

# A Support Group for Elderly Russian Immigrants

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## Introduction

As a caseworker in the Resettlement Service of the Jewish Family Service of Detroit, I work mostly with Soviet immigrants. Many are over sixty years old. Almost without exception, elderly immigrants left the USSR to accompany or to rejoin children and grandchildren.

Elderly immigrants often undergo severe losses, disappointments and hardships in the wake of the move to the *goldene* land. Issues that come up repeatedly in talks with elderly clients are grief and guilt over separation from children, grandchildren and others remaining in the USSR; disappointment at not being able to find work, with a resultant drop in self-esteem; frustration with regard to American medical care, which frequently cannot help the client realize his fantasy of being cured of all sorts of health problems, and sorrow and anger over alienation from children—themselves recent immigrants—who may not have the resources or the inclination to help the elderly parents. Also apparent are the anxiety of those who are dependent on public assistance for their survival and depression over the loss of old friends and familiar surroundings. Occasionally, I encounter ambivalence over having emigrated, and idealization of the lost homeland, rife though it is with anti-Semitism. Most common are complaints of loneliness and isolation, which are compounded by the lack of good public transportation in Detroit (and many other cities.) In short, elderly clients who are especially isolated, or whose relationships with their children are troubled, can present a compendium of stresses, losses, disappointments and hardship. In response to the need such clients have for supportive contact with the agency and with other immigrants, a support

group for elderly Russian immigrants was organized in my agency. My co-workers and I anticipated that elderly, isolated, needy clients would respond positively to the opportunity to share their experiences and feelings with others.

The group has met weekly for almost two years. Meetings are held at the agency for one-and-a-half hours each week, on a day that the clients do not attend the English language program for elderly Russians which is offered at the local Jewish Community Center. I conduct the group in Russian, but a fair amount of Yiddish is exchanged. Transportation is provided by the agency.

## Purpose and Membership

Membership was intended for clients whose need was judged greatest by their social workers. I contacted elderly clients who appeared especially isolated, depressed or troubled, or whose adjustment was complicated by particular difficulties. Clients who were sufficiently open, communicative and low in manifest anxiety to be able to function in a group setting were considered for membership. Membership was not intended for immigrants who had just arrived, for such clients must confront a host of immediate, concrete tasks. Those contacted for group membership had been in Detroit for four months to two years. The backgrounds of two members are illustrative:

Mrs. A, a widow, unexpectedly underwent a serious operation shortly after arrival. As a result of the operation, she was unable to get about for weeks and still has limited functioning. For lonely, dispirited Mrs. A, whose only relative in the area is a niece, the group provides an important source of contact and rapport with others.

Another member, Mrs. K, while in better physical health than Mrs. A, is so anxious and dependent that she will not often venture out of her rented room. When Mrs. K's elderly landlady is hospitalized or out of town, as is frequently the case, Mrs. K lives in near-total isolation. She is the group's least communicative and open member, but its most regular one.

The group started with four people and gradually came to include about fifteen regular members. About half of the clients I contacted elected not to come, or dropped out after between one and five sessions. At present, all the members have attended quite regularly for at least six months. About eight members—two couples and four widows—have attended regularly since the group was begun.

In their article about a prenatal group for Soviet immigrants, Cunningham and Dorf pointed out that "the concept of group as a therapeutic agent as known in America is unheard of in the Soviet Union. Groups . . . in the USSR are usually informational and instructional in which an authoritarian leader lectures to the audience . . ."<sup>1</sup> One reason why our support group became cohesive and expressive is that *few specific expectations were made of the members*, other than that they conduct themselves in a reasonably orderly manner and that they notify me of foreseeable absences. Members were told that the purpose of the group was "to talk about your new lives in America." That was a sufficient rationale—one which did not arouse suspicion, feel threatening, or create anxiety. I stressed to the members that "the agency is interested in how you feel about your lives in Detroit." An open, uncomplicated, deliberately vague approach apparently worked well with these clients. Those who elected to come, the clients who have needs met by the group, did not offer resistance to the simple-sounding purpose I

<sup>1</sup> Marina Cunningham and Nina Dorf, "Prenatal Group for Soviet Immigrants," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LVI, No. 1 (1979), pp. 73-76.

set forth. Rather, the amount of material that poured out practically engulfed me before the clients themselves decided which themes and issues were most important.

