Serving the "Other" Refugees*

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. . . and if there is anything positive to be learned from Jewish suffering, it is how to prevent others from suffering so . . . We are asked to identify with humanity, not just with our compatriots and this, I submit, is one of the toughest strands in the moral fiber of the Jewish people.

INVOLVEMENT of the New York Association for New Americans in the resettlement of non-Jews actually goes back to 1972, when it assisted in the absorption of Ugandan refugees following Idi Amin's expulsion of British subjects and Asians, and to 1975 when it did the same for about 100 Vietnamese in the aftermath of the war in South East Asia. In 1979 the Jewish migration and resettlement community of which NYANA is a part, began to serve non-Jewish refugees in a consistent, organized fashion. This was in response to a request of the federal government to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—a request prompted by the then emerging problem of resettling the "boat people" of Indochina coupled with the recognition by the federal government of the American Jewish community's experience and expertise in the field of refugee resettlement. To this date, among the various nationality groups assisted in keeping with HIAS's agreement with the U. S. Government were Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Cubans, Haitians, Afghans, and Ethiopians. The Indochinese are by far the largest of these groups, representing over 98 percent of the total. The Vietnamese comprise some 70 percent of the Indochinese. The number of them assisted by HIAS reached its peak in 1980, at over 5,000; this number contrasted with 15,000 Soviet Jews who were assisted the same year. (In 1979, HIAS aided nearly 29,000 Soviet refugees.) By 1983, the nearly 1,300 Indochinese comprised roughly 50 percent of HIAS's caseload whereas the Soviet refugees at less than 900 represented about 30 percent. The corresponding numbers of Ethiopians and Afghans are very small, 168 and 107 respectively, over the past three calendar years.

These HIAS statistics give a sense of the extent of the Jewish community's involvement with these refugee groups, the country over. Locally, at NYANA, we have served close to 2,000 Indochinese since 1979, the peak year being 1981, at 560 people. (We saw more than 13,000 Soviet Jews in 1979, the peak calendar year for resettlement of that group.) In 1983, the number of Indochinese served was higher than that of the Soviet Jews, 488 and 445 respectively. The number of Ethiopians and Afghans combined amounts to less than 100 served during the last three calendar years; we saw none prior to 1981.

In addition to these non-Jewish refugees, the "other" groups referred to here are Jewish refugees from Iran and from Syria. We have seen close to 100 Iranians between 1981 and 1983 and over 60 Syrians during the same period.

Who is a Refugee?

Prior to a discussion of the various services offered to these refugees, it is in order to examine a question that has come up in informal conversation as well as in print among Jewish as well as general circles.

The question is: who is a refugee, and aren't the Soviet Jews arriving in this country really immigrants rather than refugees, since they leave their country by choice and are not forced to flee for their lives? In reply, I submit that both immigrants and refugees leave their countries by choice and that only people who are exiled from their countries have no choice in the matter. The question really boils down to the primary reason for making the choice; is it in the area of economics, politics, religion, education, social conditions? Many have said that Soviet Jews leave the USSR for reasons that are as much economic as political. By inference that would make their migration no different from that of Italians, Greeks or, for that matter, Israelis who come to live in the U.S. Is that really the case? If you leave your country so that your children can have a chance to compete fairly for their education, or so that you can keep a Jewish identity without fear of some untoward consequences or so that you can get out from under the cloud of suspicion, enmity, bigotry and a host of unpredictable ills that can befall you at the hands of the authorities at any time simply because you are a Jew, are you just another immigrant? I suggest that these people are no less refugees than the many who flee from the ravages of war even if their motivation for leaving includes the economic factor. An economic factor is always present in mass migrations regardless of what other causes or motivations are there but it is not the crucial one even though it may be the most obvious to some.

The "Other" Jews

The non-Soviet Jewish refugees, the Iranians and the Syrians, receive services under the traditional NYANA program, in operation with some modifications since the agency's birth in 1949. The clients are seen initially by caseworkers who interview the entire family in order to gather background information and assess immediate needs with respect to shelter, food, clothing, health, and so on. A housing coordinator assists in securing dwelling for the families and a medical coordinator arranges for needed medical or dental care. Family members of working age with no obvious work limitations are referred by the caseworker to a vocational counselor who records their complete employment and education histories and assesses their skills.

The agency's resources and the efforts of its varied professional staff are directed toward the refugee's attainment of economic self sufficiency. The focus of the vocational counseling effort is on achieving this purpose in the short-term while a strategy for the achievement of the client's long-term vocational goals is developed. NYANA's English-as-a-Second-Language program is also directed at the job market and is dove-tailed with the counseling program to prepare the refugee for job interviews and job retention. Acculturation both to the Jewish community and the general community, which is recognized as an end in itself, is also viewed as a process essential to the refugee's job placement and effective functioning in the world-of-work.

