

“Maine is very good piece of America. A good reflection of good America.”

- *Natasha Petrovsky, Former Soviet Jewish Immigrant*

Soviet Jewish Immigration to Maine

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May 2015

After the Israel military's achievement in the Six Day War in 1967, Jews in the Soviet Union began to publicly support Israel's success and demonstrate their dedication to their Jewish heritage. In response, the Soviet State, headed by Leonid Brezhnev, publicly advertised Israel as being comparable to Nazi Germany, casting out an anti-Semitic shadow on the Jews within the Union. To the Soviet State, Zionism was now a crime, indicating one's loyalty to Israel over the Soviet Union. Consequently, The Soviet Union became a dangerous and undesirable place for the Jews families living there (Orleck 49). People who outwardly displayed their Jewishness or engaged in religious services did so at the risk of being exiled, and even going near a synagogue was dangerous (Hoey). Former Soviet Jew Natasha Petrovsky described, “Most of our life before was defined by the fact we were Jews. So, unfortunately for us in the Soviet Union, being a Jew brought only negative feelings, nothing positive...every day we felt we were foreign to this country, and every day we expected some humiliation. So it was really uneasy feeling to be a Jew.” In 1977, Natasha, her husband, her mother, and her two sons packed up and sought refuge in the United States.

The Former Soviet Jews fled their homes with little on their backs, hoping to find a home where they would be free from anti-Semitism, where they could provide education for their children, and where they could feel safe. As soon as they were able to exit the Soviet Union, they

had the agency to decide where they would go, the two main options being Israel and the United States. Up until 1975, the majority of the Soviet Jews who obtained exit visas chose to go to Israel. It wasn't until a few years later that approximately 110,000 of the Soviet Jewish immigrants chose the United States over Israel (Orleck 58). Because there were no direct ways to get to either Israel or the United States, families traveled through Vienna, where they connected with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). The final step involved the collaboration of HIAS and Jewish resettlement agencies in the United States, who would determine where to place the families, where would they end up, and who would be supporting them.

When Former Soviet Jewish Families arrived in Maine, beginning in the 1970s (the later wave would come after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991), they were able to successfully integrate because they had agency to get them going, support to help this process, and they were able to achieve their goals. Those three factors separated Maine's Former Soviet Jews from other refugee groups that have since settled in Maine.

In Maine, and across the country, there was a positive hype surrounding the immigration of the Former Soviet Jews before they even arrived. Bobbie Gordon, who chaired a resettlement committee at her synagogue in Portland, described the widespread efforts to not only bring the Former Soviet Jews to the United States, but to also help them when they made it overseas.

When word came there was really a large national effort to bring people in, we brought our children and our exchange student...Maine chartered a plane for a march on Washington. When the government was really falling to pressure for bringing immigrants from the former Soviet Union to this country, people from all the states were going to the gathering on the Mall.

After the first sets of immigrant families began to enter Maine, newspapers and magazines put the Former Soviet Jews in the spotlight. Articles praised Jews for their bravery and perseverance coming to a place with few belongings and little to no English. In 1974, *The*

Portland Evening Express printed an article talking about the first two Former Soviet Jewish families' entrances into Maine. The article was titled "Emigres Here Showed Great Courage." The article commended the immigrants, saying, "As remarkable as the two families' arrival here with virtually nothing but the clothes on their backs, not knowing a word of English, is the work of the entire local Jewish community in helping to assimilate them." Other articles published in the *Press Herald* were titled "Soviet Emigres Garner Warm Jewish Greeting," and "Soviet Emigrants Getting to Know Us." The Former Soviet Jews in Maine had the media on their side, and they had the people on their side too.

This kind of positive publicity for the refugees was a stark contrast to the media coverage of the arrival of Somalis in Lewiston. In 2002, the mayor of Lewiston, Laurier Raymond, publicly expressed his concern with the arrival of the immigrant group. He wrote a letter to the Somali community telling them to stop the influx of Somali families. He asked the leaders to help promote "breathing room" for the city by helping to reduce the amount of refugees migrating there. He wrote, "The Somali community must exercise some discipline and reduce the stress on our limited finances and our generosity" ("Mayor Raymond's Letter"). White supremacists, including members of The World Church of the Creator, rallied in Lewiston, pronouncing their disapproval of the Somali population. Even though thousands of people rallied in response, and to this day are working to dissolve the divide between the Somalis and their fellow Lewistonians, the split is still present (Finnegan). Families are continuing to settle, but the community is far from settled, which in part is due to the fact that the Somalis entered in large groups, and the Former Soviet Jewish refugee immigration began with just two families.

