

REDEEMING THE CAPTIVE

Twenty-Five Years of Successful Resettlement and Acculturation of New Americans

MISHA GALPERIN, PH.D.

Executive Director, The Educational Alliance, New York

The resettlement of almost a half-million emigres over the past twenty-five years has been an extraordinary success, and the impact of this migration on the American Jewish community continues to be profound. Yet, the emigres' economic and social adjustment to American society has been more successful than their integration into the American Jewish community, and New Americans are seriously under-represented among American Jewish leadership. As emigres continue to arrive in sizeable numbers, our attention to other issues on the Jewish communal agenda must not divert our attention from the critically important resettlement and acculturation effort.

By the fall of 1991 when I took part in the opening seminar of the Jewish literacy program run by the Wexner Heritage Foundation, I was already a fifteen-year veteran of Jewish communal service and the work on resettlement and acculturation of New Americans. That seminar, taught by Rabbi Nathan Laufer, was directly relevant to that work. Its topic, the first subject to be covered in a two-year course on Jewish history and taught through the study of text, was the *mitzvah* of *Piduyim Shvuim*, Redeeming the Captive.

To my amazement, I learned that this *mitzvah* was considered the highest religious duty of every Jew. We studied Moses Maimonides' analysis of the subject and learned that redeeming the captive was so important in Judaism that a congregation was encouraged to go as far as selling the building materials purchased for the construction of a synagogue, or even to sell a Torah scroll, to obtain the funds necessary for the redemption. It is little wonder then that Operation Exodus, a special UJA/federation campaign to fund the rescue and resettlement of Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU), was an unprecedented success. It is little wonder that our field has made such a priority of resettlement and acculturation work with New Americans. Yet, many of us, particularly those who were themselves emigres from the former Soviet Union (FSU), who had little expo-

sure to textual learning, were not necessarily consciously aware of the specific Judaic underpinnings of this effort. Nevertheless, the commitment to the work of helping integrate the emigres into American society and the Jewish community has been nothing short of remarkable and the success of the effort is self-evident.

Much as the massive immigration of Eastern European Jews at the turn of the century gave rise to the establishment of our profession through the development of communal institutions, so has this wave of newcomers to both Israel and North America stimulated the development of new methodologies, approaches, and specialties.

The articles in this special issue of the *Journal* address these points in great depth. Fuchs' analysis of the Jewish attitudes toward contemporary immigration policy substantiates the motivations behind this massive undertaking of the past 25 years. Tress, Race et al., and Herron analyze the economic/vocational adjustment of the emigres. Much of the work of Jewish vocational service agencies in the past two and a half decades has been concentrated on this task, and much new thinking has emerged in response to the challenges posed by this population (e.g. Handelman & Miller, 1990). Excellent new work is presented on the subject of psychological assessment, adaptation, and clinical work with New Americans. It is noteworthy that the au-

thors of these papers, Anna Halberstadt and Adele Nikolsky, are bilingual, bicultural clinicians whose emergence has made it fully possible to study, understand, and develop responses to the psychological adjustment problems of New Americans. Friedman's, Becker and Isaac's, and Greene's papers on acculturation are the most recent additions to the growing body of literature (e.g. Kosmin, 1990; Markowitz, 1985) on this new communal endeavor, which has produced many ideas and techniques now being applied in the area of Jewish continuity with the native-born population.

The other articles in the issue deal with a variety of subgroups of the emigre population, including Bukharan Jews, the aged, adolescents, and children, as well as with bilingualism, control and cultural norms, and perceptions. Sharon's article illuminates Israel's experience in the area, which was previously described by Markowitz (1993) in the single most important and informative work on what the author called "a community in spite of itself." Zicht's article provides an interesting comparison of the resettlement of 3,500 Syrian Jews in New York to the resettlement of Jews from the FSU by NYANA, which resettled nearly half of all refugees from the FSU. Finally, Tress and Gold ask why there has not been more research into Soviet Jewish resettlement and urge that more attention be paid to this important effort.

Before you turn your attention to this special edition, I wanted to share some conclusions I have reached as a result of my twenty-year experience of being an emigre, a teacher of English as a Second Language, a community center worker, a clinician and researcher, a vocational program developer, an administrator of the largest resettlement program in the United States, and a fund raiser and volunteer in this remarkable twentieth-century Exodus.

