"Adoption" of Soviet Families by Synagogues: Strengthening the Jewish Community Through Soviet Resettlement

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In 1968, the larger communities accepted the responsibility of resettling Soviet Jews. It was not until 1970 that smaller communities were asked to participate. In 1975, the North Shore (Massachusetts) Jewish community accepted its first Soviet family. The challenge of meeting the resettlement needs of the new immigrants has had a profound effect on the agencies and synagogues, and other institutions, on the North Shore. In this medium sized community, the need to organize and implement a meaningful program of Soviet resettlement created a cooperative effort among federation, agencies and synagogues that had not existed before.

The Community

The North Shore Jewish Community numbers 20,000. Its institutions include a Federation, a new Jewish community center and a new rehabilitation center for the elderly, both completed in 1972, a Hebrew day school, a small Jewish family service agency, two Reform temples, three Orthodox synagogues, and six Conservative temples. Three of the Conservative congregations are within a three mile radius of each other. By 1970, it was clear that the old Jewish Federation of Lynn had to find a way to incorporate these new Jewish people into its Federated service area. In essence, what had developed was not an historically unified Jewish community but a patchwork quilt of independent communities encompassing many unaffiliated Jews. The committed felt loyalty to a synagogue rather than to the community. The outlying suburban communities clearly felt neither kinship nor loyalty to Federation. The distance from the heavily Jewish suburban West Peabody area to the new Jewish Community Center in Marblehead is approximately fourteen miles, thirty minutes driving time. There are no good highways and roads linking the outlying communities with the center of Jewish activities in Marblehead.

In truth, due to a lack of transportation the North Shore Jewish Community Center with its new swimming pool and gym was not accessible to families living outside the affluent Swampscott-Marblehead area. Services of Jewish Family Service were unavailable to the outlying areas until the early seventies. Synagogue leadership in the Swampscott-Marblehead community gave lip-service to the support of Federation, but in reality undermined coordinated programming.

The outlying suburban communities were not willing to participate meaningfully in federated fund campaigns, especially when money went for local needs, because they did not feel that they were served; they felt that when they gave for local needs they were subsidizing a community center which they couldn't use. A sense of kinship between the outlying suburban areas and the established community remained elusive. Other than united interests in overseas needs, specifically aid to Israel, there were no common threads to link the newly formed suburban communities and the Swampscott-Marblehead establishment.

The Program

In 1976, the Jewish Federation of the North Shore voted to provide the funds for the resettlement of nine Soviet families and asked Jewish Family Service to undertake the project with no provision for adding staff. Jewish Family Service, after all, was the "expert" in resettlement, having had the experience of assisting a single Soviet family in 1975! Jewish Family Service at that time had a professional staff of two and a half caseworkers, including the Executive Director.

A plan was devised by which members of the agency's woman's auxiliary would take responsibility for finding and furnishing new apartments, transporting new immigrants to medical appointments, developing job opportunities, and handling other numerous functions of resettlement. Staff would somehow absorb the casework service tasks.

The original thinking of the Jewish Family Service Resettlement Committee was that our community could best find employment for blue-collar people who could be employed in the leather and shoe factories throughout Lynn, Peabody, and Salem. Initial experience with Soviet working class families indicated that jobs could be found; however, there developed a significant social barrier between the newcomers and the members of the woman's auxiliary volunteers. Although the volunteers were initially enthusiastic and invited the Soviet newcomers to their homes, significant social and intellectual barriers were obvious and the volunteers soon lost interest in maintaining a social relationship with the immigrants. This led to disappointment, frustration, and confusion for the immigrant who could not understand why the volunteer was no longer interested.

With the help of HIAS, in 1978, the community was encouraged to accept professional people who might become employed in the cities and towns throughout the greater Boston area. The Route #128 belt around Boston with its numerous electronic and industrial plants was pointed to as a rich source of potential employment for those technically qualified. In May, 1978, the Jewish Family Service Resettlement Committee with trepidation voted to accept its first professional Russian family. On the basis of initial success, the Jewish Family Service Resettlement Committee and professional staff became convinced that we had excellent potential for the resettlement of highly skilled technical people who were young and had some English fluency. Our caseload since that time has been composed of young, partially English-fluent engineers, computer programmers, and high level technicians. This decision to resettle professional and technically proficient immigrants proved highly valuable in future utilization of volunteers. We discovered that volunteers related much differently to the professional newcomers whom they helped to integrate into the North Shore Community.

The Crisis

For the first two or three years, the resettlement work had been accomplished primarily by a small group of committed volunteers from Jewish Family Service woman's auxiliary aided by staff. The group, it was clear, was running out of energy and also feeling that the community at large was not participating to a full extent. Federation, to be sure, was providing funds for resettlement, but the families were all being resettled in the inner city area of Lynn where apartments could be rented at a reasonable cost. We were creating a ghetto of Russians within the Lynn community. Jewish Family Service had demonstrated that it could resettle families successfully with a small volunteer core; monies would be made available by the local Federation for the maintenance of new immigrants but not for increased staff

at Jewish Family Service.

If we were to double the number of families as requested by HIAS in 1978, a new pool of volunteers had to be created. The agency was also concerned that although it was effectively helping in providing the newcomers with the basic necessities of life, food, clothing and jobs, it was doing little to assist them to become integrated more fully into the Jewish community. Of greater concern was that we were doing little to help the new families understand what it meant to be Jewish, other than providing them with Community Center memberships. A small number of Russian children had been enrolled through scholarship in the community day school. The community had a combined strength of nine synagogues containing many potential volunteers to assist in the resettlement program. The Jewish Federation was enthusiastic about involvement of the local synagogues, as it would give them a meaningful role in a Federation supported project and help to interpret Federation to congregants. The opportunity the program afforded was for the newcomer to become part of the community fabric through membership in a synagogue.

