

**Conversations with Soviet Jews:
The Fourth Wave of Jewish Emigration from the Soviet Union and their Integration into
American Jewish Life**

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Abstract

The aim of this project is to explore the non-assimilation into Jewish American religious life of members of the fourth and final wave (1986-1989) of Soviet Jewish refugees to the United States. In the late 1980s, thousands of Soviet Jews came to the US with the help of American Jews. As is evident in American Jewish publications, though the American hosts expected the Soviet Jews to engage in Jewish religious life in America, they were often disappointed. So why have so many Soviet Jewish refugees not fully taken on Jewish cultural and religious identity after their immigration to the United States? In this paper I argue that despite the extraordinary efforts of the American Jewish community, the Soviet Jewish immigrants of the last wave have not taken on an American Jewish religious identity, in part because American and Soviet Jews have different understandings of what it means to be Jewish. Through a close examination of six interviews conducted with fourth-wave refugees, five publications on the subject of their integration by Jewish organizations, as well as two handbooks published by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society for Soviet Jews about American Jewish life, I demonstrate that the Soviet Jews in the US have created their own Jewish identity based on their experiences of Jewishness in the USSR, and engage in American Jewish religious life only in ways that are useful or meaningful to them in the context of this past. I also show that the American Jewish community has often had trouble understanding this, as is evident in the multitude of publications they have released in which they explore the potential reasons for this phenomenon and search for a solution to bring Soviet Jews into the American Jewish religious community. Within this analysis, I explore the concepts of identity, religiosity, and culture.

I. Introduction

In the summer of 2018, I began the long and difficult process of finding, contacting, and interviewing individuals who had come to the United States as part of the last wave¹ of Soviet Jewish emigration from the USSR in the late 1980s. I was inspired to do so in large part by curiosity about my own heritage—my mother was 18 years old when she and her family joined the thousands leaving in this last wave of emigration from the Soviet Union. Like many, her family chose to come to the United States rather than Israel (the official stated destination for all Soviet Jewish refugees), since my mother’s uncle had already immigrated several years before and was living happily with his family in Indianapolis. My mother had often spoken to me about her experiences and first impressions in their first few years in the US. Assimilation for her family was a difficult process, but they were pleasantly surprised by the abundance and openness they found in America. In addition, they were helped by Jewish volunteers from their host community, who provided them with clothing, transportation, and general tips about living in the United States. I became curious to know more about the experiences of other members of this migration wave, specifically about the ways in which native culture plays a part in the immigration and assimilation processes.

When I set out to begin the interview portion of this research, I was still uncertain about the concrete focus of my project. My interview questions were broad, and I asked my subjects about everything from their life back in the Soviet Union, to their immigration journeys through

¹ The fourth and final wave of Soviet Jewish emigration occurred roughly between 1986 and 1991. The first wave occurred approximately between 1881 and 1921, the second in the years following WWII, and the third between 1971 and 1981 (these years are approximate, and exact dates vary from source to source). See, for example, Samuel Kliger, “The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union,” in *New York Glory: Religions in the City* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 149.

the Vienna-Rome channel², to their daily habits and experiences now, almost thirty years after they immigrated. I anticipated that I might find out about how much of the culture they brought from the Soviet Union, including food, holidays, even attitudes towards education and healthcare, they had retained throughout their time in the US. However, the more interviews I conducted, the more I realized that there was an interesting and unexpected dimension in my interview subjects' integration into American life. It seemed that a considerable number of them have not become "Jewish enough" from the cultural and religious perspectives of American Jews. This was about the time that I realized that labels commonly used in many sources, such as "Jewish," "Jewish-American," "religious," etc., do not always describe the phenomena I am studying clearly or with enough specificity. The framing of these concepts can be rather fluid in real life and in scholarly literature, leading to potential misunderstandings or contradictions in discourse on this topic. For this reason, I felt the need to define these concepts as I use them in this paper, and I will attempt to do so throughout the sections that follow.

At first, I assumed that the limited number of interviews that I conducted was the reason for this apparent non-integration into Jewish-American life of these immigrants. Perhaps most of the people I had spoken with happened to be anomalies within the larger Soviet Jewish³ immigrant community. However, as I began to read secondary sources on the topic, I realized that my subjects were not isolated examples of this phenomenon. I recognized that even my own family is a prime example of this. Though my mother's family came to the United States

² After Soviet Jews left the territory of the Soviet Union and declared their intent to come to the United States as refugees, they underwent processing in Vienna and then Rome before finally being allowed to come to the US.

