

# ACCULTURATION AND RESETTLEMENT OF JEWISH EMIGRES FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

## Research Results and Implications for Programming

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*Initial resettlement assistance and Jewish acculturation are inseparable processes. The attitude of the nest community and the degree of interpersonal cross-cultural contact shape the emigres' view of Judaism in America and influence their future involvement in the Jewish community. Such cross-cultural contact has significant benefits for both Americans and the emigres.*

In the fall of 1993, a study using survey research methods was implemented to evaluate aspects of the local resettlement program for Jews from the former Soviet Union. Written questionnaires in both Russian and English were designed to (1) assess the outcomes of the Soviet Emigre/American One-to-One Matching Program and (2) study the status of emigres who arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area from January of 1990 through March of 1993.

In addition to written survey questions, open-ended questions were included on the questionnaires, and ten face-to-face interviews were conducted to encourage respondents to share additional qualitative data that may not have been captured by the survey questions alone.

The population in the study consisted of both emigre and American participants (N=634): 308 American volunteers and 326 emigres including 157 pairs of emigres and Americans who met together weekly for at least six months as part of the One-to-One Matching program.

Sponsored by the Emigre Department of Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties (JFCS), the One-to-One Matching Program matches newly arrived emigres with American Jewish volunteers. It is one program within the JFCS Emigre Department Resettlement Program, which

offers a wide variety of resettlement services to Jews from the former Soviet Union and other immigrant and refugee groups fleeing persecution in their homelands.

The overall goal of the Emigre Department Resettlement Program is two-fold: to assist newcomers to become self-sufficient in their new community and to facilitate their adjustment and involvement in both American and Jewish communal life. Toward this end, the One-to-One Matching Program's stated purpose is to serve as a "living bridge," bringing newly arrived emigres and American Jewish volunteers together in order to help newcomers learn English, to facilitate their acculturation to American life, and to increase their Jewish identification and involvement.

The One-to-One Program has been in operation for more than a decade and has matched thousands of emigres with American volunteers. However, until this study was implemented no systematic assessment had been conducted of the degree to which program goals met program outcomes. This study was therefore designed to examine both the intended and unintended results of the program. In addition, no formal study of the status of the emigres resettled by JFCS had been conducted for a decade; therefore this assessment was designed to ascertain the success of the resettlement of the emigre respondents.

Given the many thousands of Jews from the former USSR already living in the community and the thousands expected for the foreseeable future, it seemed particularly useful to examine both the program's effects and the overall status of emigre resettlement. The data available as a result of this study may be especially important to Jewish community institutions locally and throughout the United States as they plan how to assist and involve the largest migration of Jews since the turn of this century.

Three research questions were posed to measure the acculturative effects of the One-to-One Program on participants, to evaluate their perceptions of their participation, and to examine how the newcomers have adapted to their new lives. The results are summarized below.

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **What Aspects of the JFCS' One-to-One Matching Program Do Emigres and Their American Partners Perceive as Most and Least Effective?**

Emigres perceived that their volunteers were most effective in helping them understand spoken English and secondarily in speaking conversational English and understanding slang. Emigres also stated that their volunteers helped them acculturate to American life by giving them valuable information about American manners and behavioral expectations. Of equal value to the emigres was that the Americans made them feel welcome in their new homeland.

Overall, emigres felt that contact with American Jews increased their Jewish identification by first helping them feel that they are a part of the American Jewish community and secondly by introducing them to Jewish holiday traditions and rituals from which they had been separated by the Soviet Communist regime. General satisfaction with their program participation was high.

Americans felt that they had been most effective in helping emigres understand and speak English and comprehend American slang. They perceived they were not effec-

tive in helping emigres read or write English. The volunteers' overall assessment was that they had been quite effective in the acculturation process by orienting emigres to American behavioral expectations, giving practical "how to" advice, and helping resolve personal problems. Some assistance was provided by the Americans in finding jobs, and little help was provided in finding apartments or schools for children.

