

THE IMPACT OF JEWISH EDUCATION ON SOVIET EMIGRE ACCULTURATION

The MetroWest Experience

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Immersion of emigre children in intensive Jewish education did not succeed in involving their parents in the Jewish community or enabling their families to develop Jewishly. The current approach to resettlement, based on a one-to-one pairing of native-born with New Americans, is not religiously oriented but instead focuses on educational and cultural activities. It is proving to be more successful in integrating New Americans into American Jewish communal life.

The MetroWest Jewish community has been involved in the resettlement of various waves of refugees throughout this century. Following the passage of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment in 1974 that linked U.S.-Soviet trade with Soviet Jewish immigration, a new wave of emigration began. The numbers of Soviet emigres arriving in MetroWest grew steadily throughout the mid-1970s and peaked in 1979. The number of new arrivals began to decrease from almost 460 in 1980 to approximately 120 in 1982 and only 7 in 1986. In 1987, the total number of emigres arriving in MetroWest once again began to increase, reaching 590 in 1990. Currently there are approximately 100 new emigres each year.

In 1979 the estimated arrival of 500 emigres prompted the establishment of the Committee on Absorption and Resettlement of Emigres (CARE). This committee was formed to ensure the coordination of resettlement services throughout the community. Not only were the Jewish Family Service (JFS) and Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) involved in resettlement as they are presently, but the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Education Association (the local bureau of Jewish educational services) also provided cultural and educational services to the new arrivals.

THE EDUCATION OF SOVIET EMIGRE CHILDREN

One out of three Russian Jewish immigrants to the United States in 1979 was under the age of 18 (half of them were under 13). Of the 650 Soviet emigres who actually arrived in Metropolitan New Jersey in 1979, approximately 100 were students between the ages of 5 to 15.

The nature of the education provided to these Russian Jewish children had a direct relationship to the major objective of integrating new emigre families as rapidly as possible into the American Jewish community. For the adult, resettlement normally involved a half-year of intensive support activities, including some instruction in basic Judaism. Since adult emigres spent most of their time learning English, obtaining employment skills, and attending to basic survival in a new cultural milieu, their Jewish education component was limited to brief presentations by staff and some informal instruction in the one or two synagogues they attended. Russian-language materials were distributed for all the holidays, but adult exposure to formal Jewish studies was quite limited.

For school-aged children however, the Jewish Community Federation of Metropolitan New Jersey (currently the United

Jewish Federation of MetroWest) and its beneficiary agencies indicated a willingness to provide two years of free tuition in a Jewish day school and two summers of camp experience. It was hoped that this two-year period of intensive Jewish education and experiences would promote a strong sense of Jewish self-identification, a positive relationship to Judaism, and the willingness on the part of the family and the student to continue Jewish education, living, and identification within the context of the Jewish community.

Did a program of intensive Jewish education for the children of Soviet emigres succeed in integrating them into American Jewish life? This is an important query since it focuses on the influence of Jewish education on an immigrant population. It also sheds light on the efficacy of the entire Jewish education enterprise in this country.

Creation of Feeder Schools

Until the spring of 1979, the newly arriving Soviet emigre children were referred directly to the Hebrew Youth Academy (now called the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy) and the Solomon Schechter Day School, and the federation provided a basic tuition subsidy of \$600 per student per year. In the spring of 1979, the numbers arriving were so large that the schools were unable to adequately provide the additional educational services needed to properly integrate the students into the classes. In addition, the classes as a whole were suffering due to the imbalance of American-born students and the new arrivals.

In 1979, in response to the large number of new arrivals and still maintaining the goal of promoting the integration of Russian Jewish children within the day schools, the federation established, under the administration and supervision of the Jewish Education Association, a Russian Feeder School Program. The program was designed to (1) promote rapid learning, especially of the English language, in order to bring the students up to grade level and to (2) provide a

substantial program of Jewish studies that would serve as a kind of day school readiness program. A full-time administrator was engaged for this program under the supervision of the JEA executive director. Students were to be prepared to enter the day schools on or slightly below grade level in English. Special classes in Jewish studies for the emigre students avoided the problems associated with having sixth graders in a second-grade Hebrew class.

The Jewish Counseling and Service Agency (currently JFS), which provided the basic social services to the Russian family and served as the liaison between the family, the Russian Feeder School Program, and the day schools, also directed five-year-old students directly to the Hebrew Youth Academy's pre-school program. The JCC provided group and recreation activities throughout the year, and the Jewish Vocational Service worked with the Russian Feeder School Program to counsel older students and help direct the teenagers into appropriate academic and vocational schools or programs. The National Council of Jewish Women provided extensive tutorial assistance through its Volunteer Corps.

The length of each student's stay in the Feeder School depended on his or her English-language skills. Some students remained only a few months, and others with poor English skills stayed for longer than a year. For elementary schoolchildren, every effort was made to shorten this stay, as parents wanted their children "mainstreamed" within an academic year. It was felt that a lengthier period of segregation would have negative academic effects—while the students would gain greater English proficiency, they would lose in core curriculum content. The parameters of the academic year were emphasized, as even those youngsters entering the Feeder School in the middle of the year would have the opportunity to experience a summer in a English-speaking Jewish day or residential camp, an experience that helped immeasurably in increasing their readiness to enter a regular

day or public school in the fall.

