A Family Life Education Program for Soviet Jewish Seniors*

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Seventeen per cent of the new immigrants from the Soviet Union who have been resettled in Chicago are in the age range of 65-80 years. This relatively isolated segment of the Soviet immigrant population has a particularly difficult time adjusting to life in America. In addition to the problems usually associated with aging, these elderly immigrants must cope with learning a new language and adjusting to a new lifestyle and culture. This paper will discuss the successful utilization of a time-limited JFCS Family Life Education program designed to ease the integration of Soviet seniors into the Jewish and general community.

Loneliness and isolation are often the conditions of the elderly in our country. These conditions stem from a number of sources including the impact of societal devaluation in a culture which idealizes youth, and the resulting internalized negative self-perception which many elderly experience. Both theoretical and empirical literature related to groups suggests that man's sense of alienation is reduced and his social functioning enhanced when he interacts with others in the context of a group.[1]

Gerontological research has indicated that groups can make an important difference in mitigating the feelings of alienation and loneliness of older people in the community. Through the use of groups, the elderly can be helped to re-establish direction in their lives by experiencing new opportunities for the continuity of social roles and for the development of new roles. Participation in groups helps to strengthen the inner resources of the elderly, to build their self-esteem, and to connect them to needed community resources.[2]

The idea of a group for Soviet elderly Jews emerged as a result of the particular needs of this population. Though they may leave the Soviet Union with a relatively positive self-image, having been valued members of the family circle there, this higher level of self-esteem soon becomes eroded in the struggle to adjust to a new culture and in the attempt to learn a new language. Feelings of inadequacy resulting from the inability to maneuver and function in a new land without the knowledge of the spoken language may soon come to the fore and predominate.

Characteristics of the Soviet Elderly Immigrant

The Soviet elderly immigrant is a survivor of World War II, having directly experienced the devastation of a monumental war fought in or very near his home. The immediacy of the war experience has left many scars, for in addition to the trauma of

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Kiamesha Lake, New York, June 2, 1981.

[1] M.A. Lieberman, I.D. Yalom, and M.B. Miles, *Encounter Groups, First Facts.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

[2] Irving Miller and Renee Solomon, "The Development of Group Services for the Elderly," *Journal of Gerontological Social Work,* Vol. 2 (3), Spring, 1980, pp.241-257.

the loss of close relatives in every family, many of these people were forced to relocate during the war period and consequently lost homes, possessions and jobs.

The elderly Soviet who has immigrated to these shores has generally left behind children, grandchildren, or close relatives, as well as friends and neighbors. Batsheva, a participant in our group, came to the United States with her adopted daughter; however, her two sons remained in Kiev.

Many of the Soviet immigrant seniors worked until the very day that they requested their exit visa. On arriving in the United States, they already realize that there is little opportunity for them to work at a paying job again. Frequently, these are highly educated people who can no longer use their experience, skills and education for employment. Ida, a Ph.D. chemist, and Paulina, the head of a large engineering department, were among the most educated participants in the group. Neither of these women anticipated finding work in their professions.

Even within the context of their own families, the older immigrants from the Soviet Union may feel less valued and needed. In the Soviet Union, grandparents are highly regarded. Their children often shared their apartment. In addition, the grandparents took care of the grandchildren, waited in lines for food and other commodities, and helped their children financially. They perceived of themselves as vital and irreplaceable in the lives of their families. Laya, a 68 year old grandmother, retained this perception and left the group early each session to prepare lunch for her 21 year old grandson.

In the United States, many of these relationships undergo substantial change. The elderly usually live apart from their children, sometimes even a good distance away. Their children are busy working and their grandchildren are anxious to speak the English language which they are so quickly mastering; consequently, there may be increasingly less interaction between grandparents, children and grandchildren. The Soviet senior not only can no longer ease the financial burdens of his children, but he himself may also be in need of financial assistance.