Although a primary emphasis of the Americans was on helping the emigres adjust to American life, they also perceived that they had an influence from a Jewish perspective by personally welcoming the emigres on behalf of the Jewish community and by showing them how American Jews celebrate holidays. Overall, Americans expressed very high satisfaction with their program participation.

#### **To What Extent Do These Perceptions Differ between Emigres and Their American Partners?**

Both partners agreed that help in understanding conversational English and speaking English was most useful. In addition, they agreed that Americans gave emigres valuable cross-cultural information about American manners, behavior, customs, and holidays.

Making newcomers feel welcomed was important to both partners, although the Americans tended to significantly underestimate the importance of feeling welcomed to the emigres. Both groups generally agreed that, as a result of their relationship, newcomers felt a part of the Jewish community and more knowledgeable about Judaism and American Jewish behavioral expectations, although again the Americans tended to underestimate their influence on the emigres.

The American and emigre perceptions differed significantly in several areas. Both groups highly self-identified as Jews. Their specific Jewish behaviors, however, were significantly different, although the emigres' behavior became more similar to American Jewish group behavior over time

as reflected in synagogue affiliation rates, holiday observance, and philanthropy toward Jewish causes. Emigre children were more likely to have attended Jewish day schools, and emigres were twice as likely to go to Jewish organizations for help with their problems. Emigre respondents also reported significantly higher rates of membership in Jewish Community Centers than their American counterparts.

Participation by both groups' children in Jewish camps, nursery schools, and Israel youth trips, however, was almost identical, with the same high rate of more than 70 percent. Even when substantial community scholarships for emigre children ended after their second year in the United States, emigre respondents reported that 77 percent of their children continued to attend Jewish camps.

Both groups gave high ratings to the One-to-One Program and its impact on their mutual understanding. The acculturative effects on the American partners, however, were greater in terms of their better understanding of their counterparts' culture. Americans reported significantly increased understanding of their emigre partners' customs, values, current behaviors, and personal experience of migration.

Overall, although satisfaction with their participation in the program was high and both groups stated that they would definitely recommend the program to a friend, the American volunteers' satisfaction levels regarding their participation were statistically significantly higher than those of the emigres.

**To What Extent are Emigre Participants  
(a) Fluent in English, (b) Acculturated to  
America, and (c) Identified and Involved  
with Judaism?**

Most emigre respondents were moderately successful economically. After their first year in the United States, most households were self-sufficient, with a reported mean household income of \$26,000 and at least one adult member working.

Emigre employment seems to be unstable, at least in the initial three-year period of resettlement, and is apparently linked to recessionary job market conditions. A substantial number of emigres reported that at least one work-eligible member of their household was seeking employment, often as a result of layoffs even after having found initial employment. The proportion of respondents who indicated that they were unemployed and seeking employment after two years in the United States was 26 percent.

Gross household income levels of emigre respondents increased over time, with a mean income of \$14,000 in their first year in the United States gradually increasing to a mean income of \$37,000 by year three. Income level was also a predictor of organizational affiliation and involvement in synagogues and philanthropy, and higher income households also reflected higher affiliation rates.

With regard to job satisfaction, emigres indicated that they were largely satisfied. For those who were not satisfied, the cause of their dissatisfaction was their feeling they did not earn enough to support themselves, not that their job was not in their former Soviet profession.

Original difficulties with English were largely overcome by year two. Upon arrival, 91 percent of emigre respondents tested at beginning English levels and 14 percent spoke no English. As a group, substantial progress in English acquisition was made, with 85 percent of respondents reporting command of English at the intermediate or higher level and no individuals at the zero English level. Upon arrival English scores were about half of the emigres' current English scores.

Organizational and synagogue affiliation rates, as well as participation in Jewish philanthropy, seem to increase over time for emigre participants. After three years in the United States, 74 percent of emigres reported that they contributed money to Jewish organizations, as compared to 24 per-

cent of those in the United States one year or less. Based on study results, it seems that as income increases over time, increased voluntary support for Jewish causes may also be expected.