To help resettle twenty new families in 1978, the request was made that the temple, sisterhood, brotherhood or social action committee, "adopt" a family. It was felt that there would be more of an investment on the part of the congregation as a whole if its board of directors voted to participate in the program. This assumption bore fruit in later months. Members of the clergy and the "power structures" within the congregations had a real stake in the successful resettlement of the families, because successful resettlement reflected directly upon their congregation.

From January through March, 1978, the President and Executive Director of Jewish Family Service met with temple boards and outlined the plan, which was as follows:

That the local congregation agree to "adopt" a Soviet Jewish family.

That the adoption meant the recruitment of a resettlement committee from all arms of the temple which could find apartments, furnish them, assist with jobs, arrange for school for the children, and assume all of the functions that had previously been undertaken by the woman's auxiliary of Jewish Family Service.

That money for the resettlement was to come from Jewish Federation of the North Shore and the temple would assume *no* financial obligation for the family.

That Jewish Family Service would provide training and a support system to the volunteer organization in resettlement and in the complexities and difficulties faced by the new Americans.

That six to eight weeks prior to arrival of the family, a dossier would be presented for approval to the temple congregation describing the new family.

By March, 1978, seven of nine congregations had agreed to adopt a Soviet family. Two declined, but have since participated in the program.

Strengthening the Community Through Soviet Resettlement

In May, 1978, the first adopted family arrived and was resettled in Peabody, an outlying community, by a young Conservative congregation. The spirit and enthusiasm of the volunteers breathed new life into the entire resettlement program, as it was most encouraging to the agency board to know that the outlying communities were taking an interest in the program. There was also much activity on the part of the Peabody volunteers who frequently would come to the agency to consult with staff. It was the first time that many of these people had even known of the agency's existence or its work in the community. A large contingent of volunteers greeted the family at Logan Airport. The family consisted of an engineer, his wife, eleven-year-old daughter, a year-old baby, and two parents over sixty-five. Yiddish speaking volunteers greeted the young

family and the children of the volunteers spontaneously found ways to communicate with the eleven-year-old Russian child. The elderly ladies began to weep and explained in Yiddish that they could not believe that there were Jews who cared about them. The chairman of the volunteer committee said, "This is the first time I have understood how my Federation dollar helped anyone," a sentiment that was reiterated many times. Volunteers frequently expressed a more positive attitude toward Federation and a better understanding of its role in the community.

As might be expected, the first families to be resettled by the synagogues made for the most difficulty, as training sessions had to be held with each congregation and committee. Questions of what to purchase, where to purchase and where to look for an apartment were discussed. By the time a congregation was asked to help with a second family, a seasoned core of volunteers who understood the process and were willing to cooperate had been estabished. The agency staff provided technical assistance to the volunteer committees through provision of resources, interpretation of the use of government programs, and interpretation of the emotional difficulties faced by the newcomers. It should be noted that the utilization of the local synagogues and volunteers, while being of tremendous value to the newcomers, did not reduce the work load of the professional staff. Numerous meetings had to be held with the local synagogue committees to keep channels of communication open between committees and agency. There were factions vying with different philosophies within the individual temple committees. Frustrations on the part of volunteers were frequently projected onto agency staff. Volunteers frequently felt anxious and frightened over the responsibility for their new charges. They needed the encouragement and support of professional staff. The tasks of staff, rather than diminishing, changed from direct assistance to volunteer coordination. Staff found that they had to be available to volunteers beyond agency hours. There were frequent calls by volunteers to staff during evening hours and weekends. Without the supportive structure and continued fostering by the agency professional staff, the program would not have been successful.

With the availability of Block Grant funds, HIAS requested our community accept seventy-five people in 1978-79. We were able to obtain a full-time resettlement worker and in the first Block Grant year resettled seventy-five people in twenty-three family units. Without the help of the local temples, the community could not have possibly resettled this large number of Russian families.

There were numerous community activities in the resettlement program. Meetings were frequently held of all community volunteers. For perhaps the first time, members representing all segments of the community met with enthusiasm under the auspices of a Federation sponsored program. Members of outlying communities who had rejected participation in and support of the Community Center were careful to make sure that their families were given a complimentary year's membership to the Center. Members of the Rabbinical Association discussed the possibility of designing an introductory course in Judaism for the community of newcomers. The community newspaper, the *Jewish Journal*, provided publicity emphasizing temple participation in the resettlement program. The agency's annual breakfast was widely attended by representatives of all the local temples together with the families they had adopted. New community leadership emerged through the project, some of whom were invited to serve on the board of Jewish Family Service.

Although it is difficult to evaluate the

impact of the program on the Federation campaign, it is clear that the program highlighted Federation positively. The individual rabbis spoke positively from their pulpits about the resettlement program and praised Federation for its role in helping to make it possible. Prior to the arrival of the Russians, lay and rabbinical leadership were ambivalent about participating in the program. The prevailing attitude was that "they should go to Israel" and that "they have no interest or desire to be Jewish." Our experience clearly negates this assumption. Although the Russians' desire for temple affiliation and identification as Jews varies from family to family and congregation to congregation, given the opportunity and community support the Soviet immigrant has a desire to be Jewish. Three of the older couples moved into the Federation-sponsored housing for the elderly in Lynn with Yiddish being their language bridge to the community.

In summary, this resettlement project has demonstrated how a community can mobilize its institutions and members to gain a commonality of purpose.