After the children completed the Feeder School program, several options were exercised to meet the objective of maximizing their integration into the American Jewish community:

- As large a number of students as possible were transferred into the two existing day schools, with federation funding for (1) additional staff to provide tutoring in English and Hebrew, as well as to serve the larger numbers of students and for (2) transportation to and from the schools through a Day School Transportation Pool administered by JEA.
- Students were transferred to day schools in nearby communities when there was insufficient space in the two day schools in the federation area, with federation subsidizing their tuition. In 1981 and 1982 the Yeshiva of Hudson County received \$79,000 in federation funds for accepting 58 children
- For those children whose academic or family situation precluded transfer to a day school, a comprehensive effort was made to provide other means of Jewish education through enrollment in congregational religious schools, in the Central Jewish High School of the JEA, and in the activities of the JCC.

The opening enrollment in the Feeder School in 1979 was 56, and in the following year, it increased to 100. Of these 100 students, 43 were subsequently transferred to the day schools; the language skills of the remaining 57 were too weak to enable their participation in a dual-language curriculum. These students were transferred to public schools or special education facilities.

When immigration declined in 1983, the Feeder School was disbanded and emigre children were placed directly in day schools, which provided free tuition for one year. When the number of new arrivals increased again in the late 1980s, straining the day schools' capacity, a tuition-free

Emigre Day School was established. It began operations in January 1990 under the auspices of the Jewish Educational Association, but was disbanded shortly thereafter. Since then, emigre children have again been placed directly in day schools.

Retention of Emigre Children in Day Schools

The retention of emigre children in day schools has been poor. Although some elementary grade students remained in the day schools after their year or two of free tuition, the general rule was to drop out when free tuition and transportation were no longer provided. Often when the local public school population was considered undesirable, families would petition the day schools for tuition assistance, which was usually granted. When these emigre families could afford to move to better neighborhoods, they left the day schools. For example, of the 60 children receiving tuition-free enrollment in the day schools in the academic year 1991-92, only 23 returned for the second year when tuition was no longer free.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE

Immersion of emigre children in intensive Jewish education did not succeed, for the most part, in involving their parents in the Jewish community or enabling their families to develop Jewishly. Both anecdotal evidence and statistical measures of affiliation support this conclusion.

According to the JFS database, the number of synagogue or JCC memberships is very low among those families. In addition, a survey conducted by Reuben Romirowsky, executive director of the JFS, of emigres between 1978 to 1993, indicated the following: 73 percent were Jewish; 27 percent were intermarried; 55-70 percent rated a Passover seder, fasting on Yom Kippur, and attending High Holiday services as important; rituals with the least ongoing obliga-

tion had the highest practice; 56 percent had no Jewish or American friends; 50 percent indicated that they were "just Jewish" with no denominational ties; and 79 percent felt that Jewish education for their children was important.

Romirowsky's study is part of a larger work in progress on Jewish identity formation of Soviet emigres. Some of his conclusions merit inclusion in this study:

Although coming from an experience of anti-Semitism and a negative identity in the Former Soviet Union, Russians do not seek out religious affiliation more intensely, as a compensation for the "missed opportunities" of Russia. Friendship patterns indicate a reluctance to open up to Americans, with Jewish friends not being sought out.

In addition, every educator who worked with these families can relate dozens of anecdotes illustrating our failure to "reach" them. Kielbasa-and-cheese sandwiches were the favorite school lunch brought from home, and recess games used *tefillin* bags as hockey pucks.

The Jewish community is in a state of paralysis around how to define Jewish continuity and what resources to use in the service of strengthening Jewish identity in America. Millions of dollars are being poured into American Jewish education, and millions more into acculturation efforts that have, as their core, getting Russians to enroll [their children] in Jewish day schools and afternoon religious schools. This survey suggests that Russians are not as invested in their own Jewish education, despite highly valuing education as a means of advancement and to achieve status. However, Jewish education for their children is considered fairly important.

For a variety of reasons, the provision of a program of intensive Jewish education for emigre children failed to achieve the objective of integrating their families into the community. For one, involvement in the Jewish community was seen primarily in

terms of the synagogue, an institution that was alien to the vast majority of emigres. To compound this difficulty, most synagogues were unfortunately not involved in the resettlement process with the federation. This gap made Judaism a formalized "official, almost perfunctory practice to be trotted out on cue. Jewish studies were merely "subjects" in the eyes of the emigre children. Other than some grandparents who still understood Yiddish, the emigre population had no attachment to anything Jewish. Religion to them was like Communism. In school they did as they were told—outside it did not apply. Federation—as well-meaning, sincere, and helpful as it was—was considered as "them," the authorities. Despite the wide-ranging support provided, the emigres related to the organized Jewish community as they once did to the government in the Soviet Union.