The Iranian and Syrian refugees have some common characteristics that distinguish them from the Soviet or eastern European refugees seen at NYANA in recent years. Both groups come from Middle-Eastern, Moslem countries radical in their politics and extreme in their hostility to the state of Israel. In both of these countries, nevertheless, the Jews have tended to adhere to their religion

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and their cultural traditions to a far greater degree than their Ashkenazi counterparts. Short of making an analysis of these differences I would venture a guess that they have more to do with differences in governments' attitudes toward religion in general than with their attitude toward Jews in particular.

The Syrians

With respect to other characteristics the Syrians and Iranians differed markedly from each other. The Syrian group comprises mostly young women whose primary motivation for leaving their country was the dearth there of Jewish men whom they might marry. Many young Jewish men have left Syria over the years as conditions for the Jewish community worsened. To date the agency has resisted the temptation to enter the matchmaking business but has done all it could to facilitate an absorption of these women into the New York, particularly Brooklyn, Syrian Jewish community and to help place them in either jobs or training programs.

The educational level of these women varied widely, ranging from illiteracy in their native language to the equivalent of college education and, in one case, fluency in French and near fluency in English. The mean however was a few years of elementary education. Most of them did not hold jobs comparable to the nine-to-five variety common in the U.S. but rather were involved in some form of cottage industry, usually in the needle trades. The culture shock and the naiveté regarding the American work place were greater among this group than among the Soviets and Eastern Europeans and a higher degree of reactive depression appeared among them. Consequently, a great deal more supportive counseling than usual was given them and the amount of time spent on acculturation and orientation to the world of work had been increased to meet their needs. Eventually most of those who had had sewing experience were happy to be placed as sewing machine operators, sometimes after having practiced the skills for a number of weeks at the ORT sewing program in New York. (That program no longer exists because of a sharp drop in demand over the past few years.) As a rule these job placements had to be made with employers who were either Sabbath observers or willing to tolerate the women's early Friday departure and absence on Jewish holidays. Efforts also had to be made to place these women fairly close to their places of residence in order to accommodate their generally high anxiety concerning travel in the big city.

Some of those who had had a high degree of education and English language facility and were appropriately motivated, were enrolled in our clerical training program and are now working in offices. The most "successful" ones got married.

The Iranians

The Iranians have been a markedly different group. The majority were men, most of them single in their 20s and 30's. Their educational level was generally high and a substantial number of them had some college or university education abroad, usually in the U.S..

In most instances, the Iranians were in no need of financial assistance—many were able to take assets out of Iran with them or had relatives in New York who were helping to support them—and were asking for vocational services only. There is a large proportion of professionals and businessmen among them who were accustomed to a fairly high standard of living which, not surprisingly, they were reluctant to lower. Although many of them were fairly knowledgeable about the U.S., more so

than many of the Soviet Jews, it did not appear any less difficult for them to come to grips with the reality that, at least at the outset, they would have to take a significant step down in their career ladder before they could start climbing up again. Of course the emotional turmoil associated with this loss of status has, unfortunately, become quite familiar recently to Jewish communal workers throughout the country, particularly vocational workers, who have been serving middle-class Jews who have lost their jobs.

The services most sought after by the Iranians were English language training and the various vocational services leading toward placement as well as direct placement in jobs. Since the issue of agency financial assistance was not involved in most cases, there was no concrete agency leverage in persuading them to accept certain jobs. At the same time the counseling relationship was less strained than in those cases where monetary aid was involved. The clients were free to accept agency service to the extent it was perceived as helpful in advancing them toward self-sufficiency without fearing a loss of income should they refuse a job offer.

Services to Non-Jewish Refugees

Initial resettlement services to the non-Jewish refugees are delivered by twelve voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) in New York City, which comprise the New York City Refugee Resettlement Agency Forum. Funding for these services is provided by the U.S. State Department and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. NYANA, a Forum member, works closely with the other VOLAGS and has been instrumental in the establishment of an extensive network of public and private agencies in the New York area involved in servicing refugees.

The amount of financial assistance given to clients under this program is significantly smaller than that generally given to those under NYANA's traditional program. Until 1980 the federal government allocated $400.00 per capita for "core resettlement services"; since April 1980, the amount was raised to $525.00 and more recently to $565.00. This amount of money is intended to keep the recipient clothed, fed and sheltered during his initial resettlement period. Once this amount is spent, if additional financial support is necessary, the client is referred to the Department of Social Services for cash public assistance and Medicaid of which the federal government pays 100 percent for a period of up to 36 months from the client's arrival in the U.S.

