Soviet Jewish Immigrants' Adjustment in Four United States Cities

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A study based on the responses of the heads of Soviet emigré families in four major American cities to determine their job, occupational and financial status (by their own estimates). Their responses were also sought on social adjustment, Jewish identification, and subject, or sense of well-being.

Introduction

The information in this article has been culled from a larger study of Soviet immigrants who arrived in the United States in the second half, of the 1970s.[1] The study was based on a survey of 900 Soviet immigrants who were living in 14 cities in the U.S. in 1981.[2] The study had two major purposes: to find out about the immigrants' socio-economic adjustment to their new country, and to describe the nature and strength of their Jewish identities. To learn about adjustment we first asked about schooling and earnings in the Soviet Union. Then we asked the Soviet immigrants to describe for themselves and their spouses, since their arrival in the United States, the number and types of jobs they have held, the places in which they have worked, their rates of pay, their savings, their reasons for leaving a job, and their language fluency. We also asked them to make some subjective evaluations; for example, to compare their work situation, income, standard of living, social status or position and life as a Jew in the U.S. with what it was in the Soviet Union.

To learn about Jewish identity, we asked about temple and synagogue attendance and affiliation, strength of religious feelings, types of organizations to which the families belong, the amount of Jewish education they and their children had and are having, whether they practice various rituals and whether they encourage their children to observe traditional practices and to identify with the Jewish community.

The cities and sub-sample sizes were chosen deliberately with the intention of producing a representative picture of the bulk of Soviet immigrants who live in the larger cities, but with large enough samples within the cities so that we might explore whether experiences differ from city to city. Data were collected on the head of household (really, the adult who chose to answer questions for the family) and all other members of the family—spouse, children, parents. Unattached members of the household were not a target of the survey.

[1] Papers describing the overall study and various sections of it are as follows: "The Soviet Jews Adjustment to the United States: *Project Report;*" "Some Aspects of the Socio-Cultural Adjustment of Recent Soviet Immigrants to the United States", *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* Vol. 5, No. 4, October 1982, pp. 535–541. "The Jewish Dimension Among Recent Soviet Immigrants to the United States", *Journal of Jewish Social Studies,* forthcoming, "Soviet Jews' Economic Adjustment in the U.S.", submitted for publication. All of the above have been authored by Julian L. Simon and Rita J. Simon.

[2] The names of the cities and the number of interviews conducted in each were: Atlanta (20), Boston (100), Chicago (150), Cleveland (50), Columbus (20), Houston (50), Kansas City (20), Los Angeles (50), Milwaukee (50), New York (200), Philadelphia (50), Rochester (20), San Francisco (100), Worcester (20).

In each city, the sample frame was obtained from a Jewish resettlement agency, and every Soviet immigrant family that arrived in the United States between 1972 and 1980 and whose "head" was between 18 and 55 years of age at the time of arrival, had a chance to be included in the survey. The resettlement agency sent letters to persons whose names had been randomly selected, describing the survey and asking their cooperation. Each person was then contacted by phone and asked if he or she would agree to be interviewed. Eighty-seven percent of all the potential respondents agreed to participate. The refusal rate in New York City, at 30 percent, was higher than elsewhere. Among the 13 other cities the average refusal rate was 8 percent. Sixty-two percent of the interviews were conducted in Russian, 38 percent in English. The interviews lasted about 80 minutes. The sample was designed so that, within each city, twenty-five percent of the respondents had arrived before 1978 and 75 percent in 1978 or thereafter.

This article develops one of the intentions mentioned above: namely, to examine whether the Soviet immigrants' adjustment experiences differed from city to city. To do that we selected four of the major cities in the survey (Boston, Chicago, New York and San Francisco) in each of which we had conducted at least 100 interviews and compared responses to items bearing on social and economic adjustment and on the respondents' attitudes toward the help they received from the local agencies.[3]

[3] In response to the question: Why did you decide to settle in this city, most of the respondents in the four locations said because they had relatives or friends living there. But the New York respondents were different in one respect: 30.5% of them also answered "because the Jewish agency sent me there. I had no other choice". None of the respondents in Boston and San Francisco answered that way, and only 6.6 percent of the Chicago respondents offered that reason.