In addition, we did not fully understand their mindset. They were not at all like the post-World War II refugees, with whom we shared a common language (Yiddish) and religious/cultural heritage. Finally, as important as Jewish education is in the Jewish tradition, it alone did not address the needs of the emigres arriving in the 1970s and 1980s. While the children were in Jewish day school or camp, their parents were struggling to learn a new language and to transfer their job skills to a tight employment market. If it had been possible to make their parents as Jewishly literate as their children, perhaps the acculturation program would have succeeded. The home is still the single most important determinant of Jewish continuity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Whether emigres have been thoroughly Russified or are committed Jews, they suffer the sense of isolation, alienation, and loss known by all refugees. Therefore, they will respond best to an approach that is characterized on the one hand by sincere warmth and caring, and on the other, by unthreatening contact with the host society. As

American Jews, when we reach out to the immigrant with caring, the response is generally most rewarding. That Jews care for Jews because they are Jews is a lesson that immigrants will absorb easily and is seminal for future Jewish development. A welcoming attitude, both on the community and on the individual level, is the basis of any acculturation effort.

A warm Jew-relating-to-Jew approach should be a natural part of the approach of community professionals, resettlement volunteers, and **synagogues** who are involved with the emigres, particularly during the period of initial resettlement. Ideally, both professionals and volunteers should be selected on the basis of their ability to relate to the emigres without artificiality as concerned Jews.

There are a plethora of institutions and agencies in our communities, each with a special range of tasks, which, taken all together, represent the Jewish whole. For Soviet Jewish integration, there are several implications to this embarrassment of riches.

- It represents the fact that there are many ways to identify as a Jew in America. All of them should be open to the Soviet newcomers.
- It recognizes the fact that American Jews are viewed as individual "consumers" who "buy" programs and affiliation according to their individual preferences. Soviet Jews are individuals with individual responses, predilections, and even prejudices.
- To be a Jew at the synagogue or during campaign time or during day school hours is insufficient. Jewish communities are structured to encourage the expression of commitment in many ways and on many levels. This is something that should be communicated to the emigres.
- To enable a comprehensive, concerted effort, all community resources and agencies must work together in a planned, co-

ordinated manner. They must view themselves as an interrelated system. No agency has proprietary rights to the immigrants, and none can, in good conscience, opt out. Each has a role within the system.

- Finally, the emigre should be made a partner in the process of integration. This partnership should reflect the fact that there is no dual set of criteria, one for natives and another for the emigres. In general, Soviet Jews have responded to programs in similar ways as do members of the general Jewish community; that is, in those communities that have involved the emigres in their decision-making and programming apparatus.

Inclusion is not being suggested as a matter of technique, but as a matter of substance. The newer Americans should be included as a democratic right. To the extent that they are willing and able, they should have an input in matters that affect them. It is, of course, also true that this medium carries a very effective message: This is the way that American Jews constitute their community of which they are now an integral part.

Romirowsky suggests that perhaps the Jewish community "should let the former emigres continue to define how they want to express their Jewish identity, with the possibility that they will look and behave differently than Americans."

The Open Door Program for New Americans is the current MetroWest federation vehicle offering educational and acculturation programs and services to Soviet emigres. It is administered by the Jewish Education Association of MetroWest, which works closely with JFS and JVS and reports to the federation's Committee on Absorption and Resettlement of Emigres. Despite the absence of a full-scale resettlement effort, this program *is* successful in integrating families into American Jewish communal life. The sincerity of the one-on-one approach is yielding results. After more than a decade and a half of intensive resettlement

efforts, the CARE committee now has former clients serving on it and making valuable contributions to its efforts.

The Open Door Program focuses on American-Jewish-Russian cultural activities. It is not religiously oriented. There are regular classes on Jewish holidays, traditions, and Jewish history. A full-scale curriculum is being developed for a Melton-like course covering the basics of a core knowledge base in Judaism. Trips to the Lower East Side of New York City, Ellis Island, visits to famous synagogues, *Sukkah* raisings, and havdalah programs are balanced by classical music performances by emigre musicians and celebrations of the role played by Russian veterans of World War II. The emigres themselves help plan their activities, which include family programming and teen activities. Slowly, yet steadily, they are defining their position in the American Jewish community. And in the federation annual campaign, just as there are categories for physicians, businessmen, Women's Branch, Young Leader-

ship, etc., there is a division for New Americans. This year, there were 158 pledges to the UJA campaign from the New Americans division.

CONCLUSION

Constructive attitudes on the community level, a Jew-relating-to-Jew approach on the personal level, a systems model for community resources, and emigre partnership in the process are all in fact, different expressions of an identical set of convictions generated from a commonly held Jewish communal philosophy. Any of these conditions, if worked through with complete integrity, will ultimately be seen to include all of the others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All documents relating to this program are available in their entirety at The Jewish Historical Society in Whippany, NJ. The writer wishes to thank Dr. Catherine Lasser, Director of Open Door, the educational program for New Americans, for her editorial assistance in the preparation of this paper.