In terms of personal friendship patterns and social integration, the majority of emigre participants socialized almost exclusively with other emigres. Socializing with Americans on an informal, personal level seems to decrease over time.

Emigre respondents chose the term "Jew" as the most desirable to describe themselves, and almost half (49 percent) reported that they were members of a synagogue, primarily of the Reform denomination. They viewed Jews in America as more a nationality or a cultural group than a religious group, as contrasted to American respondents who described Jews as primarily a religious or cultural group. Only 6 percent of American respondents considered Jews a nationality as compared to 39 percent of emigres.

More than 75 percent of emigres stated that they were very satisfied with their new lives by year three in the United States; dissatisfaction seems to be correlated with unemployment and low gross household income.

### IMPLICATIONS

The experience of migration and the problems of immigrants are very human ones, involving traumatic separations, role confusions, identity conflicts, and economic instability. The literature on migration documents the degree to which these difficulties are precipitated, exacerbated, or mitigated by the specific circumstances of the migration and perhaps even more importantly by the reception and assistance newcomers receive in their country of destination.

This study highlights and underscores the following key implications for policy-makers and practitioners in the migration and resettlement field:

- Cross-cultural adjustment is a lengthy

process, particularly for those who lived as adults in their country of origin. A key element in this adjustment process is the degree of acquisition of the language of the host country. This task is particularly challenging for those who must learn not only a new language but also a new alphabet.

- With regard to language acquisition, the study results indicated that enriching the language learning experience with cross-cultural personal contact is valuable and effective. In this way, acculturative and affective information is integrated with "pure" cognitive language instruction, making for a particularly powerful approach to English-as-a-second language acquisition for immigrants.
- Central to the study results is the value of interpersonal cross-cultural contact. Not only the importance of the experience for the emigre but also its profound effect on the member of the host culture are noteworthy. The study suggests the power of intercultural interaction and the importance of establishing cross-cultural bridges in any effort to bring two unlike groups together.
- Culture is a system for survival in a given environment—a system of "do's and don'ts" for how to behave. All cultures contain implicit and explicit learned patterns of thinking, assumptions, values, and norms of behavior that are transmitted and understood only through personal experience and the finding of shared meaning through the use of language. Resettlement policies must foster an attitude of cultural relevance and communicate a belief that no one culture is inferior or superior to another. Such policies and practice must rather reflect the view that, in a specific environment, one cultural system may simply work better than another.
- American responses indicated a dramatically expanded understanding of the emigres and increased self-understanding as well. With regard to effects on

Americans, these study results further highlight the effectiveness of the personal bridge-building approach. Coupled with the positive emigre responses about the value of the exchange to their adjustment to American life, the study demonstrates that it is possible to abandon the idea that cultural differences are impediments to communication. In fact, study results imply that cross-cultural differences are resources that are valuable to both groups individually and collectively.

- Assistance from the receiving community either helps or hinders successful immigrant resettlement to varying degrees. Findings emphasize the great value of help from the host community to the newcomer. Tangible assistance to meet survival needs is critical; however, consideration of emigres' psychological and social needs is as important as attention to their physical needs. Study results point to the often underestimated importance of the attitude of the host community in vitiating culture shock and in facilitating psychological adjustment.
- The abrupt and permanent transition from one environment to another, popularly termed culture shock, posed great difficulties for emigres. They experienced problems with economic stability and communication; confusion about accomplishing mechanical tasks of daily living, such as knowing how to travel or operate appliances; and lack of confidence about what is appropriate behavior. Findings indicate that, of the emigres' self-reported top three problems, after adequate economic security and language acquisition, social isolation was considered most serious. Significantly, among the most highly valued benefits of their participation in the program was their experience of being warmly welcomed and included in their new community.
- A key stated goal of the program is to enhance emigres' knowledge of their

ethnic history and traditions and to encourage their participation in Jewish community life. Findings suggest that the Jewish identification and involvement of the emigres and their children are related to their personal experiences in the initial resettlement period. How the emigres are received initially and their ultimate involvement with the Jewish community are inseparable processes shaping the emigres' feelings and view of the American Jewish community and its members.