There was, and is, no shortage of input from the group members. During some meetings, I have imagined that I am a baker who has been presented with a mass of rich dough, which could be shaped into bread, or rolls, or a torte! In short, I am surprised at how the idea of a group took hold without pressure from me, and the intensity with which members present material. I have seen the group members come to mean a great deal to each other as they provide each other with needed support and rapport. Furthermore, I have seen the members' attitudes toward the agency and their caseworkers undergo radical changes. Because the group was organized with the members as its focus, they have come to feel more esteemed by the agency than they did during the initial, often rocky, weeks after arrival.

### Organization

Transportation was of vital importance to organizing the group, since elderly immigrants are unable to provide their own transportation. The agency driver picks up and takes home about five group members, and I use the agency's station wagon to transport the others. The clients appear gratified at receiving transportation; it is experienced as special attention. For example, a member who lives about five miles from the agency, said to me repeatedly, "Are you sure you can *really* come get me, all the way out here?" The atmosphere in the car quickly becomes convivial. And, because the clients must sit so close to each other, there is ample opportunity for flirting!

An attractive, quiet room which contains a long table was selected for the meetings. I think the room has a certain atmosphere; although windowless, it is cozy and inviting, decorated with bright-colored bean bags.

Chairs are placed close together around the long table.

Modest refreshments and, occasionally, a bouquet of flowers are provided. This pleases the clients, who place importance on hospitality. The refreshments and the flowers are small but important elements of the undertaking. They serve to put the group members at ease and to make them feel welcomed and encouraged. "It's good here," said Mrs. K the first time refreshments were served. Mr. P commented, "These cookies cost money." On a very small scale, the cookies symbolize investment in the clients, and respect, from the agency.

Over the first few months, I called the group members each week to remind them of the meeting, and of when and where to be ready for the driver. Eventually, it became unnecessary for me to call the members; they learned to call me in advance if they could not come. That change is one element of a process whereby the clients learned how to function as members of a support group.

### **Major Themes and Issues**

A number of major themes surface repeatedly. What it is like to have been a widow for ten, twenty or thirty years comes up again and again. The widows all express a desire to remarry, but for decades, they have had to cope with the tragic fact that so many eligible men were lost in World War II. The widows are able to offer each other much solace. At the same time, they have not abandoned hopes of finding a mate. For example, Mrs. I spotted a gentleman at the agency who interests her and she contrives to be given a ride home by him! The widows talk animatedly of a singles club for elderly Russian immigrants in the Russian community in Brighton Beach, New York. Members of the club reportedly "go out on the beach together in their swimsuits." There was heady talk when a sometime group member actually did marry

an elderly American. But most of the widows remain lonesome. Some of them, widowed in their twenties, have had to cope with being alone over most of their adult lives. The theme of loneliness, and the hardship faced by the widows while they raised children without a husband, comes up again and again in our discussions. Rarely is there self-pity, but instead, resignation, and a tenacious hope that in America, romance will blossom again.

The clients' experiences during World War II and the impact the war had on their families and attitudes are perennial subjects. "If you could X-ray us inside," Mr. P said to me, "you would see the damage wrought by World War II." The men in the group all served in the Red Army during the war. Some were seriously injured and later received disability benefits. It is difficult for Russian veterans to accept that here, the recognition and special privileges they formerly received are not forthcoming. The veterans maintain that the Red Army saved America from a Nazi invasion: without the Eastern front, the Germans would have vanquished Europe, and then America. (Therefore, says Mr. S, once in the United States, Soviet veterans of World War II certainly deserve public assistance!) The men in the group share a formidable bond in that they fought at the front, but the women also can be considered veterans. Some lost husbands, children or parents; others, brothers, sisters and aunts. Some almost starved to death during the siege of Leningrad or after being evacuated to far regions of the Soviet Union. Some managed to find their loved ones again after the war, but others' lives were broken.

World War II was a traumatic, fundamental experience for all the group members, one which shaped their attitudes as well as their destinies. I conclude that much of the resourcefulness, the resilience and the close family ties these clients evidence are bound up with the grim wartime experiences they managed to

