

Soviet Immigration: The Adolescent Experience

Carole T. West, Ph.D.

Principal of General Studies, Rambam Torah Institute, Los Angeles, California

Teachers who work with (Russian) immigrant children notice that much effort must be made to teach them to behave in an acceptable manner (e.g. not to be disruptive in the classroom) as well as how to organize their work and get their assignments done.

The experience of Soviet Jews and their adjustment to life in the United States has been the subject of many articles.¹ However, little has been written about the difficulties faced by teenage children and their parents as they attempt to adjust to the academic and social demands of the American high school. This article will attempt to explore these difficulties; it will place special emphasis on such problems resulting from changing cultural demands as: the impact of life in a free society, the effects of change on family life, the "cultural baggage" of mistrust and entitlement and overconcern with occupation and status.

Change to a Free Society

American society, and the school which reflects its values, is less structured and makes greater demands on individual effort and responsibility than does its Soviet counterpart. In his essay *Will the Soviet Union Survive?* Andrei Amalrik stressed this point:

The ideas of self government, or equality under the law for all and of personal freedom—and the responsibility that goes with these—are almost incomprehensible to the Russian

¹ Articles published in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* which have been used for this study are: Leon D. Fisher, "Initial Experiences in Resettlement of Soviet Jews in the United States," VLI (Spring, 1975), pp. 267-9; Gaynor I. Jacobson, "Spotlight on Soviet Jewry; Absorption in the U.S.A.—Challenge and Prospect," VLII (Winter, 1975), pp. 190-4; Burton S. Rubin, "The Soviet Refugee," VLII (1975), pp. 196-7. Other helpful articles are: Ben G. Frank, "The Russian Jew in America," *The Jewish Digest*, 20 (August, 1975), pp. 25-30; and Lenore Parker, "From Paternalism to Pluralism," *Foundation News*, 17 (Sept./Oct., 1976), pp. 38-43.

people . . . The very word "freedom" is understood by most people as a synonym of the word "disorders," as an opportunity of executing with impunity some kind of anti-social or dangerous actions.²

The Russian child, raised in a child-centered but authoritarian atmosphere, is used to doing as he is told and has little experience in taking initiative for his behavior at home or at school. Initiative has not been rewarded, possibly because there is little belief that individual action will have any meaningful impact on one's life. Furthermore, it might lead to behavior unacceptable in a society which greatly values conformity.³

One can recognize the effect that being placed in a less-structured environment has on the adolescent. Unused to freedom at home and school, confused by the fact that his parents who once made him the center of their world are preoccupied with their own adjustment to the new culture, he may feel abandoned since he no longer is receiving the accustomed amount of emotional support, control and/or attention. His feelings may be further confused by his own adolescent strivings for freedom from familial control as he simultaneously fears the effects of separation and independence. Frequently these conflicts, exacerbated by cultural change, result in innumerable behavior problems which can be seen, at least in part, as a crying out for discipline and structure.

Teachers who work with immigrant children notice that much effort must be made to teach them to behave in an acceptable manner (e.g. not to be disruptive in the classroom) as well as

² Quoted in Robert G. Kaiser, *Russia: The People and the Power*. New York: Pocket Books, 1977, pp. 202-3.

³ *Ibid*, p. 296.

how to organize their work and to get their assignments done. The student's need for constant supervision confuses the parent who may not be seeing any changed behavior at home. The parent does recognize, however, that the school fails to provide the type of structure with which he is familiar, and he recognizes that such help as he was able to give previously (such as aid with homework) no longer has value. Instead of accepting the fact that his children must learn to take initiative and develop a sense of responsibility for their own work and behavior, the parent's anxiety is transformed into anger, frustration and a sense that the school is not doing its job. These feelings illustrate a basic conflict which he faces. Soviet Jews may have left Russia in part because they wished for more freedom in their lives; however, the cost of freedom is that there will be fewer externally imposed restraints and greater need for self-discipline.

Breakdown of the Family

Emigration from the Soviet Union today, like similar movements in the past,⁴ creates many difficulties in the family. Parents who willingly left the Soviet Union because they believed that their children would be able to have a better life in the United States or Israel still have many ambivalent feelings about the changes to which they have been subjected. They may have financial problems for the first time. Parents who were professionals previously may now be factory workers or unemployed. Parents may not know how to find a job (a task done in the USSR by the government or by the universities); they may not understand how to use credit and other financial services unavailable in the Soviet Union. Moreover, stress brought about by change may result in physical or mental illness unknown in the past.

In addition, parents often feel frustrated by the response of the children for whom they made this sacrifice. The children—as overwhelmed as their parents by the strains

⁴ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951, pp. 227-285.

inherent in moving to a new country—are frequently more negative than grateful. They resent the constant reminders that their parents left Russia in order to secure their futures, and they feel guilty about their anger and resentment. The parents often react to their children's emotions by denial and withdrawal. They may deny that there were any problems at home or school in the Soviet Union. And since they are usually unable to deal with their children's anger—feelings complicated by the necessary frictions of adolescence—they often withdraw. The parents justify this withdrawal because they are overwhelmed by the complexities of their own adjustment, because they feel unable to help their children in an alien environment and because they do not know what else to do.

The problems facing the adolescent are many. They may have time-consuming responsibilities at home since they must often take over tasks left undone by overburdened parents. Their parents, exhausted and confused, may not be able to understand their needs and the children may not have close friends or relatives to help them with their difficulties.