The elderly Soviet experiences a loss of independence in language, in finances, and in maneuvering his way around the city. This may cause intense feelings of inadequacy in a previously highly functioning person.

In the process of describing the older Soviet immigrants we must not overlook the positive characteristics and strengths which they bring with them to the new country. They are adept at sharing information which will be helpful to other Soviets, and they are alert to learning new resources and services which will ease their way. Many have also quickly formed a new social network, as is apparent here in Chicago. Though their children live in separate apartments, they usually live nearby; and the Soviet senior continues to focus on family as he did in his native land.

The Soviet elderly are more used to physical hardship than their American peers. They may, therefore, be hardier and more energetic. A walk-up apartment on the third floor will be much more acceptable to them than to the American senior adult.

In contrast, the older adult in America generally perceives himself in a less valued and esteemed position than the Soviet older adult within his own family in the Soviet Union. The American older adult is less likely to live as close to family as did the Soviet grandparent in the Soviet, or as he does even when resettled here in America. By and large, Soviet elderly continue to maintain a close relationship with their children and see them more often than do American elderly. The American family will often utilize social services and institutional care to assist an elderly relative in coping with the infirmities of old age;

however, the Soviet family will seldom use this kind of service to help with an older family member.

The Needs of the Older Soviet Immigrant

In his first year in America, the needs of the older immigrant from the Soviet Union are extensive and complex. First and foremost, he/she must orient to a new life. This involves learning how to get around the city, how to find health care, go shopping, pay bills, cash checks, use the phone. He must, of course, attempt to learn English; must learn which store to go to for which items; must learn how to deal with the social welfare system. The new older immigrant must learn how to find the right resource for each need: the right doctor, the right synagogue, the right apartment. In the United States, many choices and decisions are possible; in the Soviet Union, the options were few. Any person moving to a new city naturally needs to obtain information about the various services and resources available. However, how much more difficult it is when one is unfamiliar with the language, customs, and general norms of the culture.

In terms of psychological needs, the older Soviet immigrant must build a new social network to replace the many friends and family he has left behind. The new immigrant needs to feel less helpless, and more independent despite his lack of language skills. He needs to know that he can still be of value to his family in some way; he may also perceive a need to stay close to family despite the fact that his family is becoming more independent of him. He may need to replace his reliance on family for fulfilling social needs with an outreach to peers for this purpose.

It is important that the older immigrant find activities which will provide satisfaction, enjoyment and stimulation, so that life can still be perceived as good. He must seek out opportuniites to enjoy and to learn. Among the participants in the group, Anna, who was a pharmacist in Kiev, satisfied her intellectual interests by frequenting the various Chicago area museums and concerts. Others enjoyed the Passover Seders and Chanukah celebrations offered by various synagogues for the Soviet immigrants.

Soviet elderly are more isolated than the other age groups of Soviet immigrants because they do not work and may have difficulty attending the English classes offered. Because of their age and general fatigue, many of the group members despaired of learning a new language. The trauma of relocation may simply be greater in general for the Soviet elderly person.

The need of the Soviet elderly for opportunities to meet and socialize with peers, to familiarize themselves with community resources, and to maintain and enhance feelings of self-worth through increased mastery of their environment and through the development of new relationships, was well served by the JFCS Family Life Education Soviet elderly group. To organize such a group, the Soviet resettlement staff was requested to refer functioning and mobile Soviet seniors (age 65-75) who could benefit from such a group. The combined skills of a family worker for the Soviet resettlement program, herself a Soviet immigrant, and the family life educator for the district were utilized to provide the necessary design, implementation and leadership for the group. The group was conducted on a trilingual basis: Yiddish, which the family life educator could communicate in and the family worker could understand, Russian, and some English to familiarize participants with several conversational expressions.

Program Design and Implementation

"Getting to Know Your Community," designed for six sessions, was conceptualized as a group which would deal with a combination of concrete issues relating to

community resources and psychological issues pertinent to family relationships and the difficulties of adjusting to a new culture.