The words of the emigres and their matches perhaps describe the impact of their experience best of all. As one emigre wrote:

Our volunteer helped us during this very difficult phase of our new life in America. I will never forget the holiday of Passover we spent together last year and will celebrate ourselves this year. I was cut off from Jewish life in the former Soviet Union. And now my participation in Jewish life is very important for me, and for my family. Now, finally, Jewish history and culture became understandable to me.

Independently, the above emigre family's American volunteer wrote:

I hadn't done anything in the Jewish community since I moved to San Francisco until I saw your ad and called. This was a great opportunity to better understand my own Judaism while helping a family integrate themselves into our community. They became family for me as well.

As Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel once observed: "Our recent history shows us that wherever he is abandoned by his own, the Jew is lost. But when he is supported by his own, we can together begin again." Study results suggest that emigres and Americans experiencing together a sense of shared belonging to Jewish peoplehood bodes well for Jewish continuity.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROGRAM**

Research results confirm that the Emigre Resettlement Program achieves its goals of assisting newcomers to become self-sufficient and become involved in American and Jewish communal life. Results also provide useful information for future program planning, and recommendations for both the overall resettlement program and the One-to-One Matching Program specifically are discussed below:

### **General Resettlement Program**

- English as a Second Language services and employment and training programs must be maintained and strengthened as these are the keys to successful resettlement and among the highest priorities from the emigres' point of view.
- As emigres report very high reliance on Jewish communal institutions for assistance with their problems, agencies must be prepared to provide long-term bilingual and culturally sensitive assistance to the growing emigre population.
- Use of Russian Jewish newspapers and/or newsletters should be emphasized for communication with the emigre population as close to 80 percent report dependence on this media for needed information.
- Organizational activities that facilitate personal contact between newcomers and members of the host community should be maximized in order to assist emigres in their adjustment, increase the Americans' acceptance of immigrants, and generally improve community relations. Such efforts should focus on working-aged, English-speaking individuals and their families.
- Programs should emphasize making emigres feel welcome, respected, and supported in their new community as relieving social isolation is among the top three needs expressed by emigres, along with obtaining jobs and learning English.

- Initial resettlement assistance and Jewish acculturation are inseparable processes and must be integrated programmatically; how the emigres are initially treated shapes their view of Judaism in America and will increase or discourage their ultimate involvement in the American Jewish community.

### **The One-to-One Matching Program**

Research results confirm that the One-to-One Matching Program achieves its objectives of assisting emigres to learn English, facilitating their adjustment to American life, and increasing their knowledge of and involvement in the American Jewish culture and community. The responses also provide useful information for how to improve the program for the future. Recommendations are discussed below:

- Initial group orientation sessions were the most highly valued aspect of all the services offered to volunteers by the program staff. More regular and individualized contact with volunteers would be helpful in resolving problems and offering practical advice to the volunteers, who often expressed feelings of being overwhelmed with the many initial problems that immigrants face.
- To build a sense of Jewish community, more events for emigres and their volunteers to attend together would be advisable. Respondents from both groups frequently commented on the desirability of Jewish activities they could attend and learn from together.
- Many American volunteers expressed the need for more Jewish education so that they themselves could learn and in turn impart this knowledge to their emigre match. Although a high percentage of American volunteers were affiliated with the Jewish community (62 percent reported synagogue membership), many were not. Many volunteered in the program because of a desire to connect with the organized Jewish community and

deepen their own identity as Jews. To increase the effectiveness of the volunteers, intensified efforts should be made to provide information to Americans about Jewish holidays, traditions, history, and community resources and events. Offering this information in conjunction with shared holiday events may be particularly effective.