³ Though many different terms can be used to describe this group, such as "Russian Jews," "Russophone Jews," or "former Soviet Jews," I will be using the term "Soviet Jews" to refer to this population throughout this paper. Authors of secondary sources to which I refer may use the above terms interchangeably.

precisely as a result of their Jewish ethnicity, nobody in the family today goes to synagogue, says prayers, eats strictly kosher food, or celebrates any of the Jewish holidays. The Jewish culture and religion have all but disappeared from my family, and apparently from a significant number of other families who came during the fourth wave as well. It seems that despite the efforts of American Jews in their host communities, many of the Soviet Jews of the last wave often wanted nothing or very little to do with the American Jewish way of cultural and religious life. The various resources and aid provided to these refugees, including handbooks on how to successfully integrate into Jewish American life, did little to convince a significant part of this population to fully blend into their host communities.

In this work, my aim is to show that it is the particular Soviet context in which these immigrants were brought up, and the ways in which this context made them understand religion and Jewishness differently than American Jews do, that are the reasons for their non-integration into American Jewish life. In order to do so, it is vital to analyze not only the ways in which Soviet Jews in the US do not participate in American Jewish cultural and religious life, but to go back and look both at the history of Jews in the USSR, and at the socio-political climate during the years in which the immigrants of this last wave grew up and lived. It is also just as important to analyze and compare the motivations and expectations of the American Jews who fought to allow these refugees into the US with the motivations of the Soviet Jews, as well as the ways in which “Jewishness” is understood by both parties.

By combining this historical analysis with excerpts from the interviews I conducted, as well as material from other primary sources, I hope to tell the story of a misunderstood people—a people who wanted economic stability, a safe and prosperous future for their children, and simply to not be treated as second class citizens—whose disadvantageous position within their

homeland turned out to be their ticket to leave. The Jewish ethnicity of these refugees was the only reason they were able to leave the USSR, but their complicated relationship with this aspect of their identity was the reason they caused so much confusion and disenchantment for their receiving host communities. In this project, I ask, what were the reasons for this problem, and where do they originate?

All throughout the history of the Soviet Union, even dating back to the last years of the Russian Empire, there were several large waves of Jewish emigration. The last of these waves occurred in the late 1980s, when Gorbachev gave into the pressuring of Western governments and opened the borders to Jews who wanted to leave.⁴ Officially, these people were supposed to be immigrating to Israel, their ancestral homeland, to reunite with family members. Once they arrived in Vienna (the stopover point between the USSR and Israel), many were immediately put on a flight to Israel, where they received citizenship upon arrival. Many others, however, became “dropouts,” changing their intended destination from Israel to another country such as the US or Canada, and began the long journey of seeking refugee status.⁵ When the refugees finally arrived in their destination countries, extensive work was done by various Jewish organizations to help them begin their lives there. This included efforts to inaugurate these refugees into Jewish cultural and religious life, which had been forbidden to them in the USSR.

However, much to the surprise of their hosts in the US, many of these adult refugees did not embrace a Jewish religious identity, and in many cases have not fully integrated into their

⁴ Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 5.

⁵ Zvi Gitelman, “Soviet Immigrant Resettlement in Israel and the United States,” in *Soviet Jewry in the 1980s: The Politics of Anti-Semitism and Emigration and the Dynamics of Resettlement*, by Robert O. Freedman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 163; Fred A. Lazin, “Refugee Resettlement and ‘Freedom of Choice’: The Case of Soviet Jewry,” *Center for Immigration Studies*, July 2005, 1, <https://cis.org/Report/Refugee-Resettlement-and-Freedom-Choice-Case-Soviet-Jewry>.

hosting Jewish-American societies, even after years of living in their new country. This phenomenon was confusing to their Jewish-American hosts, since one of the main driving reasons of the mission to get these people out of the USSR was to bring them to a place where they could practice the Jewish culture and religion without fear of persecution.⁶ However, the actual motivations of the Soviet Jews were very different, and may have been misinterpreted by those organizations and governments who helped to get them out. Though many American Jews saw the goal of this mission as helping their Jewish brethren come to a country where they could freely practice the Jewish religion and be openly Jewish, the Soviet Jews saw their move to America as a chance for better economic opportunity.