The Kupermans were one of the first two Soviet-Jewish immigrant families to settle in Portland. In the fall of 1974, Vera Kuperman, her husband Savely, her stepmother Elena, her mother-in-law, Tatiana, and her two, young daughters, Marina and Anna, uprooted their lives in the Ukraine and set off in search of a better life (Liljeholm). After receiving an invitation to go live with friends in Israel, Vera and her family found themselves at a crossroad in Vienna. When the Kupermans decided they wanted to go to the United States, they went to Rome, and then were sent to Portland. Two days after moving to Portland, Savely, was employed as an air-conditioner repairman. On Marina's first day of school, the superintendent connected the tearful girl with another Russian child with whom she could comfortably speak Russian. Almost immediately, Vera and Savely began to attend English classes at the high school. A few months later, when relatives wanted to move to LA, the Kupermans decided they didn't want to go anywhere else; they were happy in Maine. Vera and Savely still live in Portland, and their daughters are both successful in their respective professions; Marina is a doctor and Anna is a schoolteacher.

The Kupermans' story represents the broader picture of the Former Soviet Jewish immigration to Maine. Why were they able to establish the lives they had hoped to in Maine? Beginning the moment they stepped off the plane, the Kupermans, along with the successive immigrant families, were greeted by an incredibly generous, supportive, and caring community in Portland, one that helped set them on their path to successful integration. The Jewish communities welcoming them into Portland were a unique support group in that they were eager not only to get them out of the Soviet Union, but also to actively guide them through the transition into Portland life. Susie Schwartz of Portland played a key role in the resettlement of the Jewish immigrants in Maine during the later Soviet Migration wave, between 1992 and 1996.

She worked for the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine, which, during those years, settled almost 100 individuals between the ages of 4 and 95. Volunteers from the resettling agencies and synagogue groups regularly greeted the incoming refugees at the airport with welcome baskets containing challah, Shabbat candles, foods and toys for their children.

The Former Soviet Jews came overseas with hardly anything, and Jewish Family Services and the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine took these immigrants under their wing, providing them with clothing, food, money, shelter, and household necessities that were donated by community members and organizations. As in the case of the Kupermans, they signed the families for Portland's ABLE Program, which taught English at the local high school, they found the best-fitting jobs for the immigrants (taking into account their level of English proficiency), they helped the children get started at schools, etc. Individuals, families, businesses, charities, and organization put time and effort into making the transition as smooth as possible for the Former Soviet Jews.

One of the first steps they had to take involved helping find employment for the Former Soviet Jews. This was a group of well-educated, skilled people who wanted to learn English, tackle American education, find jobs, and establish themselves in American society. Finding the top jobs for themselves was not one of the goals for the immigrant parents when they came to Maine; they were willing take jobs below their level of expertise if it meant they could accomplish their goals of finding freedom, safety, and providing for their children. Local businesses were particularly helpful in the job placement process. According to Susie Schwartz, the Marriott Hotel in Portland was especially wonderful in hiring these immigrants. These Former Soviet Jews, who were cleaning rooms there as their profession, were often people with graduate degrees that they earned back home. "They were just happy to be here," she said. "They

didn't complain or anything." They chose this path, and they were satisfied with where it took them.

This level of community outreach didn't happen for the Somalis of Lewiston, who began their mass migration to Maine at the start of the millennium. They were second-generation migrants to Maine, meaning that they weren't originally placed there. They chose to move to Maine after deciding it would be a good place to raise their families and settle down for good. According to Catherine Besteman, though, many Lewiston community members were not on board with the arrival of the Somalis, as evidenced by their quickness to refute articles in *Mother Jones* (2004) and *Newsweek* (2009) that "suggested the refugees were rescuing Lewiston, a view that contradicted the perception held by many that the city of hardworking residents was draining its coffers to provide for economically dependent refugees" (Besteman). These people took to blogs and other forums to express their frustrations over the Somali immigrants. The different religious backgrounds, and most notably the difference in race between the Somalis and the majority of the Lewistonians provided a harsh barrier to for the Somalis to cross over in order to be accepted.

Comparatively, the Former Soviet Jews were lucky to have had a group that wanted to show them the ropes in Portland, despite the fact they came from different religious and cultural backgrounds. For example, the Jews living in Portland expected the refugees to come in and become active members of the community, given the fact they would finally be able to express their Judaism. Very few did, however, simply because they had a different way of expressing Jewishness. Sam Kliger, director of the American Jewish Committee's (AJC) Russian Jewish Community Affairs, used the phrase "detached affiliation" to describe this difference, noting that, because the former Soviet Jews were denied the freedom to express their religion, they

developed more private, internal ways of practicing religion. For most immigrants, being Jewish didn't imply attending synagogue regularly or celebrating the holidays in the way that even the most conservative American Jews do (Kliger). According to both Susie Schwartz and Leslie Joy Simmons, the welcoming Jewish communities were disappointed by a continued lack of participation in the Jewish community.

Despite this divide, Jewish communities remained supportive of the Former Soviet Jews. When they did, in fact, choose to participate in Seders or other religious observances, they were welcomed into the homes of people like Bobbie Gordon. Gordon recalls giving immigrant families their first Passover Seder experience at her house. "We used to borrow tables from temple, and had about 40 people sitting around the table, and we showed the group what they were saying and doing." Gatherings like these were common in the Jewish community, and provided a stronger connection between the immigrants and the native Mainers.

