

# Soviet Jews Find Old Woes, New Joys in New World

By LAURIE JOHNSTON

On 108th Street in Forest Hills, Queens, the Red Apple is no chain supermarket but a rugged-individualist little grocery, decorated with Russian-costumed dolls. It sells Russian-canned salmon and sturgeon soup and tickets to Russian movies screened regularly at the nearby Continental Theater. Monya Popovitser, a Soviet Jew who owns the Red Apple with his wife, Ida, immigrated in 1971. He worked as a leather cutter here, as he had in the Ukraine, and opened the store five years later.

On this Main Street of the fast-developing Soviet-émigré colony in the Forest Hills-Rego Park area, the Inner Visions Beauty Salon and Barber Shop and the Off-Broadway Clothing Store are among other businesses owned by the city's new wave of Jewish immigrants.

Russian-speaking teen-agers hang out on 108th Street's corners in the evenings, when older immigrants and young marrieds with children linger outside the Red Apple's door to chat in Russian or, sometimes, Yiddish.

Inside, Mr. Popovitser talked about the store in enthusiastic if rumpled English, ending, "It's not just a job, it's a business — it's a life." Mrs. Popovitser, a bookkeeper by training, responded wryly to the suggestion that, now that she and her husband had borrowed money to own a store, she was a "capitalist" sorts. "I feel like a capitalist — I feel like a tired horse," she said with happy scorn. "If all capitalists feel like me, better forget it."

## 'A Good Life, a Jewish Life'

Buying watermelon on a recent evening, 25-year-old Semyon Shtayner and his wife, Yasya — and 2-year-old Felix, bright-eyed in a stroller — were part of a Red Apple crowd that was plainly reveling in the array of fruits and melons. "In Russia, harder to get," Mr. Shtayner explained. Like many of his countrymen here, he drives a taxi (as he did back in Chernovetse), earning \$700 a month. He pays \$300 for a one-bedroom apartment. With a wide grin, he said that he had "enough food, enough clothes, enough job," as he also did in the Ukraine; that he goes to



The New York Times/Sara Krulwich

Monya Popovitser at community board at Red Apple supermarket in Forest Hills, Queens. Inset, poster in Russian and English tells of magazine for sale.

synagogue "not every week" and that he really left to get "a good life, a Jewish life, a free life."

Since late 1968, when the Soviet Union released the first trickle of Jews (then, as now, ostensibly bound for Israel), about 20,000 have settled in the New York metropolitan area, according to the New York Association for New Americans. This is almost half the total Soviet Jewish immigration to this country in a period in which 145,000 Soviet Jews went to Israel.

Spring produced a sudden flood. The Soviet Union, while insisting that its emigration policy is nobody else's busi-

ness, yielded somewhat to American pressures as it intensified its pursuit of trade concessions, Olympics goodwill and approval of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. From 3,000 in 1977, Soviet arrivals, nearly all of them Jewish, topped 6,000 in just the first six months of 1979.

With 6,000 more expected by the end of the year, the "new wave" of Russian Jews in the metropolitan area will reach 30,000 very soon. The immigrants are increasingly urban and educated, nearly as unfamiliar with Jewish culture as with American.

Brooklyn contains at least half the



city's Soviet Jewish immigrants. Brighton Beach has been known for years as Little Odessa because a third or more of its residents come from

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there. But there are also substantial numbers in Central Queens, which has 1,700 families, 1,300 of them in Forest Hills-Rego Park, and in Washington Heights-Inwood in Manhattan and in Riverdale, the Bronx.

Not far off 108th Street in Forest Hills live Svetlana and Mikhail Resnikov, who have named their American-born, 8-month-old daughter Zorina ("Sunrise," they said, or "Dawn"). Their Russian-born son, 9-year-old Alexander, went with them from Kiev to Israel for two and a half years before the family came to Forest Hills in 1975.

## Son Could Not Attend University

"Russia is a beautiful country but not for us," said Mrs. Resnikov, a brief sorrow in her huge dark eyes. She was a technician in an electronics plant and her husband, a squarely built man of 42, was a construction engineer. "Higher I couldn't go in Russia — a Jew for them is an enemy," he said in English more halting than his wife's. "And I was sure my son could not go to a university."

As for their second emigration, "We can't explain why we left Israel," Mrs. Resnikov said. "We learned Yiddish and Hebrew and we like the Jewish culture. In Kiev, on holidays, the only synagogue was too crowded to get into so we would drive by to look at it. But, I tell you the truth, Russian people of our generation aren't religious."

Now, after four years here, Mr. Resnikov is impatient with "working like a worker" in his \$6.50-an-hour job as a roofer but has found nothing better. His wife works in a nursing home.

"We live nice," he said, "but we didn't live bad in Kiev or Haifa. I would like to have my own American business as a construction engineer — we would live better."