In the USSR, being Jewish was not a religious, but rather an ethnic marker. By the time the immigrants of the fourth wave were allowed to leave the Soviet Union in the era of Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika, they had been very far removed from most of the cultural and religious elements of Judaism, which were for the most part not allowed. Unlike the refugees of earlier waves, who were closer to their Jewish religious roots and chose Israel as their destination, religion played very little part in the decision of the fourth wave immigrants who chose to go to the US, a country which presented them with incredible economic opportunity and social freedom. For them, emigrating was about providing a better, more secure future for their family, and for being able to live without being looked at as second class citizens.

Upon arrival in the US, they were greeted by enthusiastic members of the American Jewish communities, many of whom had actively participated in the social and political movement to allow the Soviet Jews in as refugees. The American Jews had their own set of

⁶ Samuel Kliger, "The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union," 152.

expectations, partially influenced by the above-mentioned movement, as well as by stereotypes about Eastern European Jews (such as the idea that they would resemble Tevye and his family from *Fiddler on the Roof*⁷), about what the refugees would be like and how they would assimilate.⁸ American Jews “assumed that the immigrants would have a strong desire to participate actively in organized Jewish life...and they hoped that the newcomers would bring ‘fresh blood’ to American Jewish life.” However, the secular, well-educated, cosmopolitan Soviet Jews merely wanted to be left alone after receiving the initial aid aimed at helping them settle into their new country.⁹ This caused many tensions and frustrations between the two groups. In the thirty years since this migration, not much has changed—for example, though some members of this migration do attend synagogue, it is often for social reasons, and though there are elements of Jewish culture and tradition (such as cooking some Jewish foods, celebrating certain holidays, wanting children to marry other Jews, etc.) present in the lives of many of these immigrants, they are often mixed with both Soviet and American secular customs.

Overall, in this paper I argue that these Soviet Jewish refugees have not been able to integrate into American Jewish religious life and take on a Jewish religious identity (in the American understanding of this term), and instead have created their own hybrid Soviet/Russian/Jewish lifestyle and identity, thereby undermining the expectations for their successful religious integration of their hosting Jewish communities and aid organizations, who

⁷ *Fiddler on the Roof* is a famous musical, based on a book by Joseph Stein, about a Jewish family living in a shtetl in Imperial Russia’s Pale of Settlement in 1905.

⁸ Larissa I. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 190.

⁹ Sam Kliger, “Russian-Jewish Immigrants in the U.S: Social Portrait, Challenges, and AJC Involvement,” *American Jewish Committee*, November 2011, 4, <http://www.ajcrussian.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=chLMK3PKLsF&b=7718799&ct=11713359>.

misunderstood the fundamental differences between American and Soviet “Jewishness”. I also argue that this is in part because of the unique conditions of anti-religious sentiment of the Soviet Union in which they lived, and in which they developed their sense of Jewish identity.

This paper works on the assumption that the assimilation policies of the hosting American Jewish communities were largely unsuccessful. I will work through why this is the case in the sections that follow. Though a small number of authors may disagree with this assumption, the majority of the work published on this topic takes for granted that this is the case, as we will see in the literature review and primary source analysis. In addition, most past studies of this topic seem to focus on Soviet immigrants in New York City. I, however intend to center my argument on fourth wave Soviet Jews in the US at large, with some concentration on Chicago, where I conducted my interviews.

Before writing about the particular sense of identity held by immigrants and refugees, it is important to understand the historical and cultural circumstances in which their past is situated, and which are vital to comprehending the ways in which they view themselves and the world around them. Tracing back the history of Jewish emigration waves from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union is crucial, since it is necessary to view the emigration wave that I focus on through a historical context. It is just as necessary to examine and analyze Soviet culture and politics—specifically the ways in which these two governed the (non-)existence of Jewish religious and cultural life, especially in the later years of the Soviet Union. It is through the lens of this history that I will examine my primary sources. By recognizing the conditions in which Jewish people lived, we can better understand the motivations for the many waves of Jewish emigration out of those countries, as well as the ways that their understanding of what it

means to be Jewish have changed over the years as a result of the social and political context in their country of origin.