First and foremost, the entire enterprise has been and continues to be an extraordinary success by almost any definition and from any reasonable point of view. By the end of the century nearly a half-million New Jewish Americans from the FSU will

have resettled on these shores since the mid-1970s. Those third and fourth waves of Soviet Jewish immigration—the first two being at the turn of the twentieth century and in the wake of World War II—took place as the Soviet Union devolved from a feared, seemingly invulnerable totalitarian superpower, whose state-sponsored anti-Semitic policies came very close to annihilating physically and spiritually what was once the largest Jewish Diaspora, to a barely solvent, war-torn, inflation-ridden, struggling Third World country, whose leaders try to walk a very fine line between playing to popular nationalistic/anti-Semitic sentiment and the fear of offending the international community.

Among the over 400,000 arrivals in the third and fourth two waves were some of the best and the brightest members of the Soviet society. This emigration has, in fact, been referred to a brain drain comparable to the German emigration of the 1930s. The average age, level of education, and vocational achievement for the population have been higher than for the immigrants to the United States in general (Gold, 1992), and by the time measurements are taken ten to twelve years after their arrival, the median level of income for the group exceeds the American national average (Kosmin, 1990).

Second, the impact of this migration on the American Jewish community has been profound and continues to be one of the major shaping forces in its development. In large Jewish communities such as San Francisco and New York more than 15 percent of the Jewish population are New Americans, and the newcomers represent an even greater proportion of those members of the Jewish community who are receiving Jewish communal services. This is true not only of such intuitively predictable involvements as Jewish vocational services or programs for the impoverished and frail Jewish elderly, but also for such settings as college Hillels, day schools, and Jewish Community Centers. Communal resources that were and are still devoted to resettlement represent a lion's share of philanthropic dollars raised by the Jewish community, in addition

to government funds expended on this effort. Assuming a very conservative \$3,000 per capita expenditure, the total spent on this effort has been over \$1.2 billion.

Third, the New Americans' economic and social adjustment to American society has been overall more successful than their integration into the American Jewish community. The two processes are, of course, linked. As Kosmin (1990) showed, the New Americans' level of income and their command of English are the best predictors of their degree of Jewish affiliation. While the newcomers' level of income is higher than the national average, it is lower than the Jewish national average (at least within ten to twelve years after their arrival). And while the overall level of Jewish affiliation is quite similar to that of American-born Jews, this can be interpreted not so much as good news about New Americans but as bad news about American-born Jews.

This lag in integration into the American Jewish community is particularly obvious in the serious under-representation of the New Americans among the leadership of the community. New Americans are well represented in the leadership of academia, industry, medicine, and the arts; for example, the late Joseph Brodsky, a Nobel Prize winner and the Poet Laureate of the United States; mathematician Gelfand of Rutgers, a MacArthur "genius" award winner; Komar and Melamid, very successful conceptual visual artists; and Sam Kislin and Yuri Radziewsky, multimillionaire businessmen. However, there are almost no New American Jews from the FSU among the lay or professional leadership of the Jewish community. To my knowledge, no New American has become a president of any American Jewish organization. I know of only one Conservative (Leonid Feldman of West Palm Beach) and one Reform (Viktor Rashkovsky of Oak Ridge, Tennessee) rabbis who are New Americans. Even though a significant number of former emigres are employed as social workers and other Jewish communal professionals, I know of less than a half-dozen in true deci-

sion-making positions in the agencies. Although much of the cause for this under-representation is traceable to the aversion developed by the members of Soviet society to public/civic activities, and some is just a matter of time and generational change, I believe that not enough of an effort has been devoted to the integration effort and, in particular, to leadership development.

Fourth, the heterogeneity of the New American Jewish population is still under-appreciated. This issue of the *Journal* contains interesting work on Bukharan Jewish emigres, one of the ethnic groups within the FSU immigrant population. There are substantial distinctions among the emigres depending on whether they came from large urban centers or rural areas, their level of education, and their pre-migration social and economic status. The diversity within the New American Jewish population is almost as wide as it is among the population of the FSU and is comparable to the diversity among Jews of Israel. When planning programs for the emigres, recognition of this diversity is crucial to success.