surmount. Visitors to the group and I are struck by how the group members return again and again to their experiences during World War II. In the Soviet Union, memories of the war are kept alive. Doing so suits official purposes related to heavy emphasis on spending for defense rather than for consumer goods. However, the group members' wartime experiences at the front, in transit and after evacuation remain so charged with meaning, so traumatic and indelible that, for them, 1945 is virtually like yesterday. Mrs. M recalls how she went hungry and became bony after being evacuated to Siberia. Mrs. S recalls how her aunt, with whom Mrs. S resided, was "blasted to bits" in a bombing raid. Mrs. S also talks about the long train ride to Kazakhstan, and safety, she made with her baby. Mrs. A's hair turned gray suddenly after she received word that most of her family had perished at the hands of the Nazis. Mrs. Z tells how her husband hid from her the letters that told of her family's annihilation. Mr. S has not forgotten the sight of others drowning around him as his unit was forced into a river. He speaks of crossing the Elbe into Berlin, where he greeted an American Soldier with *shalom*. Mr. S recalls, too, how a German prisoner lunged at him when Mr. S revealed he was a Jew. Mrs. P remembers searching for her husband after the war and finally locating him in a remote hospital, with the help of something like a clearinghouse for the seekers and the sought which was organized after the war. Mrs. M survived the siege of Leningrad, when starving, freezing people tried to stave off death by eating dirt. Mrs. I recalls how her two brothers "got on a train for the front and were never heard from again." The remembrances go on and on, but the clients cannot express enough of what they remember. Recollections of wartime experiences are always close to the surface. They are ineradicable. The clients appreciate an opportunity to express themselves to the agency about the traumatic

experiences they barely survived. They do indeed deserve special appreciation of those parts of the past.

The group process reveals that some of the clients' current attitudes and behaviors are plainly rooted in wartime experiences. Mrs. F, for example, cannot bear to be apart from her husband, even for an afternoon! If one of the Fs goes to the doctor, the other one goes too, and if one of the Fs must stay home to wait for a repairman, the other one waits alongside. I consider that Mrs. F's deathly dread of separation (she will cry if faced with the prospect of even a few hours by herself) has to do with the massive losses she suffered during the war, when both she and Mr. F lost their entire families of origin, eighteen people in all.

As one might suspect, the war left these survivors acutely conscious of being Jews. In addition to living in terror for their lives and losing so many loved ones to the Nazis, the group members endured barrages of anti-Semitism. For example, the major Russian cities were bombarded not just with bombs, but also with tons of anti-Semitic leaflets to the effect that the war was the fault of the Jews. Members of the group still have not forgotten the sight of those leaflets dropping on them from the skies.

On occasion, the group has broken into a Yiddish song. Because of past encounters with anti-Semitism, both during World War II and afterward, the members' awareness of being Jews in a group is very strong, and calls forth a host of powerful, moving associations. The clients express joy at being able to relive childhood experiences such as attending a Purim party. Even attending a synagogue service was overwhelming to Mr. S, who had not easily done so for fifty years. Nor surprisingly, the group members, like so many Russian Jews, want to know right away whether or not someone is a Jew. They doubt they can trust anyone who is not Jewish. A politician is deemed good if he is

a Jew, suspect if he is not. What is more, the pre-war, post-war, and wartime experiences the clients have lived through could, to their way of thinking, happen again. For example, Mrs. M said that "the Atlanta child killer had better not be a Jew, because if he is, there will be a pogrom."

Like wartime experiences, encounters with Soviet prejudice have had noticeable impact on these clients' thinking. The group members wonder whether they might be denied some forms of public assistance because they are Jews. That fear is groundless in the present, but it is indicative of these people's past, when being a Jew meant being disqualified from various strata of Soviet society. Orbach has remarked: "As Jews . . . they [found] themselves . . . identified as such by the state and because of that . . . [faced] a myriad of obstacles to complete personal and professional fulfillment. In the Soviet Union, a Jewish identity is a negative one, leading to a tenuous form of second class citizenship."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that group members have voiced worries that they might not receive a specific benefit such as HUD rental subsidy allowance because, as Mrs. Z said, "nobody is making noise for them." In other words, no one is deploying connections, bribes and favors on their behalf—a *sine qua non* for receiving like benefits, especially by second-class citizens, in the Soviet Union. I often point out to group members that they are still thinking "Soviet-style." One of the group's major functions is to examine how some members' attitudes, obviously the result of years of dismal and frustrating interaction with the Soviet system, no longer are appropriate. However, it is no easy matter for any of these elderly people to change his thinking and attitudes. The increased rigidity which accompanies aging

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Orbach, "The Jewishness of Soviet-Jewish Culture: Historical Considerations," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LVII, No. 2 (1980), pp. 145-153.

does not make for ready adjustment to the radically different values and attitudes the clients presently encounter. For example, I frequently remind the group members that in the United States, social welfare programs are at least *intended* to be equitable: "noise making," bribes and the like will not result in an increase in one's food stamp allotment.

The group members, like many immigrants, are unsure how to proceed when they have a grievance against an agency or an institution. In the group, members discuss their grievances and examine possible responses. Typical grievances include disparities in amounts of public assistance, and perceived differences in quality of medical care. On occasion, the group has recommended that a member take action about his grievance, for example, by seeing his worker at the Department of Social Services, or by writing a letter to a newspaper.