II. Historical Overview: Judaism and Jewishness in the Russian Empire and the USSR

In the Russian Empire, most Jews (with a few exceptions) lived in the Pale of Settlement.¹⁰ In the reforms of the 1850s, some members of the Jewish commercial and banking elite, as well as wealthy artisans, were allowed to move outside the Pale, and Russian universities were opened to Jews.¹¹ However, multiple events that occurred at this time, including the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, also triggered the first mass Jewish emigration wave to Western Europe and the US.

As tensions grew through the 1910s, Jews played a large part in the revolutionary movements. Many were attracted to Marxian Socialism, since it rejected antisemitism.¹² A large number of both Bolshevik and Menshevik members were Jewish, and they played a leading role in what would lead to the downfall of the Russian Empire and the rise of the Soviet Union. In the years following the establishment of the Soviet Union, the status of Jews, as well as Jewish culture, experienced many back-and-forth changes. After the Civil War, antisemitism disappeared as an official policy.¹³ A Jewish section (*yevseksiya*), whose job it was to bring communism to the Jewish masses in the country, was established in the Communist Party.

¹⁰ Paul Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 258.

¹¹ Paul Bushkovitch, 259.

¹² Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 291.;The presence of antisemitism in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union is a complex topic in itself, which I will not be exploring in depth for the purposes of this paper.

¹³ Howard M. Sachar, 339.

Antireligious propaganda soon began to be spread to all people, including Jews, and the government used a variety of methods to get rid of Jewish religious life and re-establish Jewish traditions in more communist forms.¹⁴ Often this was done by taking Jewish music, literature, and even theater and altering it to fit Soviet values. Massive closure of synagogues began in 1921, and most non-communist Jewish organizations were closed down. The government also established their own Jewish schools, with the purpose of teaching Jewish children who spoke Yiddish as their native language to learn Soviet values.¹⁵ The hope was that these children would then go home and educate their parents and grandparents about these values, and against the traditional Jewish way of life.

This had several effects. On the one hand, it created a sort of “double-standard” in Jewish families. People could be religiously observant at home, in private, but also could be active in non-Jewish (or even anti-Jewish) activities on the outside.¹⁶ Many young Jews joined the Komsomol¹⁷, which presented them with a means of social mobility. However, the movement to get rid of traditional Jewish religious and cultural practices and values also helped to foster a very unique Jewish identity, as well as a Jewish secular culture unique to the Soviet Union.¹⁸ It also caused the mass assimilation of Jews, with Russian becoming the first language of many by the 1930s. Often traditional Jewish rituals mixed with Soviet traditions, leading to a new, mixed culture. Anna Shternshis argues that what occurred in the 1920s and 30s to the Soviet Jews

¹⁴ Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), xix–xx.

¹⁵ Anna Shternshis, 18.

¹⁶ Anna Shternshis, 12.

¹⁷ A communist youth organization in the Soviet Union

¹⁸ Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, 182.

“...was not an ‘alienation’ from Jewish tradition, but rather an appearance of a new system of beliefs and values.”¹⁹

In the late 1930s, however, severe restrictions were imposed on Jewish culture, and during Stalin’s Purges in 1937-38, in another attack on religion, church leaders and rabbis were arrested for anti-Soviet activity. According to Howard Sachar, this period of Stalinist repressions was the time in which “...the texture of Jewish ‘ethnic’ life was shattered irrevocably.”²⁰ All Jewish cultural institutions were shut down, and all Jewish-content was taken out of the aforementioned Yiddish-language schools.

It is well known that in the early half of the 1940s, during World War II, millions of Jews perished at the hands of Nazi Germany. According to a study by I. A. Al’tman, the largest human losses were suffered by the following territories: Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltics. “In Lithuania 215,000-22,000 people perished...in Latvia—at the minimum 72,000-74,000 people; in Belarus—around 800 thousand; in Ukraine over one million Jews perished. When it comes to the eradication of Jews on the territory of contemporary Russia, the author speaks of a number of over 140 thousand people.”²¹ After the war, there was another mass Jewish emigration wave (the second wave) out of the Soviet Union. There was, however, a slight easing up on religious restrictions and anti-religious propaganda during the war years.²² In addition, the Jewish Anti-

¹⁹ Anna Shternshis, 43.

²⁰ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*, 342.