Background and Demography

Table 1 describes the republics and cities in the Soviet Union in which the respondents were living before they came to the United States.

In all four cities, the republics of the Ukraine and the RSFSR accounted for the largest number of immigrants; but a higher percentage of the Boston respondents came from Russia proper and from the cities of Leningrad and Moscow than they did from the Ukraine.

Two-thirds of the respondents, who were heads of families, tended to cluster in the 30 to 49 age range. This distribution fits the standard pattern of immigrants, who generally move when they are young and strong. Between 81 and 85 percent of the respondents in each of the cities were married at the time of the survey. The average number of children ranged narrowly: 1.3 in Boston and Chicago, 1.4 in San Francisco, 1.5 in New York. Of the families in all four cities only eight had three, one had four and one had five children. The percentage of families with no children was 13.7 in Boston, 11.8 in Chicago, 9.0 in New York and 11.8 in San Francisco.

Immigrants' Economic Adjustment

In the main this recent cohort of Soviet immigrants came with a great deal of human capital. The average number of years of schooling for the sample as a whole was 14 for the men, and 13 for the women; the male respondents in Boston averaged one more year of schooling than the men in Chicago, and two more than the men in New York and San Francisco. There were no differences among the women in the four cities.

At the time of the survey fewer of the men were holding jobs than was the case for the U.S. resident population; but the

TABLE 1
Republic and City in the Soviet Union from Which Respondents Emigrated to the United States by City

Republic & City	Boston	Chicago	New York	San Francisco
		Percent		
Ukraine	41.0	56.6	60.5	54.0
Kharkov	2.0	5.3	6.5	2.0
Kiev	12.0	27.6	16.5	13.0
Lvov	5.0	7.9	7.0	1.0
Odessa	16.0	13.2	22.0	32.0
Other	6.0	2.6	8.5	6.0
RSFSF	50.0	15.8	19.0	20.0
Leningrad	21.0	10.5	10.0	5.0
Moscow	29.0	5.3	8.0	14.0
White Russia	2.0	15.1	8.0	6.0
Minsk	2.0	14.5	5.0	5.0
Other	—	0.6	3.0	1.0
Moldavia	2.0	4.6	4.5	5.0
Kishinev	—	3.3	3.0	4.0
Other	2.0	1.3	1.5	1.0
Latvia	3.0	3.9	2.5	5.0
Riga	3.0	3.9	—	5.0

proportion of Soviet women in the labor force was higher than the U.S. female resident population.

It is also the case that a higher proportion of both the married and unmarried women in the Soviet Union hold full time jobs outside their homes than do women in the United States. Because most of the women had only been in the United States for about two years, it is too early to tell whether they are likely to maintain cultural continuity or adopt "middle class" American life styles.

The types of jobs the respondents held varied somewhat by city, and seemed to be consistent with their years of schooling. We see for example in Table 2 that the immigrants in Boston, who on the average (at least for the men) have had one to two years more schooling, were more likely to work in professional positions.

The mean gross salaries (in 1980) for the men and women in the work force full time, were as follows.

We see in Table 3 that the level of satisfaction that the respondents have about their current job has some consistency with their occupational status and incomes.

The Boston respondents, especially the women, are more likely to feel very satisfied about their work situation than the women in the other cities. We note that a much higher proportion of the women in Boston hold professional and technical positions than do the female respondents in the other three cities.