Until April of 1980, there was no specific allocation for vocational services as part of this program and these services, primarily in the form of job placement, were delivered by caseworkers who were heavily burdened with the myriad other problems presented by the refugees. It quickly became apparent that this method of service delivery could not possibly meet the growing demands and finally, in response to a proposal submitted to the Office of Refugee Resettlement by the VOLAG consortium, funding was provided through the New York State Department of Social Services for the creation of the New York City Refugee Employment Project which became the vocational service arm of the New York City Refugee Agency Forum.

The Project employs job developers and placement assistants who interview clients referred by caseworkers from the participating agencies. The job developer performs the initial assessment of each client prior to beginning the individualized job development process; the placement assistant makes the actual job referral, often escorting the client to the job interview.

The Indochinese

Most of the Indochinese among the 2,000 served by NYANA since 1979 as well as among the 600,000 who have arrived in the U.S. since 1975 are from Vietnam. The remainder are from Cambodia and Laos. The largest number, about 37 percent of the total, resettled in California and only about 3 percent resettled in New York.[1]

The educational levels among the Indochinese adults we have resettled vary somewhat. The Vietnamese were generally better educated than the Cambodians, the internal strife in Cambodia having made it impossible for most of the latter group to advance beyond some elementary education. A typical Vietnamese had at least some high school education.

The Indochinese have generally been perceived by agency workers as industrious, upwardly mobile people who were eager to take jobs of any kind. As with most refugee groups, language has been the greatest barrier to their employment and in many instances jobs could not be secured prior to the exhaustion of the federal allotment for core resettlement services (at present $565.00 per capita) and they had to be referred for public assistance. It was then found that it was difficult to move some of the heads of large families into low paying jobs since they feared the loss of income (it was hard to convince them that the Department of Social Services would supplement their wages) and loss of benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid. By and large, nevertheless, their dependence on public assistance appears to be relatively low.

The Ethiopians

Approximately 9,000[2] Ethiopian refugees arrived in the U.S. between 1980 and 1983 out of an estimated total of more than 1.6 million[3] Ethiopian refugees world-wide. The Ethiopian junta that replaced Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 received in 1977 the support of the USSR, Cuba and East Germany in its fight against the Somalians in Eritrea and managed to drive the invading Somalis back. According to Dereje Deressa[4], an Ethiopian journalist, this Communist supported junta then unleashed a reign of terror that left 500,000 Ethiopians dead and forced 1.6 million into exile. Most of these refugees are in the Sudan, where they have been well received by the regime but where the economy can barely support the native population let alone such a great number of guests.

The Ethiopians resettled by NYANA are generally young and high-school educated. Most of them can communicate in English, some fluently. Well over half are men. They tend to come here with unrealistically high expectations regarding the type of employment or educational opportunities that will be available to them. Based on discussions with many of them, it appears that these expectations stem from impressions they received while still in Ethiopia from compatriots who returned to their country after having studied in American colleges or universities. The stories they heard were told by students whose material needs were met by generous stipends, but results and not means formed these impressions that gave rise to expectations which assumed a life of their own.

A common problem then in the course of guiding the Ethiopians toward self sufficiency is that of replacing these vague illusions with reality, not an easy task when the investment in these illusions is so great and reality has little appeal.

[1] *Refugee Reports* Vol. IV December 16, 1983, Washington, DC

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Dereje Deressa, "Ethiopia Fallen", *New Republic*, September 27, 1980.

[4] *Ibid.*

The Afghans

According to some estimates[5], nearly one third of Afghanistan's 15.4 million people have fled their country since the Soviet Union rolled in its tanks. It is said that 2.5 to 3 million have crossed over to Pakistan and, oddly enough, 2 million entered Iran where an unknown but certainly large number were served up as cannon meat in the Iran-Iraq war. So far about 6,000 or 0.12 percent of these refugees were admitted into the U.S. The number of Afghans we resettled has been statistically insignificant. The most striking feature we have encountered in this population fraction is that they are, as a group, the most highly educated we have served. Obviously they do not represent a cross section of the Afghan refugee population and their distinguishing characteristic may be indicative of the U.S. government's criteria for their admission. Anyone who has tried to place in a job a recently arrived academician or government official from a non-Western country (for example, in the past experience with Soviet Jews) has some idea of the difficulty of securing employment for these distinguished refugees. Just imagine trying to find employment for a former ambassador or cabinet minister!