- A bilingual newsletter addressed to both emigres and Americans may provide a useful tool for partners to share with each other. This vehicle may not only communicate information about program expectations more effectively to both groups but also could offer tips for learning English as well as information about the community and about Judaism.
- The use of Russian Jewish print media for communication with the emigre participants should be emphasized, given the very high percentage of newcomers who stated that they depend on these newspapers for information. Overall communication should be increased with emigre participants to ensure that they know what resources are available to them and to provide up-to-date information about the program that may be useful to them.
- Surveys should be included in newsletters or distributed separately to both groups to gather evaluative information that can be used to improve and modify the program. This type of program assessment should be conducted on a routine basis and would also serve as a mechanism to improve communication between program staff and program participants.
- The number of American volunteers in the program should be increased, with a goal of recruiting those who more closely match the demographics of the emigres. Many suggestions for enhancing the program centered on making more compatible matches by pairing individuals who shared occupations, interests, or similar aged children. As feasible, staff should

emphasize a selection, screening, and matching process that brings together partners with as much in common as possible.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

More research is indicated to determine the relative effectiveness of formal English instruction as compared to informal conversational English as a method for improving English acquisition with the emigre population. The findings, conclusions, and implications of this study suggest that this information is needed in order to design more effective programs.

To ascertain if there is a difference between the success of resettlement of those emigres participating in the One-to-One Program and those who did not, additional research is needed using a control group.

A longitudinal study would be helpful in examining the outcomes for emigre children who attended Jewish day schools. In addition, research is needed on the effects of the involvement of emigres and their children in Jewish organizational activities, such as Jewish Community Center programs, Jewish camps, and Jewish nursery schools.

The effects over time of participation in informal Jewish educational programs for emigre children who are enrolled in public school as compared to emigre children in Jewish day schools would also be useful in program planning and implementation.

Replication of this type of program assessment, adjusted as appropriate for use with other immigrant or refugee groups, could produce useful information for the field of migration studies, refugee resettlement, and cross-cultural studies.

In addition, replication of the study methodology in other American Jewish communities or in Israel as applicable could produce helpful information for use in comparing differences and similarities in resettlement outcomes. Identifying those variables that either mediate, reactivate, or

vitate adjustment problems would be important for resettlement program design.

### **CONCLUDING STATEMENT**

With all its commonalities, the Jewish community has long since passed the point when we could hope to be a community entirely without divisions. We are culturally, religiously, racially, and politically diverse, which does not always make for total unity or even easy relations.

We have many divisions, but many more strengths. The advantages of our diversity lie in our dynamism, our rich and inspiring heritage, and very importantly in our collective ability to adapt. In no small part these are a result of our immigrant tradition.

It does not always come naturally to those here first to welcome those immigrant newcomers who do not appear the same. Sometimes it takes some work and the self-awareness to remember not to judge others too harshly.

Perhaps because it does not come naturally to people, that is precisely the reason why the Jewish tradition mandates inclusionism. It is from being able to respect and celebrate our distinct identities that we enhance our collective strengths. By welcoming and learning from newcom-

ers, we create a nurturing community, enable collective progress, and ultimately strengthen Jewish peoplehood.

More than any other mandate, the Jewish ethic requires welcoming the stranger. Forty-four times in the Bible, stated in different ways, sometimes as a moral imperative and other times as a stern warning, we are told that "when a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong. He shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33,34).

The challenge of successfully integrating masses of refugees and immigrants is one of the single most pressing matters facing all of us. Both for the Jewish community, which is facing the largest migration of its members since the turn of the century, and for society as a whole, which is largely becoming a mosaic of minority cultures, this matter is of utmost concern.

Finding ways to build community by respecting diversity while also finding a common cultural and linguistic bond is a universal theme for this century and certainly for the foreseeable future as well. It is hoped that this study will in some small way contribute toward this end.