Percent in the Labor Force Full Time

	Boston	Chicago	New York	San Francisco
Males	76.4	78.0	87.0	78.2
Females	66.7	56.0	55.0	68.8

Mean Annual Income 1980

	Boston	Chicago	New York	San Francisco
Male	$15,850	$13,416	$14,534	$11,826
Female	10,396	7,024	13,643	6,360

TABLE 2
Current Occupation in U.S. by City and Sex of Respondent

Occupational Category	Boston		Chicago		New York		San Francisco	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
				Percent				
Professional, admin., executive	47.8	34.3	45.5	15.8	22.1	17.9	32.6	22.6
Technical, skilled	13.0	11.4	13.2	2.0	17.4	5.2	14.0	6.5
Clerical-other white collar	13.0	34.3	10.3	33.3	19.0	30.2	7.0	48.3
Service labor	26.1	20.1	30.8	49.0	39.7	37.4	44.3	22.6
No answer					1.7		2.3	
N	42	30	60	42	110	40	43	31

The male respondents in Boston not only are more likely to hold higher status jobs, but they also have higher incomes than the male respondents in the other three cities.

The Role Played by Jewish Agencies in the Respondents' Adjustment

The American Jewish community has contributed a great deal financially and emotionally to helping the Soviet immigrants adjust to their new environment. Over two hundred Jewish communities in the United States have helped resettle Soviet immigrants by arranging for housing, schooling, jobs, medical care and so forth. They have welcomed the new immigrants to their synagogues, their community centers, their homes and their schools. One of the purposes of this survey was to find out how many people received what kinds of aid from each of the Jewish Federations in the 14 cities, and how satisfied they were with the agencies with which they had contact. In this article we compare the types of aid respondents in the four major cities stated they had received and the degree of their satisfaction. Table 4 describes the percentage of respondents in each city that reported receiving various types of aid from all of the Jewish agencies combined in each community.

There are some real differences among the four communities. Almost every one reported receiving financial aid; but with the particular items of support varying among the cities as the table shows.

We asked the respondents to make two kinds of evaluation of the services and help they received: one, to indicate which services were most and least helpful to them; and two, to evaluate how

TABLE 3
Level of Satisfaction With Current Job by City and Sex of Respondent

Level of Satisfaction with Current Job	Boston		Chicago		New York		San Francisco	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
				Percent				
Very satisfied	42.9	56.7	30.9	35.7	25.5	27.5	34.9	33.3
Somewhat satisfied	40.5	36.7	56.7	50.0	55.5	45.0	51.2	47.2
Not at all satisfied	9.5	6.7	13.3	14.3	18.2	27.5	11.6	13.9
No answer	7.1	—	—	—	0.9	—	2.3	5.6
N	42	30	60	42	110	40	43	31

TABLE 4
Types of Aid From Combined Jewish Sources Reported by Respondents by City

Type of Aid	Boston	Chicago	New York	San Francisco
			Percent	
Financial	87.0	82.2	93.5	91.0
Housing and Rent subsidies	78.0	49.3	43.5	27.0
English classes	43.0	33.6	76.0	31.0
Medical	15.0	55.9	25.5	52.0
Job training-referral	57.0	52.6	25.5	39.0
Furniture	59.0	19.7	22.0	25.0
Food	32.0	32.9	41.5	15.0
Transport possessions	13.0	38.8	11.0	22.0
Social activities	21.0	2.0	—	16.0
Clothing	37.0	8.6	1.0	2.0
Counseling	28.0	15.8	1.0	4.0
Camp	6.0	5.3	2.0	19.0
Adult education	16.0	2.6	5.0	16.0
Education-children	11.0	3.9	.5	22.0
Movement between cities	15.0	3.3	—	13.0
Day Care	4.0	2.6	—	1.0

satisfied they were with the various agencies that provided them with assistance. On the types of help they received, one form stood out above all others as being the most helpful. Between 55 and 70 percent of the respondents in the four cities named the financial aid they received as *most* helpful. No more than nine percent of the respondents named any other service as being "most helpful". The service reported as least helpful was job training and referral. Thirty, 28 and 26 percent of the respondents in Chicago, New York and Boston made that choice as did 11 percent of the respondents in San Francisco. No other service or type of aid was so rated by more than five percent of the respondents in any of the cities.

