have been placed in a precarious position as a result of the 1979 revolution. There have been varying degrees of threat to their lives, freedom, or economic situation. Consequently, within a year, this 2,500 year old Sephardic community was reduced from 80,000 to 40,000 people. Jews left Iran knowing that they might never return. Europe, Israel and the United States have been their main lands of refuge.

The Iranians have traditionally sent their children to foreign countries for higher education. As well advertised in the news, a large number of these students are in the United States; There are among them some Jews; about 200 are in the Chicago area. When Jewish families in Iran started to fear for their lives, or the quality of life there, some of them decided to join their relatives in the United States. Most of them came as tourists or students when they had no other legal means of entering the country.

Following its humanitarian tradition, the United States has been offering asylum to those newly arrived Iranian Jews who felt that they could not return to Iran for fear of persecution. Nevertheless, for political reasons, the Iranians do not receive refugee status and are not given permanent residence unless they can claim a preferential status through close relatives who are United States citizens or permanent resi-

dents. However, a no-deportation decision was made by the United States Government; first, effective until September 1, 1979, then extended until June 1st, 1980, and later cancelled by President Carter at the time of the take-over of the American Embassy in Teheran. After that, only verbal assurances were given by the Justice Department regarding the Jews. Applications for asylum are received by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, but all records are still waiting for final decision in Washington. Such an unclear status has many adverse consequences for the students, as well as for those coming with a tourist visa. For example, obtaining a permit to work, changing school or residence, applying for asylum, become major issues that the Iranians can not handle on their own. In addition, because the majority has been unable to obtain permanent residence, they are not entitled to public assistance, free medical care and, at times, free education for the school-age children. Finally, family reunions in the United States have been rendered difficult either by the Iranian authorities or by American Consulates or, at times, by both.

During 1979, various agencies, members of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, organized a network of services to help those newcomers who may have to stay an unlimited amount of time in the United States in this uncertain status.

The first group who contacted various Federation agencies early in 1979 consisted of students. Many of them had been in the United States for up to six years, but had intended to go back to Iran upon completion of their studies. The majority were single men in their 20's. They had been supported financially by their families in Iran until the change of regime. At that point their life situation shifted drastically. They suddenly had to become self-supporting. They were concerned about their country and their relatives. They often had to take responsibilities for relatives who joined them here. Although the students had to adjust to the shock of the change in their lives, they were nonetheless familiar with the United States and the English language. Many already had taken jobs, in addition to being students. As a group they appeared resourceful, healthy and in good spirits. They were ready to face the crisis which had arisen.

The relatives of the students constituted the second group to come to the Federation agencies. They started arriving here from Iran in January, 1979. To insure their safety, some parents, who feared religious persecution, sent their younger children to their older siblings studying in the United States. In some families, women and young children came first while the men stayed in Iran, hoping to continue working. Also, in March and April, 1979, a large group of about 1,000 unaccompanied children came to the United States under the sponsorship of the Hasidic Lubavitcher community in New York. Many of these children were later relocated to other cities, including Chicago, either in various yeshivas or with relatives. Those relatives who came to Chicago after the revolution faced the problems common to people seeking refuge in a foreign country. Most of them didn't know English, felt very uprooted and were homesick. The older people were the ones with the greatest difficulties in coping with the many losses they had to

face and in adjusting to their new surroundings. In general, they had been able to bring some money with them, but were very conscious of the probability that this might be all that they would have for resettlement here before they could actually work in the United States.

In April and May, 1979, the tragic events in Iran, which included the killing of two Jews, triggered in everybody the fear of a large-scale persecution reminiscent of the World War II Holocaust. From a self-confident and independent group, the students became rebellious, suspicious and demanding. They often felt helpless and frustrated by what they perceived as slowness of intervention, or lack of commitment to their cause on the part of the United States government and, at times, of the Federation and its agencies. They took slowly to recognizing the complexity of international relations. With interpretation and much support, they began to understand how some of the interventions they had insisted upon could, in the long run, hurt them and their relatives back in Iran. Many became depressed. Students' grades and class attendance began to drop. The necessity to share small quarters with relatives, often including young children, and the need to act as interpreters for the newcomers also interfered with some students' ability to concentrate on their work. Other students suffered from anxiety they felt for relatives still in Iran. A few students even contemplated going to Iran to convince their parents to leave at once. There were long conferences with them and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society around the inadvisability of such trips. The news from Iran was contradictory, but generally negative. The temporary closing of the Visa Section of the United States Embassy in Iran in May brought about increased panic both there and here. This was when Iranian Jews in Chicago began to think seriously that 2,500 years of Jewish culture in Iran were coming to an end. They saw family