The students' solution is often to join a subgroup of other immigrant peers. Their shared experience seems to provide a form of support unavailable elsewhere. Unfortunately, this group—defending against real or imagined feelings of rejection—has reacted by accentuating its differences rather than by attempting to conform to an alien culture. For example, its members speak Russian when they are together (even if others are present); they dress in sophisticated and seductive ways inappropriate to their age. This group, isolated and rejected by other students, expresses its anger in truancy, destruction of property, drug abuse, etc. As they isolate themselves from their families and from the American adolescents who surround them, their negative feelings about themselves increase and cause greater feelings of alienation.

Attitudes of Mistrust and Entitlement

The shift from a society in which no one trusts anyone outside of his immediate family to one in which some trust is expected and is, in fact, necessary for optimal function is difficult for Soviet immigrants. Their lack of trust causes many difficulties in the school, especially when the parent and student must rely on school administrators for decisions about their future because they have little knowledge about American life.

These feelings of mistrust are further complicated by a sense of entitlement, an attitude held by many immigrants who believe that they should be given special treatment and nothing should be expected of them in return. This view may stem from life in a society which provides the basic necessities for survival in exchange for conformity and acquiescence. Moreover, the immigrants often view themselves as heroes who should be rewarded for leaving the Soviet Union rather than as victims of oppression (like those who escaped from Nazi persecution) who should be grateful for the shelter of the United States.

These feelings are often operative when parents of Soviet teenagers come to school in order to discuss the difficulties their children are having. One mother expressed the view that an expectation of acceptable behavior from her child was unjust because, since her family had already suffered so much at the hands of the Nazis and later from Soviet officials, no more should be expected of them.

Overconcern with Status and Occupation

Occupational status is extremely important to Soviet Jews. Identity, as well as survival, depended on occupation in a country which did not permit Jews to be accepted as full members of Soviet society. The importance of this concern with occupation and the status derived from it can be seen in the fact that many parents, basically content with their own lives in the Soviet Union, emigrated to the United States because recent anti-Semitism convinced them that their children would be

denied the opportunity to attend a university or institute and would, therefore, be unable to attain professional status.

Academic achievement is highly valued as the only path to social mobility. Soviet parents do not understand that the initial job placement is not the final one. Their concern is undoubtedly complicated by the fact that they do not usually enter the American employment scene with a job comparable to the one held in the Soviet Union. They feel that the lack of acceptable academic credentials as well as poor skills in English hinder their achievement and they do not wish their children to have similar handicaps.

Because the immigrant parent believes that a meaningful life is only achieved through academic success, he is extremely concerned that his children do well in school. These feelings may lead to unrealistic expectations (e.g. an immediate adjustment to school and the maintenance of performance similar to that in Russia) without recognizing the handicaps inherent in not knowing the language. Moreover, little comprehension is shown of the emotional problems resulting from the change to a new culture. Unfortunately the children frequently share in these unrealistic expectations. The anxiety which results from their inability to meet them often takes one of two forms. The student may become overtly angry and act out these feelings through violation of school regulations, cheating, defiance or continually talking in class. Or, he may become extremely depressed and withdraw into daydreaming, frequent illness and unwillingness to do his school work. Stammering is common also, both among girls and boys.

An Example

A typical situation will provide an example for these generalizations. A sixteen-year-old girl came to the attention of the school administrators because she frequently violated school regulations. Her defiance was accompanied by constant school failure and frequent tears. Her

mother could not understand her difficulties at school and said that at home she was the perfect daughter who told her everything. Her mother was confused by the fact that in the Soviet Union her daughter was a good student. She did not seem to understand that the disruption of many moves (from Israel to Italy to New York to St. Louis and, finally, to Los Angeles where the family had no choice but to adjust their fantasies to the realities of life in the West) would have an effect on her daughter. Furthermore, these moves, over a five-year period, were accompanied by shifts in schools, languages and a several month period during which her daughter did not attend school.

The daughter, unable to meet the requirements of the academic private school, wished to transfer to a public school which would provide her with vocational training in an atmosphere of greater social freedom. In an emotional family conference, the mother refused to consider the idea of change because she could not relinquish her unrealistic dream that her daughter would be a nurse. Unwilling to believe that the school personnel could act in the child's best interest, the mother attempted to manipulate the administrator and the counselor by threatening to bring the matter of the proposed transfer to the community, to sponsoring social service agencies, etc.

This example illustrates several points. First the mother lacked knowledge about the academic system and was certain that the shift

from private to public school and the change from an academic to a vocational program would destroy her daughter's future. Second, her concern with occupation and status blinded her to the reality that her daughter had limited skills, no interest in being a nurse, and was passively—through constant depression—resisting her mother's efforts to mold her into something she did not want to be. Moreover, the mother's previous experience with Russian officials gave her no reason to trust administrators. She had difficulty, therefore, believing that the school officials were trying to help her daughter. A suggestion that the family get psychological help was particularly frightening because the mother viewed any sharing of family secrets as an attack on her security. Lastly, she did not have any ideas about the appropriate methods used to deal with school personnel. Manipulation and appeals to a higher authority were the only tools that she felt that she had. All these reactions can be seen as resulting from her lack of familiarity with the American social and academic system.

This article attempts to describe several problems facing adolescents emigrating from the Soviet Union to the United States. While some Soviet teenagers make the adjustment to the new culture easily, too many others have great difficulties. Programs must be designed specifically for adolescents and their families (perhaps in conjunction with the schools they attend) so that their transition to life in the United States is a smooth one.