The levels of satisfaction with the agencies providing aid also seemed to vary more by the nature of the agency and the services rendered, than by the city in which the respondents lived. Table 5 compared levels of client satisfaction with four of the major agencies in each city from whom respondents received some type of help.

The level of satisfaction with NYANA (New York Association for New Immigrants) looks much lower than the levels reported for the "Family Service" agencies in the other cities; but since NYANA is a composite organization, its ratings represent the clients' evaluations of the vocational services they received as well as the other services offered by the Jewish family service agencies in the other cities. As a composite rating, NYANA does not come off any worse than the Jewish family service and Jewish vocational service combined in the other three cities. We note also that the Jewish vocational service in the three cities did not fare as well as the other agencies. But it is important to remember that the Jewish vocational service is the agency that deals with the most important and most sensitive of the immigrant problems: finding a job consistent with previous work, training, and social position; or retraining respondents for a different type of work. Respondents are less likely to be satisfied with the service rendered by that agency because of the importance of the problem with which they are grappling.

TABLE 5
Level of Satisfaction With Services Received From Various Jewish Agencies By City

Agency Level of Satisfaction	Boston	Chicago	New York*	San Francisco
		Percent		
Family Service				
or NYANA	(97.0)	(93.4)	(100)**	(89.0)
Very satisfied	82.5	74.6	47.0	77.3
Somewhat satisfied	12.4	22.5	43.0	19.3
Not at all satisfied	2.1	2.8	9.0	3.4
No answer	3.1	—	1.0	1.1
Jewish Vocational				
Service	(67.0)	(62.0)	—	(54.0)
Very satisfied	29.9	35.8	—	50.9
Somewhat satisfied	38.8	25.3	—	28.3
Not at all satisfied	25.4	35.8	—	18.9
No answer	6.0	3.2	—	1.9
HIAS	(29.0)	(49.0)	(13.0)	(28.0)
Very satisfied	75.9	79.7	53.8	75.0
Somewhat satisfied	13.8	13.5	30.8	17.9
Not at all satisfied	—	1.4	—	3.6
No answer	10.3	5.4	15.4	3.6
Jewish Community				
Centers and Y's	(23.0)	(6.5)	(8.5)	(31.0)
Very satisfied	52.2	—	—	64.5
Somewhat satisfied	30.4	—	—	25.8
Not at all satisfied	13.0	—	—	—
No answer	4.3	—	—	9.7

* In New York City the ratings for NYANA, which serves as an umbrella agency, includes ratings for services such as vocational training that in the other cities are carried by special agencies.
** The figures in parenthesis represent the percentage of respondents who reported having received some type of aid from the agency.

Immigrants' Social Adjustment

We shift from the economic aspects of the Soviet immigrants' adjustment to some of the more social aspects. We look first at the types of neighborhoods in which respondents live. The figures in the chart below show that more of the respondents in New York City live in "mostly Jewish" neighborhoods than in the other cities. Only two percent of the immigrants in San Francisco live in "mostly Jewish" neighborhoods.

Sixty-nine percent and 62 percent of the respondents respectively in Chicago and New York said that there were "a very great number" or "quite a few" Soviet-Jewish immigrants in their neighborhoods compared to 50 and 51 percent of the respondents in Boston and San Francisco. A large majority of the respondents said that their close friends were limited to Jews and especially to other Soviet Jewish immigrants. For example, 78 percent of the respondents in Boston, 89 percent in Chicago,

Type of Neighborhood of Residence	Boston	Chicago	New York	San Francisco
			Percent	
Mostly Jewish	18.0	22.4	41.0	2.0
Mostly non-Jewish	20.0	7.2	5.5	44.0
Mixed Jewish-non Jewish	55.0	65.1	53.0	48.0
Don't know	7.0	5.3	.5	6.0
	N = 100	N = 152	N = 200	N = 100