Fifth, the experience of life under the Soviet regime has had a profound psychological and social impact on the Jews of the FSU. While the concept of *Homo Sovieticus* may be too much of a metaphor, there are clear, measurable differences in individual attitudes and family structures between New Americans and the American-born. These differences need to be understood in the context of what was adaptive in Soviet society versus what is advantageous in a free-market democracy (Galperin, 1988).

Sixth, the immigration experience is, by definition, traumatic. People who choose to go through with it, while often compelled by circumstances not of their own making, are more likely than not possessed of extraordinary determination, courage, and other qualities that are predictive of success. However, not everyone who ended up being an emigre made the decision for him- or herself. It is, therefore, likely that extreme outcomes are almost the norm in adjustment. Some emigres do quite well and oth-

ers do quite poorly. The particularly vulnerable groups are adolescents and older adults, as well as the "reluctant" emigres, i.e., those who came because their family demanded it, rather than out of personal conviction. The process of adjustment to immigration can be likened to adolescence: it deals with identity, transformation, issues of belonging, conformity, loss, and rapid change. As with adolescence, the process of adjustment to immigration has many potential difficulties, and it is often hard to recognize the difference between normal turmoil and pathology. Clearly, however, the expectation of greater than usual distress and more dysfunction is justified.

Seventh, motivation matters. As mentioned earlier, the decision to leave is not always made with equal conviction by all members of an emigrating family. Those who are least motivated are likely to have the most difficult adjustment. What the primary motivation to emigrate was is also extremely important. That may be one reason why the adjustment of the third wave of emigres has been apparently easier than that of the most recent arrivals. The refugees of the 1970s were more likely to be motivated by the "pull" of the West and not as much by the "push" of untenable conditions in the USSR. And while anti-Semitism has been the constant throughout, in the 1970s it was perceived as a barrier to achievement, whereas in the late 1980s and 1990s it is seen more as a threat to well-being.

Yet, the differences between the two cohorts should not be overestimated in spite of the protestations of the "veterans." As Markowitz (1993) puts it, the answer to the question, "When is an immigrant no longer an immigrant?" is "When the next wave of immigrants come in" and the veteran emigres start to act as aborigines. I would argue that the differences between the cohorts really are confined to the issue of motivation for emigration. In all other respects the groups are quite similar. The only other noteworthy difference concerns the increasing numbers of older people coming in the past six to eight years as the Jewish popula-

tion in the FSU is aging.

Finally, it is not over yet! Even with smaller numbers of arrivals for the next couple of years and with potential changes in U.S. immigration policy, upward of 20,000 Jewish refugees from the FSU are expected to arrive in each of the next two to three years. Increasing numbers of non-refugee immigrants are also arriving to join their naturalized New American families. Although the spotlight has shifted from this effort onto other issues in American Jewish communal life, we must not allow resettlement and integration work to become neglected. The talk about "compassion fatigue," other pressing priorities including Jewish continuity, and the rebuilding of Jewish life in the FSU must not deflect from the critical significance of this effort to the present and future of Jewish people. In the words of the Bible (Leviticus 25.35 and 25.38): "If your kinsman, being in straits, comes under your authority, and you hold him as though a resident alien, let him live by your side.... For I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."

REFERENCES

- Galperin, Mikhail D. (1988). *Soviet Jewish emigre adolescents' adjustment to the U.S.* New York: NYU Press.
- Gold, Steven J. (1992). *Refugee communities: A comparative field study.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Handelman, Mark, & Miller, Alfred P. (1990, Winter). Vocational services in Jewish communal resettlement: The challenge for the 90s. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 67(2), 108-113.
- Kosmin, Barry. (1990). *The class of 1979: The 'acculturation' of Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union.* New York: North American Jewish Data Bank.
- Markowitz, Fran. (1985). *Jewish identification and affiliation of Soviet Jewish immigrants in New York City.* New York: UJA-Federation.
- Markowitz, Fran. (1993). *A community in spite of itself: Soviet Jewish emigres in New York.* Washington, DC: Smithsonian.