reunion in the United States as their new ultimate goal. Some families started coming via Europe, where they could still get United States tourist or student visas.

In spite of the continued turmoil in Iran, the situation of the Jews became less critical with time. However, from July, 1979 to this writing, the fear of rampant anti-Semitism, along with the loss of hope for a return to normal conditions, pushed a regular flow of Jews out of Iran. The two main problems for many families have been trying to find means of taking money out of Iran and obtaining a United States visa. The American Consulates in Europe have become increasingly reluctant to give a tourist visa to Iranians, knowing that they were likely to attempt to change their status once they arrived in the United States. This became worse after the taking of the hostages in Iran and remains a crucial issue. As a result, some families spent months in Europe, traveling from one country to another in the hope of finding a United States Consul more lenient than the others. Even the imaginative Iranian Jews don't always succeed in getting a visa or sending money out of Iran.

In the United States, the students and their relatives are slowly settling down. Starting in the Fall of 1979, students in good standing began to obtain tuition waivers and most of them had part-time jobs. A couple of them had married. The younger children entered school. The more recently arrived were beginning to speak English. Following the taking of the hostages, a new crisis arose. With the new requirement for registration with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the students feared deportation by the United States Government and even for their physical safety because of the anger of the American population toward all Iranians. As long as the crisis has remained unresolved, the problems continue. The situation to this time is still fluid and uncertain, predictions remain impossible.

Program

In Chicago, from 1979 on, College Age Youth Services, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Jewish Children's Bureau, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Family and Community Service, Jewish Vocational Service, Mount Sinai Hospital and, more recently, Michael Reese Hospital, have coordinated their service programs for Iranian Jews. The workers who provided the direct services soon became the "Iranian Team," with the author assuming the role of Intake Worker and of Coordinator of the team. Since January, 1980, another JFCS worker has shared the responsibility for the intake.

From March, 1979 through February, 1980, 68 cases were opened, involving 178 individuals: 60 married adults, 67 single adult university students, 51 children under 18. The oldest was 78, the youngest was 4 months old and born in Chicago. Roughly over one-half of this group of cases were families, one-third were students. Out of the 51 children, 13 were here without either of their parents at "Intake." Eight of the 60 married adults were senior adults.

Intake throughout the year averaged 6 new cases a month. About 20 cases were highly active during each month of this period. In this first year, there was a total of over 1,000 interviews and telephone contacts with the Iranians. An approximately equal amount of time was spent in contacts on their behalf. (This includes case conferences by JFCS caseworkers with other team members.)

Working with the Iranians has been a challenge. On the one hand they presented special problems created by their peculiar circumstances, some constantly present, others related to the various crises described earlier. On the other hand, the group presented a normal range of problems expected in any group their size, but always colored by their cultural uniqueness.

The first set of problems was related to

their *immigration status*. They were the first presented to us and, at the time of this writing (Spring 1980), still remain the most crucial ones for the Iranians. Since their legal status is still unsettled by the Immigration and Naturalization Service this, in itself, makes their situation quite different from other newcomers who have either legal immigrant or refugee status. All sorts of crises have been created for the Iranians who are attempting to settle here permanently or, at least, until the Iranian situation is clearer. In every case, help is necessary around such issues as extending student or tourist visas; changing school or state of residence; obtaining a work or practicum permit. Tourists or students often have mixed feelings about applying for asylum and need extensive help to evaluate the consequences before making a decision. In 61 of the 68 cases referral was made to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society for consultation. Most of these needed intervention or representation with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. We also often sought the cooperation of various foreign student advisors in college (University of Illinois, Roosevelt University, Spertus College of Judaica, YMCA College, and so forth).