91 percent in New York and 75 percent in San Francisco said that between 90 and 100 percent of their close friends are Jews. In Chicago and New York 78 percent and 88 percent as compared to 61 percent and 66 percent in Boston and San Francisco said that over 90 percent of their friends are other Soviet Jewish immigrants. Respondents in Chicago and New York appear more likely to live in immigrant ghettos than in Boston and San Francisco. We were somewhat surprised to find that when asked: "How often in the past year did you visit in the homes of people who were born in the U.S."; the respondents in San Francisco had on the average fewer visits than respondents in New York and Chicago.

Among those respondents who had children living at home, the following reported that their children had no American friends: Boston, 24 percent, Chicago, 31 percent, New York, 44 percent and San Francisco, 40 percent. Again, the high percentage reported by immigrants in San Francisco is somewhat surprising.

There were practically no differences among the four cities in the percentage of respondents who reported experiencing anti-Semitism (as they chose to define it) since they arrived in the United States. Twenty percent of the respondents in Chicago and New York reported at least one encounter with anti-Semitism, 18 percent in Boston and 16 percent in San Francisco.

The Soviet immigrants, at least at the time of the survey, had not opted to affiliate themselves with Jewish communal life. In response to an item that

	Average Number of Visits to Homes of Persons Born in U.S.
Boston	11.6
Chicago	9.0
New York	8.0
San Francisco	5.7

	Percent Attending Jewish Day Schools
Boston	33.9
Chicago	34.6
New York	34.6
San Francisco	15.8

asked about their ties to a variety of Jewish organizations no more than 20 percent in any of the four communities said that they had joined any one of the following groups: a Jewish fraternal organization, a community center, a Zionist organization or a Russian Jewish group. Of all the organizations mentioned, the Jewish community centers or Ys were the ones they were most likely to join; 20 percent of the respondents in Boston and San Francisco did so compared to 13 percent in Chicago and 6 percent in New York.

Less than 10 percent of the respondents in any of the four cities said they attend religious services regularly. Among those who attend regularly or occasionally, the choices were almost evenly divided between Reform and Conservative synagogues except in San Francisco where 39.5 percent said they attend a Reform synagogue compared to 13.2 percent who attend a Conservative synagogue.

The chart above shows the percentage of children who were attending Jewish day schools among families who had children between the ages of five and 18 living with them.

One measure that we used to assess how good an adjustment the Soviet immigrants were making to their new life was to have them compare certain aspects of their life in the Soviet Union and the United States. Table 6 describes the results of those comparisons.

We see a consistent pattern; on the more objective dimensions such as housing, income and standard of living, life is felt as clearly better in the United States. For almost everyone, their life as

TABLE 6
Comparison Between Life in the Soviet Union and Four Cities in the United States

Dimension	Boston	Chicago	New York	San Francisco
		Percent Better in the U.S.*		
Housing	61.0	65.0	59.0	63.0
Cultural life	15.0	9.2	13.0	15.0
Friendships	7.0	12.5	10.0	8.0
Overall standard of living	79.0	73.7	68.5	71.0
Social status of position	32.0	23.0	21.5	22.0
Life as a Jew	87.0	86.8	90.0	87.0
Work situation (atmosphere)	59.0	30.9	34.5	34.0
Income	78.0	75.7	68.5	66.0

* The choices were: better in the U.S., the same, worse in the U.S., and don't know.

a Jew is perceived as better in the United States. But on the other more subjective aspects, especially culture and friendship, a large majority do not find those aspects better. We note that respondents in New York are just as critical as those in Boston and San Francisco. We note also that with respect to overall standard of living, the large majority in each city rate the United States better than the Soviet Union, but on the more subjective items, social status or positions, respondents in all four cities rate their lives as better in the Soviet Union. A higher percentage of the respondents in Boston (where a higher percentage work as professionals) than those in the other three cities perceive their social status as better than it was in the Soviet Union. A higher percentage of the Boston respondents than that in the other cities also evaluate the atmosphere in which they work as better than it was in the Soviet Union.