The concrete informational items were considered essential, not only in terms of their inherent usefulness, but also as a way to attract and hold the interest of the participants. Soviets are more familiar and comfortable with groups that provide such concrete information.

Various resource people from the community were invited to talk about their service or agency to the group and an informational packet about community resources was also distributed. Among the resources discussed were synagogues, Jewish community centers, Social Security, Council for Jewish Elderly, and the Jewish Vocational Service. The closing serssion was to be held at the neighborhood Jewish Community Center so that the group participants could become familiar with this particular resource, since it had an active Soviet program.

Twenty-seven names of appropriate Soviet seniors were submitted to the group leaders. All of these people were called and asked to attend, and to indicate topics that would be of interest to them. Seventeen people attended the first session, ranging from age 63 to 75, and having been in the United States anywhere from three to twelve months. There were several married couples, several single men, and several single women. Almost all had children in this country, and some had also left children behind in the Soviet Union.

At each session, new people showed up, having heard of the group from other Soviets who had attended. A total of 17 to 25 people participated in each of the six sessions.

Although the two leaders of the group reflected broadly different cultural backgrounds, life styles and educational emphases, they shared a common base of ideas about the importance of the group and what to do with it.

The above described family life education group for Soviet elderly combined elements of a life-task, problem-solving group with those of an informal educational group. The life-task group, frequently the basis of family life education groups, has as its purpose the sharing of similar concerns to decrease feelings of isolation and hopelessness. The group proposes to help people to work together to overcome these feelings of being alone, and provides participants with opportunities to develop new relationships with people similar to themselves.

"Getting to Know Your Community" gave the Soviet elderly participants an opportunity to have an official "social life." It became a weekly "event" for these people and provided them with motivation to get out of the house, to meet and talk with people and to learn new and important information. The provision of concrete information about community resources enabled the participants to become more knowledgeable about options and possibilities available to them, and thus to feel more adequate and independent. They were exposed to new information about housing opportunities, synagogue and center activities, Social Security provisions, and the possibilities of finding part-time work through the Jewish Vocational Service's programs for the older adult.

The participants also benefited from meeting professionals from these various community resoruces, who could then be contacted for further information.

The group also enabled the participants to share some feelings: about disappointing family relationships in the new country, about the difficulties of adjusting to the new life and learning the new language, and about the sadness of leaving loved ones behind in the Soviet Union. They shared feelings related to loss of country and language; they also spoke of their fears about the more frightening aspects of their new country, such as the city crime rate.

The participants related to each other

and to the leaders in an open and trusting way. The concern and helpfulness of the leaders, as well as of fellow participants, fostered self-esteem: valued by others in the group, they could value themselves more.

It is important to point out the setting in which the group took place. The choice of a pleasant, comfortable and accessible place for an elderly group shows interest, respect and caring far more eloquently than words do.[3]

"Getting to Know Your Community" was held in the JFCS lunchroom, which doubles as a conference room. The room consists almost entirely of a large oil-cloth covered table surrounded by chairs. It looks very much like the large kitchen or dining room of a home. Seating seventeen to twenty-five people around this table provided a rather crowded but cozy environment. People were forced to sit close to one another; however, this closeness fostered interaction and friendliness, particularly in the opening stages of the group. A table encourages both closeness and distance at the same time, a factor enhancing the comfort level of a group of elderly who did not initially know each other.

Tea and cake were served at each session and the refreshments added to the homey, family atmosphere. Our meetings could be considered similar to social gatherings in the Soviet Union in which people will sit around a table and drink tea.

There was a feeling of festivity about the meetings and people dressed in their best. The guest speakers invited to address the group succeeded in involving the participants in their varied presentations because they were selected according to the needs of the group. However, an additional factor for the positive reception all of them received may be their comfort and ease in the informal, family setting of the group. The fact that several of the speakers could not speak in Russian or Yiddish did not interfere with the process of communication. Translation was provided by the Soviet family worker; thus there was a language of understanding based not only on mutual knowledge of the Russian language, but also on the leaders' sensitivity to the group and its needs.