Bringing relatives from Iran or from Europe has also been a priority for a majority of the Iranians already here. For all these cases, close cooperation with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society has been necessary from the beginning.

Problems around work were second in importance: advice about part-time or full-time employment, career counseling, job development, labor clearance procedures. The specialized help of the Jewish Vocational Service was utilized in 57 of the client cases.

All *financial assistance* to Iranians has been in the form of loans. A small proportion of this aid was used for payment of rent and emergency maintenance. The majority of the loans were given for pay-

ment of tuition either to Jewish educational institutions or to other universities. Some of the tuition loans were made by Jewish Vocational Service, which also granted some of its own scholarships to a small number of students as part of the total assistance provided. Follow-up and counseling for both work problems and tuition loan applications have been a coordinated effort of Jewish Vocational Service and Jewish Family and Community Service.

Foster placements were needed for some of the minor children who were unaccompanied by at least one parent and for whom their siblings or cousins couldn't provide proper care and supervision. Thirteen such children were referred to the Jewish Children's Bureau for foster placements. Since most of the relatives of those children are also Jewish Family and Community Service clients, the two agencies have been working in close cooperation around the multitude of problems such placements present. At times the Jewish Family and Community Service worker provided some clarification of cultural aspects of behavior already observed in previous contacts and which interfered with the smooth process of a placement.

The medical needs of the Iranians have been limited. However, payment by those who didn't have sufficient financial resources was of course impossible. Since they were not permanent residents, the Iranians couldn't benefit from public assistance. Mount Sinai Hospital and, in one instance, Michael Reese Hospital, have provided free treatment. 35 people have been referred for a variety of medical services. Almost all of them needed individual planning and follow-up.

The cultural and educational needs of the Iranians were in part met by themselves and in part required attention from the agencies. Most Iranian parents handled registration in schools for their children. However, our help has often been needed

for various steps in the process: help for registration, scholarships, improving proficiency in English. Search for English courses was a combined effort of the Jewish Vocational Service and Jewish Family and Community Service. The Bernard Horwich Community Center has provided one of the English classes.

From the beginning the Bernard Horwich Center has been involved programmatically, and, in cooperation with the College Age Youth Services, it has provided a meeting place and guidance for the students' organization. On October 25, 1979, its Board decided to offer a one-year free membership to the Iranians. On a casework basis, some children and adults were referred to the Bernard Horwich Center by the Jewish Family and Community Service for various of their activities, including day and summer camp. Based on our observations of a need, an attempt was made to organize a group for the homesick housewives at the Bernard Horwich Center. This did not elicit much response from the women.

Not the least important, a good working relationship has been established with the Iranian Jewish student organization in Chicago.

Beyond the problems which were constantly present, such as those just described, there were some periodic problems derived more directly from specific crises. At such times, various policy issues were raised; decisions and plans had to be made which required the cooperation of all the agencies, the Federation and often the Jewish community. Although various agencies, in turn, took leadership for the intervention required, all the agencies were involved in the planning meetings. For example, when the two Jews were killed in Iran in the Spring of 1979, we all had to be prepared for the eventuality of an emergency rescue operation; contingency plans were made for emergency lodging to be provided by Mount Sinai Hospital, the

Jewish Community Centers and through the Jewish Children's Bureau. When the American Embassy was besieged in Iran, the students here had to be helped to register with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This was done to avoid any risk of deportation but also to protect the students from Iranian Moslems. The College Age Youth Services and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society took responsibility for planning a series of meetings with the students and Immigration and Naturalization Service. When there was fear for the hostages' lives at the end of 1979, it was decided to plan for safe housing for the students to protect them if necessary. Again this became a cooperative effort, with the Jewish Children's Bureau taking the lead. The Jewish Family and Community Service actively participated in all the planning but also, at such times, had many individual contacts with students and families around their specific difficulties and to deal with the intense feelings aroused by the situations they found themselves in.