The Future

The last section of the interview focused on the future. We asked the respondents "how satisfied do you think you will be with your job situation in five years": and "thinking now of income—how do you think your family will compare with other American families". Thirty percent of the respondents in Boston expect to be "very satisfied" with their job situation compared to 18 percent in Chicago, 19 percent in New York and 25 percent in San Francisco. Between 20 percent and 28 percent of the respondents in the four cities expect to be rich or above average in income. Between 8 percent and 12 percent expect to be below average or poor.

Finally, we asked them: "Taking all things together how happy would you say you are these days".

Most of them say they are pretty happy. Rather surprisingly, the highest percent of "not happy" responses came from San Francisco; and equally sur-

	Boston	Chicago	New York	San Francisco
Very happy	16.0	14.5	24.0	9.0
Pretty happy	67.0	56.6	65.5	57.0
Not at all happy	15.0	27.0	10.5	33.0
No answer	2.0	2.0	—	1.0
	N = 100	N = 152	N = 200	N = 100

prising, the highest percent of "very happy" responses came from the New York respondents.[4] Perhaps the explanation is simply that there are more of them, more Soviet immigrants and more Jews, in New York City and fewer of them in San Francisco, than in any of the other cities. Newcomers, be they Jews, Cubans, Vietnamese, or any one else, feel more comfortable and more at ease if there is an existent community and lots of people with whom they can converse easily and share a common past. Ten years from now, the happiness ratings across the four cities may look quite different.

[4] The surprise may also reflect the bias of the American authors who view San Francisco as one of the most attractive cities in the country.

From the Pages of this Journal 25 Years Ago

Two very significant questions will trouble Jews in the next few years. First, is this the healthiest and potentially most satisfying means of belonging, of discovering "togetherness" that our society affords. It certainly is the most available in the sense that religious differences are widely recognized in American society. The focus of many ethnic activities about a religious center brings the Jews into line with the patterns of action characteristic of Catholics and many other groups. The religious restructuring of Jewish communal life thus follows a trend encouraged in American life.

The question nevertheless remains—whether the easiest course is the most desirable one. Several aspects of the trend are troubling. First, the overloading of the synagogue with social functions is a threat to it. The social adjuncts of the synagogue may, in time, become more important than the acts of worship. The traditional ideas that were once central to Judaism may recede into a broad pattern of social attitudes, not particularly significant in the life of the group.

Furthermore, the focus of group activities on the synagogue will alter the character of group identification. The Jews of the future may be presented with a "package deal" in which the alternatives are to belong or not belong, but in either case, completely. This may encourage a kind of conformity, perhaps even uniformity, that has not been characteristic of American Jewish life in the past. Then, the community, centering in a single institution and dominated by a single set of considerations, may become so middle class, so suburban, that it will lose contact with some of the healthiest trends in its own past.

Another question is likely to trouble the Jews of the future: What effect will the growing prominence of the religious factor in American Jewish communal life have in the relationship of Jews to the other Americans with whom they have lived on healthy terms? In metropolitan cities large numbers of diverse people had developed ways of dealing with one another so that they could tolerate each others differences yet cooperate where desirable. No group was completely segregated. All had rather developed a loose condition of coexistence. Thus, Jews maintained their identity but in many areas of their own activity were involved in a most intimate relationship with non-Jews.

The suburbs threaten that balance. There every family is a member of a parallel series of organizations, most of them related to its religious affiliation that is tantamount to self-segregation and may create significant differences between Jews and other Americans from which both would suffer.

Oscar Handlin
Summer 1978