Another major area of discussion in the group concerns the fact that for a large number of elderly immigrants, emigration entailed the loss of a son or daughter remaining in the USSR. The group shared the joy of Mrs. I, whose *vyzov* (invitation) to her son brought results, and the pain of the Ps and the Fs, whose mail never brings the news they await. With reports of growing anti-Semitism and worsening food shortages in the USSR, the parents' sense of bereavement is compounded by guilt and anxiety. It is pathetic for the parents of a *refusenik* to have to face the fact that there is nothing to do except mourn and hope. I consider that group discussion helps members to cope with such a situation. I shall never forget how two parents of *refuseniks*, Mrs. F and Mrs. P, strangers at the outset, found each other within minutes after Mrs. F first came to the group, and comforted each other as best they could.

In some cases, emigration leads to disappointment in the son or daughter who cannot seem to make good here, or who is

not in a position to help the elderly parents. Mr. and Mrs. Z, for example, can hardly bear to speak of their younger son, who is in Detroit. He remains a janitor, and single, although he is past forty. The Zs voice anger at the agency "for not giving our son the training he needed." Having, as Mr. Z says, "a son who is neither fish nor meat" would be painful to any parents, but the matter is doubly disappointing in view of the Zs' separation from their other son, who remains in the USSR with their only grandchildren. He has been denied an exit visa. In a similar vein, Mrs. K deals with *de facto* separation from her only son, who lives in Detroit. His wife is not on speaking terms with the old lady. Mrs. K worries about what will happen when her current landlady moves to Florida. For Mrs. K, the unknown looms like an iceberg in a course that is barely navigable at present, and stress renders her near-suicidal. The other members have tended to distance themselves from Mrs. K by not expressing interest in her, and by ignoring her when she talks. The others' attitudes have not brought about much change in Mrs. K's manner of relating, at least not yet. However, she has made good use of the group in terms of lessening her severe isolation. She has formed friendships with two other ladies, whom she sees frequently outside the group.

Troubled living situations are not unusual for elderly immigrants, and group discussions reflect that fact. Elderly couples who are so fortunate as to have an apartment worry about meeting the rent, which usually absorbs most of their income from public assistance. Single people, mostly widows, face the vagaries of being a roomer in someone's house, unsure whether it is permissible to use the paprika or turn on the television. Clients who live with their children generally must cope with a variety of family conflicts and with "just having a cot in the living room."

However, family ties are of utmost importance to most elderly immigrants.

Group members whose children are unmarried or childless commiserate on that score. Sometimes immigrants dream that being in America will alter such a disappointing situation. For example, Mr. Z. told me he was "sure that in America, my son would finally get married." Mr. Z. continues to hope.

All of the above issues enter into the many group discussions about the losses versus the gains of emigration. Foremost among the losses are those of family left behind, perhaps never to be rejoined. Beyond that, there is the loss of one's old, familiar identity, whether of a worker, or a veteran, or a retired person with many friends, and one's old environs. There is the loss of familiarity with the language and the system. One's savings, possessions and old friends have fallen away. With the move to America, the group members' lives suddenly became comparatively cloistered and bounded.

The group members also have to face the ironic fact that although they have little purchasing power, everything, for the first time in their lives, is here for the buying! Food, clothing, furniture, etc. are all here to a previously unimaginable extent. However, the clients are dependent on other people or agencies to provide for them. Sadly, the clients are far more dependent on others than they used to be. The group members are able to examine how and why they now are so dependent, and can offer each other useful information on how to lessen dependency. For example, everyone in the group is faced with insufficient income to afford services such as transportation, visits to hairdressers, and dry cleaning. The group members provide each other with information about all sorts of discounts available to them. I myself was aware that elderly immigrants can get discounts on their electricity rates, but I was surprised to learn that special discounts are available to the elderly at some dry cleaning plants! Group members constantly

exchange information about food prices at various supermarkets; such information is vitally important to them. Broadly speaking, coming to the group assists members to be up-to-date concerning prices, programs and benefits, no easy task for people who cannot read the newspapers or understand the radio. Members encourage each other to be as self-sufficient as possible.