Group Process

Though the format and content of the program were pre-planned to some extent, they left room for suggestions and feedback from the group. The planning was not completed until after the initial meeting. Consequently, the choice of topics and guest speakers was determined by both leaders and participants.

During the first session, it was necessary to reiterate several times to the participants that it was not the purpose of the group to help with individual, personal problems such as lost baggage or delayed Public Aid, but to deal with those subjects which were of interest to the group as a whole: to address the common concerns.

At first, there was a tendency to view the leaders as an extension of the functions of the resettlement worker; however, by the third session, they were seen more realistically as being the organizers and facilitators of the group. They were there to serve the needs of the group as a whole, rather than to solve individual problems.

As was mentioned earlier, the sessions were trilingual; however, Yiddish was the primary language. It is interesting to note the participants' warm repsonse to our conducting the sessions in Yiddish. They appeared to enjoy recalling the language which they had all known as youngsters, but which many hadn't spoken in forty years. As Simcha Goldberg discribed in his recent article, Soviet Jews were cut off from the possibility of cultural Jewishness thirty years ago.[4] The Soviet elderly,

[3] *Ibid*, p. 249.

[4] Simcha Goldberg, "Jewish Acculturation and the Soviet Immigrant," *Journal of Jewish Communal Services*, Vol. LVII, No. 2 (1980), pp. 154-163.

however, are the generation who experienced a rather full Jewish life as young children. Some of the participants remembered Hebrew prayers and had attended Yeshivas. A discussion of synagogues evoked many warm memories of forty years back; Hebrew, T'fillah, and Chazanim were recalled with deep emotion and enthusiasm. The use of Yiddish symbolized more than a language to them. It was a cultural tie to their long ago past, a symbol of freedom in a country where one could speak any language without fear. Yiddish represented their positive identification with being Jewish, the reason for which they were able to emigrate and were eligible for so many services offered by the Jewish community. To some, the use of Yiddish also symbolized the leaders' interest in and concern for them; as one of the participants so poetically stated to the senior author, an American-born person struggling to communicate in Yiddish, "you don't speak Yiddish, you sing Yiddish."

The format of the group was designed to include both affective and cognitive components. The affective component of the group structure emerged spontaneously as a result of timing or developed from a discussion of the uses of a community resource. Thanksgiving weekend, during which time the session was postponed, provided the impetus to discuss participant feelings about family holidays. This then developed into a discussion of family relationships in America and how different it was for them here than in the Soviet Union. Many expressed concern about their growing physical and emotional distance from children and grandchildren since their arrival in the United States. There was also a sharing of feelings of loss of family and friends left behind in the Soviet Union.

A presentation on the services of the local Council for Jewish Elderly resulted in an emotional and bitter discussion about placement of elderly family members in nursing homes. Some expressed the fear that their own children might do the same to them one day. As mentioned before, in the Soviet Union placement of the elderly is a rare phenomenon.

Parallels to the Group Experience in the Soviet Union

Groups are not popular in the Soviet Union. The government fears the inherent power of the group coalescence. Only a very structured professional, educational or work group, connected to an organization, is allowed. These, as well as social groups in the Soviet Union, will generally consist of people on the same social or professional level, people with common interests. Occasionally, a group will be used to draw up a formal complaint or grievance, and thus perhaps effect some needed change or addition.

During our first session, participants in the group defined a common problem, the need of a translator at the local Public Aid office. They then requested that we transmit a petition for them requesting intervention by the JFCS administration to acquire the services of such a person. They were consequently using the group for a purpose which was similar to the use of a group in the Soviet Union.

Other similarities to the Soviet group experience include: utilizing the group to provide concrete information, distributing informational handouts, and, of course, sitting around the table drinking tea. All of these elements in our group structure were familiar and comfortable, and perhaps paved the way for the acceptance of the less familiar affective components of the group format.