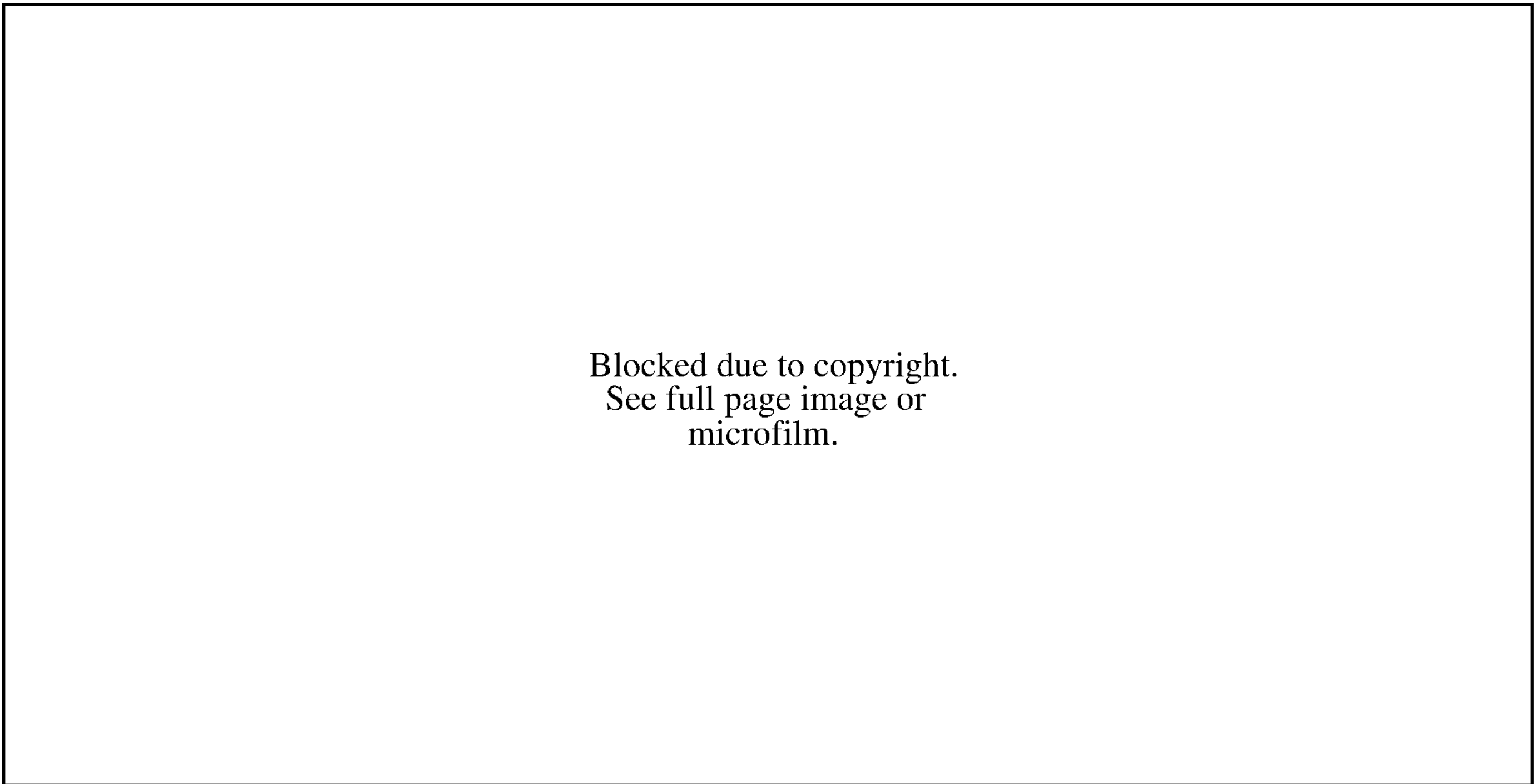
## Success and Disappointments

In a nation of immigrants, many of this wave's problems are as typical as their hopes. In the American tradition, too, are some quick-success stories at one extreme and bitter disappointments at the other. Newer aspects of the migration, reflecting both Communist society and the birth of Israel, add to the difficulties.

"They don't think the way we do — how could they, when they've done things so differently?" said Esther Gruenblatt, an Orthodox rabbi's wife who runs the Service Center for Russian Immigrants near 108th Street in Forest Hills. This is one of the Jewish community agencies that takes over from the New York Association for New Americans, which receives all Jews brought to this country by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

With her waiting room full, Mrs. Gruenblatt was consulting with a woman from Tashkent about a tutor for her son's bar mitzvah. The woman was embarrassed about not being able to pay for his yeshiva tuition yet, even though the family had immigrated only six months earlier. Her husband, "a physicist, head of an electronics laboratory" in Tashkent, had been working here for a month at \$3.25 an hour. As a "pediatrician" who made house calls, she had earned 120 rubles a month. ("Good shoes," a volunteer interpreter pointed out, "cost 50 rubles.")