In coming to Maine, The Former Soviet Jews were able to escape anti-Semitism and to be in control of their Jewishness, as they would no longer have to worry about expressing their religion. As Natasha Petrovsky described, the Soviet Jews in Maine were defined by being Jewish, and they had to live every day feeling ashamed of it.

We were and are completely non-religious people. But, for us, but we have a very strong Jewish identity. ...I never feel humiliated in the United States, never once. Of course many anti-Semitism, I understand, but it has never affected me or my family.

Because the stigma of Jewishness didn't carry overseas to Portland, both Natasha and Vera wanted to raise their children knowing where they came from, and to be proud of their heritage. Vera described that she and Savely "liked them to understand their background and know that, here, you don't have to hide from anybody to celebrate holidays." In Maine, they didn't.

Not only would many of the Former Soviet Jews feel like they had the freedom to identify as Jewish, but some got to experience opportunities they had always dreamed of. In an interview with the *Portland Press Herald* in September of 1990, immigrant Igor Fridman described how he and his new wife, Victoria, could not have a religious wedding back in the Soviet Union because it was far too dangerous to even approach a synagogue, let alone go inside one. It wasn't until coming to Maine that Igor actually got to go inside of a synagogue (Hoey). Having the flexibility to have a Jewish wedding, regardless of how religious the immigrants were, added to the notion of finding a successful life in for these people in Maine.

These immigrant families wanted to raise their children in a place that would enable their children to get good educations, to be safe, and would allow them the best possible lives. And Portland did that. Having this freedom from anti-Semitism added an important feeling of safety for Natasha and Vera, especially with regards to raising their children. They didn't have to worry about anti-Semitism in the schools and their children were generally accepted by the other children, contributing to the overall positive educational experience in Portland. The Kupermans lived in a small community within walking distance from a synagogue and school. When they moved, she sent her toddler to daycare at the synagogue, and her oldest to the Nathan Clifford School. She fondly recalled the little park right by her house:

[The kids] had breakfast out and they played in the park with kids and learned the language, and the school, Nathan Clifford School...at this time was not too far...all neighborhood kids were the same age, and in the mornings they would have everybody was meeting in the little park across the street from our house and it was very secure to send them without any supervision...so they went to school with all the neighborhood kids and everyone came back from school together.

She said that every morning, the neighborhood kids played in the park before school, which was within walking distance. If the immigrant parents could accomplish their goals of escaping anti-Semitism and providing the best lives for their children, then they would be

successful in Maine.

The Somalis moved to Maine for similar reasons, the number one goal being they could provide good educations for their children and raise them in a safe environment. But many didn't, and still don't, feel nearly as safe. According to Catherine Besteman, one Somali Bantu father said, "We moved here to save our lives. We didn't choose to come to America. We are refugees. We came here to find safety, so we could save the lives of our children, so our children could be safe. But our children are not safe here. We are terribly worried about them" (Besteman). The Somali children in Lewiston were just not getting the same support to foster healthy and successful upbringings.

Most of the Former Soviet Jews, who chose to leave their homes in the Soviet Union, found the freedom they hoped to find in Maine. Whether they had a choice to resettle to Maine or were placed there, there was a reason why so many of the Former Soviet Jewish immigrants ended up staying, despite the sacrifices they had to make: they found happiness and comfort in Maine. When Natasha Petrovsky and her family moved to Portland a few years after settling in the United States, she had her doubts about being able to live happily in a place so different from any she had ever known. While it shocked her at first, as it turned out, she ended up loving what it had to offer.

I feel so comfortable and it's very easy to live here and I love ocean it's a very big part of my life. I really enjoy Maine. People are really friendly so it's a very good fit for us. We are also really close to Boston. It's comfortable, beautiful, and quiet, but if you want culture we have it. We have season tickets to the Portland symphony, the music we have very good museum and theater and if you want you can go to Boston.

Maine was a relatively quiet, easy-to-navigate, welcoming place for these immigrants, and the welcoming atmosphere that the Jewish Communities provided elicited comfort for the Former Soviet Jewish Refugees. "Maine is very good piece of America," Natasha said. "A good reflection of good America."

The Former Soviet Jewish immigration to Maine was a story of success, relative to the other refugee groups that have come to Maine. The charities and Jewish organizations as well as individual American Jews in Portland spent a great deal of time and money to free a group of foreigners with whom they shared a deep connection. They brought them here, provided them with the necessities to get on their feet, and continued to support and welcome them into their communities. The refugees were ready to start fresh and build their lives in a place that was free from anti-Semitism, and where they could provide education and safety for their children. They had this ideal arrangement that other refugee populations, most notably the Somalis in Lewiston, were unable to forge. Unlike the Somalis, they had the people on their side from the start, and the media was rooting for them. Former Soviet Jewish immigrants had found what they were looking for: a better life. They found this better life in Maine.

Interviews

Roberta Gordon
Vera Kuperman
Tania Litvin
Natasha Petrovsky
Susie Schwartz
Leslie Joy Simmons

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