The discussion of psychological issues was certainly a new group experience for the participants. In the Soviet Union, such issues would be discussed only among close friends and families. The openness both about disappointments in family relationships and about feelings of loss illustrated a

remarkable degree of trust and confidence in both members of the group and the leaders. This discussion did not occur until the third session, but even so, it reflects the impact of a free environment. Apparently, freedom from fear and suspicion had already become part of their perception of their new surroundings.

The group was different from the Soviet experience of a social or professional group in that it had a truly heterogeneous composition. The common characteristics of the participants were based on their all being immigrants, elderly and Jewish. However, in all other aspects, they were a vastly varied group of people. They came from all parts of the Soviet Union: Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, Odessa; from all social classes and from broadly differing educational and professional levels, ranging from the extremely educated executive to a hardly literate worker, born before the Revolution. Despite this extreme mixture, an atmosphere of cohesiveness and warmth prevailed within the group. Perhaps this can be attributed to their realization through the group discussions that their struggles and concerns were shared by all.

There were several other elements of the group experience which were visibly different from a Soviet-style group. Participant opinion was solicited to determine topics of interest to the group, much unlike any group in the Soviet Union, which is conducted in a more authoritarian way. At first, the participants could express themselves only in terms of concrete needs. Subsequently, however, they were able to ask for more sessions, for an extension of the program, for opportunities to meet with Americans, for an excursion trip and a closing party.

Referring to each other informally by first names was a departure from the more formal Soviet custom of utilizing both the first and patronymic name, except among close friends and family. When asked how they would prefer being called, the participants requested the first name basis. It may have symbolized to them the more congenial, trusting and informal atmosphere of their new surroundings.

The relationships within the group were warm, close, trusting and friendly. There was little competitiveness among the participants and much sharing of information. We noted changes in individuals during the progress of the group. People who at first seemed somewhat suspicious and close-mouthed, became relaxed, open, active participants.

Termination

Soviets find termination of contacts with a worker or other helper particularly difficult, having said so many "goodbyes" already. In the case of our group, there was an attempt to delay its conclusion by requesting more sessions. The request was agreed to and the sessions extended to ten; however, once these extended sessions began, the attendance dropped considerably. We might explain this occurrence in several ways: The extension took place during the winter holidays and it took place in a new setting (the Jewish Community Center). However, not attending may also have been a way to avoid saying goodbye. The sessions were there for them to go to and enjoy, but they chose not to and thus avoided the inevitable separation from leaders and other group members, and from the group itself.

In actuality, termination issues occurred in all sessions. As mentioned before, the discussions included the leaving behind of children, relatives and friends, and the growing emotional and physical distance of family. Therapeutically, these discussions were valuable in that the sharing of the common issues related to loss and mourning conveyed to them the universal elements of their grief. It was good to share with others who understood, who had similar experiences, who could listen, accept and fully empathize.

Summary

We have discussed the beneficial effect of a time-limited group experience on twenty individual Soviet elderly immigrants. These Soviet seniors, who had been somewhat isolated and immobilized by the trauma of a major relocation, were provided with an opportunity through the group to meet and socialize with each other, and to become familiar with important community resources. As a result, new friendships were forged, and participants were mobilized to explore more of the Chicago community, drawing support from their new social relationships. Together, in groups of twos and threes, they visited different Jewish community centers and synagogues, looked into subsidized housing opportunities, even embarked on a trip to the Art Museum.

Self-esteem was enhanced through their mutual exchange of helpful information and the ability to relay important information to their families as well. For all concerned, the participants as well as the leaders, this group experience was enabling, enlightening and enriching. As one of the participants so ably said in her evaluative comment, "Thanks to the group I met many interesting people, some of whom are now my friends. I decided to participate in some JCC activities. The group unites and gives practical help for life in America."