Finally, the Iranians have presented the usual range of human problems to be expected in any group this size, ones which are, at most, only indirectly related to their present predicament. There were physical illness and emotional illness, some problems related to the beginning of marriage, some to the maintenance of marriage. A number of young adults needed help in their struggle around emotional separation from their parents and in becoming independent. This struggle was expressed at times through depression, physical symptoms, learning inhibitions, withdrawal or acting-out. Although, in general, they have not made themselves available for more intensive counseling, about a dozen individuals have asked for help when some emotional conflicts were interfering with their coping abilities. Attempting counseling while taking into account their cultural characteristics had its own challenge.

Most of the time the new clients have presented the Intake Worker with emergencies, requiring quick and concrete responses. The requests had to be met with openness, flexibility and availability on our part. An open-door policy has been the rule, particularly during the various crises previously described. Also, because of the fluidity of the situation and the clients' mobility, individual records have never been closed, as people would reappear, presenting a new crisis after having left the area for some time. In general, empathy, respect and care were particularly important to help this group cope with realities which were painful and restrictive.

Intake evaluation and referrals were used as vehicles to help them sort out their thoughts and make difficult decisions, especially when it involved drastic changes in their lives. The goal was to offer them enough ego support and acceptance in their relatively short contacts with the Jewish Family and Community Service to enable them to start working through some of their intense feelings. Another goal was to help them regain a sense of hope and their cherished sense of self-reliance. At times this could be accomplished through helping them accept a more realistic timetable, one that they could see would be more effective. It helped the Iranians realize that, in spite of real restrictions, they were not as helpless as they had feared.

One valuable advantage has been that an intense alliance was often quickly formed through this problem-focussed help. The trust derived often enabled the clients to open up months later about other troublesome issues of needs. For example, some students have used this worker as a parental substitute to whom they turned when they were having trouble with concentration at school or when they felt rejected because of their parents' decision not to join them here.

From the previous descriptions, it should be obvious that all the Iranians had

a multitude of problems which required interventions of many member agencies. Careful coordination of our work was the essence for efficient delivery of services. The workers from the College Age Youth Services, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Jewish Children's Bureau, Jewish Vocational Service and Jewish Family and Community Service became the "Iranian Team." With bi-weekly meetings (weekly at times of crises), it was possible to share information and experiences, solve management problems, coordinate our programs and study newly emerging issues. One of the functions of the team was to keep the administrators informed of the needs and the problems which required intervention or decisions on an administrative level. Between meetings, especially in the first half of the year, there were often daily contacts among members of the team. At times of crisis and extreme anxiety the team often reflected the feelings of the Iranians; this would bring about, in our team, crises that paralleled those of our clients. The team members have also helped each other regulate their own anxiety and thus free each of them to provide sound and realistic services. In general it can be said that commitment to their work, respect and trust of each other have been major strengths of the team, and it has enabled them to provide an effective and consistent service. For this author, the experience in the team has been an unexpected reward of the Iranian program.

Conclusion

The dramatic circumstances of the Iranian problems and the lack of certainty at all levels made our Iranian program difficult and frustrating at times. However, this is also what made it intriguing and challenging. At the close of the first year of our program, the situation remains fluid and uncertain; there is no reason to assume that it will change soon. It is likely that there will be more crises. Independently of the

hostage situation, the information coming from Iran concerning the Jews is contradictory. It is likely that more families will decide to become reunited in the United States. Many Iranians hope to return to their home should the circumstances change in Iran. However, time does its own work; in spite of themselves, many Iranians are settling down and may well remain here permanently.

Our goal for the coming year is to continue facilitating the initial adjustment of the Iranians and to attempt to develop more resources. We hope to become more successful this year in facilitating the development of an Iranian supportive system. To this point, the already established Irani-

an community has not made itself available for newcomers unless they were relatives of members of that community.

More Iranians who at first used their Persian names have now changed to their Jewish names. As a group, the Iranian Jews have a strong and clear sense of identity, particularly about their Jewishness. It is our team's ultimate goal to help the newcomers with their adjustment here while they retain their identity and pride in the cultural heritage they took along when they left Iran. In general it is our impression that those who will decide to stay will eventually become an asset to the American Jewish community.