

How the Center Helps Russian Jews

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The Russians are no longer just a burden for the Jewish community; they are contributors; they seek to enter the mainstream.

In several large Jewish communities, the settlement house was reborn several years ago. As the sound of the Russian language began to reverberate through the halls, interspersed occasionally with Yiddish, a new being called "Russian-American Jew" started to take shape. This was a far cry from the idealized picture promoted in some quarters of the Russian Jew, deprived of his Jewish heritage and willing to suffer any hardship, any indignity to reach the land of his fathers.

Israel has had more than its share of problems in the education and absorption of the "Prisoners of Conscience" and their countrymen. But, viewed from a Jewish perspective and in certain respects, the American Jewish community is faced with even greater obstacles in the resettlement process. After all, we receive the less knowledgeable, less Jewishly motivated. Earlier waves of European immigrants came from societies whose established Jewish institutions instilled a Jewish consciousness in them. They had known models for recreation of Jewish structures or amendment of existing ones. In contrast, we welcome the end-product of 60 years of Soviet education systematically aimed at destroying Judaism as a religion and culture and Jews as a distinct ethnic and cultural group.

As Jewish communal workers, our primary task with the Russian Jews was stated two years ago by Ethel Taft: "The tremendous financial resources and human resources that we are expending in their behalf will most likely have little payoff in terms of Jewish survival and Jewish continuity, unless we embark on a concerted effort to introduce them, in a meaningful way, to our religious and cultural heritage."¹

Well over 3,000 Russian Jews have been

resettled in Los Angeles. For almost all of them, the Westside Jewish Community Center serves at least initially as a hub of social activity and acculturation. For many, the impact is reinforced through special events and holiday celebrations. For some, the impact deepens as the opportunity to partake Jewishly is seized.

All adult Russian newcomers are taught English in classes at the Center sponsored by the Jewish Vocational Service and conducted five days a week, four hours a day. About 500 Russians have been taught to drive automobiles in a Center-sponsored program designed to prepare employable adults for the reality of work in Los Angeles.

The Center provides ongoing education in American folkways, social customs, and political life. For some longer term residents, this has led into a citizenship training class. The traditional settlement house role of 50 and more years ago is alive and well at the Center—socialization, education, recreation, and group work—with the added dimension of Judaization.

A bilingual monthly newsletter, edited by the Center's Russian professional worker, is mailed to the home of every Russian newcomer. It contains information on Russian Department activities, but also about Jewish holidays, Jewish history, opportunities to participate in Center and community-wide events, and explanations of the obligations of American citizens. The cultural gap between police-state thinking and the need to make choices unheard of until now, is enormous. The newsletter, with its patient interpretations and practical insights, begins to bridge this gap.

Much of the Russian newcomers' activity centers around Jewish holiday celebrations.

Mass events for Simchat Torah and Pesach, Chanukah and Purim, are invariably oversubscribed. The hunger for Jewish identification and understanding is there in a Holocaust memorial program, Israel Independence festivities, sharing a seder in an American home or synagogue, and (for some) lectures on Judaism.

Integrating Russians into the Jewish community is a tall order. Even integrating them into a large Jewish community center is a major problem. With scholarship assistance, many Russian children now attend summer day camp. But few American children come to the chess club or ballet class dominated by Russians; and the Russian senior citizens are more comfortable with their separate club and their Russian and Yiddish-speaking leader than in the Center's Senior Adult Friendship Club.

Offering to the entire Center an inexpensive Friday evening dinner and Oneg Shabbat entertainment proved very attractive for Russians, as for other groups. But soon we recognized a pattern: despite heavy Russian attendance, there was little integration. The language barrier was a serious problem, and these events became essentially exercises in "parallel play," to all intents and purposes perpetuating the isolation of the Russians.

The approach to integration that *has* been working is the "Friendship Host Program," in which selected Russian families are matched with American families with common characteristics and anticipated mutual interests. Over 40 families now participate in one-on-one family activities, as well as occasional events for all of the families together, with planning by volunteers. Acquaintances are becoming friends, and opportunities to help in practical ways are emerging. As these Russians step into the broader Jewish community, the Friendship Host Program holds promise for the integration of many more families.

Leaders of the Friendship Host Program now sit on the Center board of directors, as does a representative of the Russian community.

Monthly trips are popular with Russians,

destinations include Jewish landmarks as well as the museums and cultural attractions of greater Los Angeles. These trips have evoked the strong attachment of many Russians to the Arts. The bilingual guide on recent trips has been the former assistant director of the Hermitage in Leningrad, one of the world's great art museums. Through him has come the needed link between the Center and the artistic community of Russian newcomers. His aid was central in creating the Russian Newcomers' Festival. Although in the United States barely a year, he made contact with a wide range of graphic artists and selected ten to be represented in the art exhibit of the Festival. Lay leaders of the Center and some of the Russians themselves led staff and the committee of Festival organizers to Russian musicians of all persuasions—classical, popular, Jewish, and (in the words of one of the program titles) "from gypsy to jazz."

As more and more talented Russian performers were lined up for the Festival, enthusiasm mounted in the Russian community, in the planning committee, and in the Center board of directors. Articles and paid ads were placed in the Jewish press. Personal appearances by staff at meetings of key Federation committees to interpret the Festival as a landmark in involvement of the Russians helped to build excitement and promote ticket sales. A television interview was arranged with the Center's program director and Russian worker, plus one of the artists and a colorful Russian singer, one of whose songs was *My Yiddishe Mama*. A stunning Festival brochure was designed and printed by Russians (with text primarily by our program director), making this a uniquely client-centered production.

As opening night approached, the artists endowed the lobby and meeting rooms with a beauty the Center had not experienced in years. The tasteful display of paintings, crafts, prints, jewelry, photography, and sculpture was rated by old-timers as among the best in a Center whose 25-year history has included many art exhibits which attained national renown.

The exhibit ran for 8 days and was viewed by several thousand people. The two Saturday night performances were Standing-Room-Only sellouts well in advance. They included a talk by a Russian emigre satirist on "Soviet Underground Humor;" individual singers and instrumentalists; and a band called "The Four Russkis" who had begun their practicing together at the Center more than 2 years before, and had now achieved considerable skill. Hebrew and Yiddish songs and music by Jewish composers were prominently included in the various repertoires, just as some of the artwork reflected Jewish themes.

Also on exhibit was a traveling show of seven Russian artists who have emigrated to Israel, entitled "From Moscow to Jerusalem." These oils and graphics added to the Jewish dimension of the Festival, although they receded in centrality as the fine quality of the local exhibitors' work became more evident.

Sales of artwork were substantial, and the exposure for many artists and performers provided first-time visibility and, in some instances, an unanticipated break. Perhaps most important, the Russian Jewish com-

munity proudly emerged from faceless obscurity to become a new resource within the larger Jewish and cultural communities. And the Center, as the catalyst that made it happen, gained recognition for its services to Russian Jews, really for the first time. This set the stage for new directions in Center work with Russians, with a planned focus on teenagers and children.

In terms of service to Russians, the Festival provided an opportunity for a subgroup to assert itself as a contributing entity within the pluralistic Jewish community.

The Russians are no longer just a burden for the Jewish community; they are contributors and seek to enter the mainstream. The massive turnout and high percentage of giving at the recent fund-raising program for the United Jewish Welfare Fund campaigns is testimony to increasing identification with the larger Jewish community. The Russians are knocking at our doors in increasing numbers, and the Center—with its goal of making Jews out of Russians—helps those doors to open, welcoming them into the extended family they seek.