"Maybe you could find good job for



The New York Times

## Outside the Red Apple on 108th Street in Forest Hills, immigrants gather to chat after doing their shopping

my husband? Or for me?" the woman asked with a shy smile, adding that she hoped to work only part-time so she could "study medicine." Her family had waited only three months for exit visas to Israel, she said, but had no interest in going there to stay.

"Well, what is Israel to a Russian, really?" Mrs. Gruenblatt said when the woman had left. "Emigrating there takes a lot of idealism — I am Jewish all my life and I'm not there. Sometimes I think the ones I see all want to be capitalists. It's the Russian dream."

"They still want to be assigned to a job, however, instead of competing for it. America still has its tremendous lure, even when you don't know much about it and only think you're prepared for it, but how can we fault them for choosing it?"

Much anxiety can be generated by low-level first jobs because "working your way up" is a new idea to Soviet immigrants. They are used to straight-and-narrow job-tracking (which also normally leads to pensioned retirement at age 50 for women and 55 for men). Many feel shame, believing that unemployment is for the "bad" or the "lazy."

Vocational counselors say there is a good deal of "inflation" in Soviet job titles and professional designations — "an electronics technician may be a 'physicist' or a midwife an 'obstetrician,'" said one. "And if they had such status and a comfortable living in the Soviet Union, they are likely to look around them and say, 'Why can't I have it here?'"

## Depression Hits in First Year

Most also "don't yet really understand the difference between what the Soviet Union and this country expect of their citizens," said Evelyn Cohen, director of family services for the Association for New Americans. "We want people to show initiative, individuality, enterprise and personal responsibility. Even in familiar surroundings, they have never had to find their own apartment, look for a better job, pick a doctor or a school."

"Depression hits most all of them during their first year here," said Her-

bert Bernstein, a former director of the Association for New Americans who is now a consultant to it. "They have lost their Mother Russia, which they tend to idealize the farther they get from the Soviet Union." Most too, he noted, "have not yet found their Father Abraham."

Identity crisis joins culture shock, since "Jewish" is recognized in the Soviet Union as a nationality, not as a religion. "Soviet Jews know the meaning mainly as a line on their official papers and passports," Dr. Bernstein said, "but they have seen the anti-Semitic handwriting on the Kremlin wall." For example, although about 30 percent of those who come here are university graduates, the universities are now admitting fewer and fewer Jewish children.

## Image Doesn't Always Fit

The decision to leave, however, confronts émigrés with the next question: What kinds of Jews do they want to become? The image held by most Americans, including the Jewish community, is of modern Soviet Jews straining to escape so they can be fully Jewish in identity and religious observance. But that image is more likely to fit those who choose Israel, according to interviews.

"Most don't feel Jewish because they weren't brought up to be," Raisa Bederman said simply. She was a color technician in the same movie studio for 25 years and has worked here on a costume-jewelry assembly line.

Her family, during their three years here, has observed "Jewish holidays but not Sabbath," she said, just as they did in Kiev. "But I see American people — not everybody is very religious, no?"

The New York Association for New Americans processes all the arriving Soviet immigrants here. The association has more than 100 social workers, counselors and interpreters. It pays immigrants' rents and subsistence expenses, perhaps \$100 a week for a family of four, until the breadwinner finds a job. The association also provides medical coverage for a year, gives classes in English, and steers im-

migrants to housing, job training and jobs (80 percent unskilled or semi-skilled), and to yeshivas and synagogues.

The estimated 1979 cost of the direct aid is \$15 million. Of this, \$5.4 million is Federal money. The rest comes from the United Jewish Appeal.

## Room at the Top for Many

Within that first year of arrival, an immigrant may be making \$20,000 a year or \$3 an hour. Room at the top is especially accessible to engineers, chemists, machinists, tool-and-die-makers, computer experts and draftsmen, along with musicians and artists.

Physicians, teachers, lawyers or social workers, for example, face a difficult road of English classes, professional retraining or board examinations.

"Few are so unemployable as to wind up on welfare — less than 1 percent, as near as we know," a spokesman said, acknowledging that the agency had "no follow-up studies on anybody" because it was "too swamped with resettling people."

Some families, as well as individual personalities, have fallen apart under the stress.

"We have some alcoholics, some wife-beaters or deserters, some battered children, the normal range for human beings — which these immigrants are, not heroes and heroines," said Evelyn Cohen, family services director at the association. "But many of the families function extremely well and most are intact. Whether happily intact — well, there's a particular stress on men who in Russia got along well in their jobs and with their associates but here the wife may learn English faster and get a better job."

Said Mrs. Gruenblatt, of the Forest Hills service center: "We didn't bring these people here to become public charges. We really use our ingenuity to find solutions for the old or the troubled."