Special Programs

In addition to our main resettlement program, we have some special programs funded by grants from various government agencies. Under JTPA we run clerical skills and jewelry training programs and under the Targeted Assistance to Refugees Program we run classroom skills training in four demand occupations and an OJT program. The classroom skills training in both programs is provided by Federation Employment and Guidance Service. NYANA recruits the participants and provides most of the ESL instruction, the counseling, orientation and placement services. These programs are tailor-made for refugees who could never have been accepted into mainstream training programs, primarily because of language deficiencies. Based on years of experience, we know that most of our students would have been rejected by training providers who serve the general public—and understandably so. These providers have neither the skill, the experience nor the mission to turn needy refugees into productive workers and taxpayers. But where they could not take the gamble we had to, and it's paying off. Our graduates are getting jobs; in fact more than half of the clerical students in our most recent cycle were employed prior to their graduation exercises which were held recently at the agency. In similar programs funded by CETA over the previous five years, we placed over 90 percent of the participants. These programs are available to all the refugees in New York City, be they NYANA clients or not. We have accepted referrals from the Forum agencies to our JTPA program and the Forum was very supportive of our Targeted Assistance proposal, a fact which undoubtedly played a key role in our receiving the grant.

NYANA also operates on behalf of the Forum the Refugee Urban Skills/Community Action Project, funded by the New York State Department of Social Services to help refugees learn basic survival skills for living in a complex urban environment. Three Urban Skills Teams, each consisting of one community worker and one bilingual community aide, work directly in refugee neighborhoods and buildings in the

[5] *U.S. News & World Report* December 12, 1983.

Bronx and in Brooklyn. They train the refugees in various areas of tenant concerns involving heat and hot water complaints, building and health code violations, tenant organization and block association formation, crime prevention and personal security, establishing linkages with local agencies and institutions, and so forth.

To Serve or Not to Serve

Some years ago, when I was an idealistic young counselor, I was taken aback by a question asked by someone I thought should know better. The question went something like, "So what's a Jewish agency doing resettling all these gentiles?" I am sad to say that I am not taken aback by such a question anymore, not because I am less idealistic, but because I have simply gotten used to hearing it. A sad commentary, that.

I used to fly into some well controlled, or so I thought, rage and sermonize about the importance of sharing Jewish humanitarianism, religious or secular, with the rest of humanity and that if there is anything positive to be learned from Jewish suffering, it is how to prevent others from suffering so. After all, this is not a new idea. In our bible it says, "Love ye therefore the stranger; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). We are asked to identify with humanity, not just with our compatriots and this, I submit, is one of the toughest strands in the moral fiber of the Jewish people. This is precisely why such questions disturb me.

Of course, the high moral plane is not for everyone. Some of us are too practical for it. "Where is the payoff"? they want to know. It's simple: If you want to provide optimal service to Jewish refugees, you have to be part of the general refugee resettlement community. The government will not fund programs that are targeted at one ethnic group only and if your program is not funded your ability to serve your own target population diminishes considerably. Take your choice of principle, the moral or the practical. In this instance the result is the same.

An Estimate of the Affordability of Living Jewishly*

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This study provides information useful to institutions concerned with the affordability of the costs of the services or affiliation they offer. The range and median cost of important items of living Jewishly are estimated, as is the level of income needed to keep these costs within the limits of discretionary funds, i.e., funds available after basic expenditures.

THIS study hopes to provide Jewish institutions with some useful information on the affordability of the cost of the services or affiliations they offer. It does not, however, attempt to understand or predict how individuals decide whether or not to undertake the cost of a given aspect of living Jewishly. That is, this study is *not* an investigation of the determinants of the value an individual places on living Jewishly. The *focus here is on the cost, not the value, of living Jewishly.* Specifically, the study attempts to identify the cost of certain important aspects of living Jewishly and to estimate the level of income which would keep those costs within the limits of one's discretionary income, i.e., within the limits of funds available after paying for food, clothing, shelter and other basic expenditures.

Obviously, the relationship between the cost of living Jewishly and the amount of one's income or discretionary funds is neither direct nor simple. For some, even modest synagogue dues are more than they are willing to pay, regardless of their income, while for others, virtually any level of dues, no matter how great, is worth the sacrifice it may require to pay for it. Still, it is true *im ain kemach, ain Torah,* if there is no bread, there is no Torah. If one can barely afford the food, clothing and shelter one feels is needed to maintain a desired life-style, little funds will be available for Jewish institutions. Participation would then primarily depend on adjustments which the institutions choose to make so as to render their services more affordable. Moreover, since the contributions of those willing to pay virtually any level of dues or fees are unlikely to be sufficient to meet an organization's needs, adjustments which attract others, even if they contribute less financially, may be necessary if an organization is to remain viable. Furthermore, insofar as participation in Jewish institutions is a requisite of Jewish survival, adjustments which render affiliation and use of services more affordable are essential to Jewish survival.

The affordability of the cost of living Jewishly is here regarded as dependent on three key factors: 1) the cost of the service or affiliation in question; 2) the family's level of discretionary funds (which is, in turn, dependent on their income, taxes and the standard of living they seek to maintain); and 3) the rate at which discretionary funds are used to meet the cost of living Jewishly as opposed to other purposes. Clearly, the last two factors include elements of

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