We have had many talks about dependency. As Goldberg has remarked, "the trauma of resettlement in an utterly strange culture is further compounded by having to deal with material needs to the exclusion of all else. The earliest contacts with Jewish agencies revolve almost exclusively around maintenance."<sup>3</sup> The group contact is no longer an early one, but many issues related to maintenance still are paramount. Clients have come right out and said that it is "awful" to be so dependent on the agency and the welfare system for their survival. One lady admitted to "lying in bed and sweating" in fear that she might lose her income from public assistance. The uncertainties of the future—will their incomes be decreased; will the HUD subsidy program be eliminated—obsess and frighten these dependent anxious people. A major element of their dependency has to do with wanting to be separate from their children; the clients do not want to *have* to ask their children for anything. Doing so is acutely uncomfortable, and, as these clients say in chorus from time to time, "my child has it hard himself." Once, I posed the question: "When you need a pair of shoes, and you cannot afford to buy them, what do you do?" Mrs. Z replied, "We come to you [our social worker], our *mamochka*." Her reply led us to discuss the clients' dependency on their social workers at the agency and on other perceived providers and mother-figures. The extreme nature of these clients'

<sup>3</sup> Simcha R. Goldberg, "Jewish Acculturation and the Soviet Immigrant," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LVII, No. 2 (1980), pp. 154-163.

dependency has tended to confound resettlement workers who initially do not understand that in the Soviet Union, being dependent often brings payoffs. "The Soviet government discourages autonomy and encourages dependence . . . Once in America, the Soviet individual tries to cope with life . . . by using methods of relating developed within the Soviet family and culture."<sup>4</sup>

Chief among the gains of emigration is, as one group member said, "not living in fear." Pogroms are a thing of the past, but rising anti-Semitism in the USSR is a sign of the present. Here, the clients can speak Yiddish as much as they like, without fear of humiliation or punishment. Also paramount among the gains is seeing their children and grandchildren carve out a future. In the USSR, there is no good future in sight.

I am pleased to say that discussions about the pros and cons of emigration almost invariably end on a favorable note. "Nobody starves here," says one lady. Nobody's Yiddishkeit is starved, either. Despite all the difficulties they face, the clients never weary of talking about the plentitude and the decency life in America offers them. These people do not have to forage and bribe any more to obtain necessities, but that is not really their point. They have traded in their old ways, the old familiarity with the system and their former identities for the opportunity to live without constraints, even though they might be seventy-five years old.

### Sharing and Acceptance

I am surprised at how the idea of coming to a group took hold among the clients. I encountered at least as much eagerness to come and "try out" the sessions as I did resistance and reticence. The clients who elected to come regularly have demon-

<sup>4</sup> Phillis Hulewat, "Dynamics of the Soviet Jewish Family: Its Impact on Clinical Practice for the Jewish Family Agency," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LVIII, No. 1 (1981), pp. 53-60.

strated considerable openness. I consider that the group members have truly come to know, and understand, each other over the months of coming together. Adversity has created close bonds between some—for example, between parents of *refuseniks*. The widows have shared a host of painful recollections, and tenacious hopes about the future. Those with children compare and contrast their past and present relationships with their sons and daughters. Bitter memories of the Soviet system, and the indelible imprint of wartime experiences create indissoluble bonds among the group members. I consider that after often sharing so many experiences and emotions, the group members are far more accepting of each other than they were at the outset. Even gloomy Mrs. K has been warmly welcomed back by the others after an absence caused by illness. Now, almost two years after the group was formed, the members take increased interest in each other's affairs. They cry out of joy as Mrs. F reveals that her daughter will leave the USSR, and commiserate with Mrs. Z when she says she will never again see her son and grandson. By sharing each other's joys and tribulations, their own troubles recede a bit.

### Conclusion

The primary purpose of the group was to lessen members' severe isolation. That goal has been achieved. Other goals centered around examining members' old "Soviet-style" attitudes and values in relation to the present, and discussing the conflicts, hardships and rewards the members encounter

as they carve out new lives in America. Attitudes toward the agency have been examined, and have become more positive as the clients have aired feelings and gained understanding.

I consider the group method in this case to be a good use of agency resources. About fifteen clients are seen weekly. Other resettlement workers told me they referred their most dependent clients to the group, with a noticeable decrease in dependency evident after a time, in some cases. Highly dependent group members tended to become less so as the meetings progressed for the reason that their level of anxiety concerning the agency fell off sharply. Those clients could be certain that the agency was in touch with them, that they would actually be at the agency once a week, that general interest would be expressed in them, and that they would have an opportunity to talk. Despite the fact that the focus of group discussion was *not* on members' individual circumstances except as relevant to issues concerning other members, the group method set up a dynamic—regular attendance, discussion and interchange—that encouraged, and permitted, substantial reduction of anxiety concerning members' individual relationships with the agency.

Looking at the group members, I think of a flock of elderly birds, a bit ragged and dusty, their feathers worn, who have endured prolonged battering storms, and are finally drying off together in a sheltered cove.