²¹ I. A. Al’tman, *Holokost i evreiskoe soprotivlenie na okkupirovannoi territorii SSSR* /Pod red. prof. A. G. Asmolova (Moscow: Fond “Holokost,” 2002); quoted in T. N. Viktorova, “Poteri sovetskogo naseleniia v konsentratsionnykh lageriakh fashistskoi Germanii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Istoriografiia voprosa,” *Molodoi uchenyi*, no. 139 (February 2017): 342–44.

²² Mordechai Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941-1964*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 9.

Fascist Committee, whose goals included representing Soviet Jews to world Jewry and to gathering support for the Soviet fight against the Nazis, was established.

After Stalin's death in 1953, there was a thaw in the government's policies and practices against people who disagreed with its ideology, which affected many peoples, including Jews. Many of those who had been arrested during the Stalinist Purges were released, and the government even allowed some works in Yiddish to be published.²³ There was also an easing of restrictions on religion, as the government allowed "...the publication of 10,000 prayer books, the baking of matzah... and the establishment of a small rabbinical seminary."²⁴ However, by the early 1960s, Khrushchev had established quotas for Jews in certain jobs and universities, in addition to limiting their role in the government.²⁵

The situation of Jews continued to fluctuate throughout the Brezhnev years as the government cracked down on Zionism, but then suddenly opened its doors for emigration in 1971.²⁶ Most people in this third wave of emigration went to Israel, and were more religious, less assimilated Soviet Jews. According to Zvi Gitelman, members of this wave "...came disproportionately from the Baltic States, the western peripheries of the USSR, and Georgia...areas in which Jewish secular and religious traditions remained relatively strong." As a result of this, it seems that many of these emigres were more 'pulled to Israel' than 'pushed'

²³ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*, 713.

²⁴ Howard M. Sachar, 713.

²⁵ Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans*, 40.

²⁶ Annelise Orleck, 56.

from the USSR.”²⁷ Over the next several years, the door to emigration continued to open and close to varying degrees and for varying lengths of time. Often people would apply to emigrate (a difficult and lengthy process which required gathering countless documents and permissions), and then the door would shut, leaving these people unable to emigrate. People who got denied permission to leave for this reason (among many other reasons) were called *refuseniks*.²⁸

The direction of people leaving also shifted. As time went by, more and more people began to choose the United States as their destination, and by the fourth major wave of Jewish emigration from the USSR in the 80s, the majority were choosing not to go to Israel. Though, like members of the previous wave of the 1970s, they were officially headed to Israel for “family reunification,” members of this fourth wave began to “drop out” and go to the US instead. The people who chose the US were typically well-educated residents of large cities, with less attachment to the Jewish religion or to Israel— these assimilated, successful urban professionals were more interested in escaping the antisemitism and economic limitations of the USSR than in making *aliyah*²⁹ to Israel.³⁰ According to Gitelman, members of this wave “...came largely from the three Slavic republics and headed for America... This wave of emigres was more ‘pushed’ from the USSR than ‘pulled to Israel.’³¹ This occurred because “...the Jews of the Slavic republics... had been cut off from Jewish culture for decades, and had little reason to go to Israel.

²⁷ Zvi Gitelman, ed., *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 11.

²⁸ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*, 54.

²⁹ The immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel

³⁰ Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans*, 54.

³¹ Zvi Gitelman, *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*, 11.

They sought political and cultural freedom, economic opportunity, and social equality in the West.”³²

The number of “dropouts” saw its most significant increase in the latter part of the 1980s when, after a long period of very limited emigration, Gorbachev opened up the doors again in an effort to improve relations with the West.³³ For years, people in the US, Israel, and other countries had been lobbying their leaders to demand putting pressure on Soviet leaders to let the Jewish people go. However, when this wish was granted, and thousands of Soviet Jewish refugees arrived in cities all over the US, the hosting Jewish communities were often surprised by how “not Jewish” these people appeared.³⁴ Based on tales they had heard of Soviet Jewish *refuseniks* of the earlier waves seeking religious freedom, they assumed that these fourth-wave Soviet Jews “came to the United States to reestablish their religious identities” and would “graciously accept instructions on how to become American Jews.”³⁵ One reason for this is that American Jews may not have understood the history of Jews in the USSR, and therefore not known the ways in which Jewishness had changed for these people in the Soviet context. They didn’t realize that members of this new immigration wave had only a “thin” distinctive culture, and more easily identified with the dominant non-Jewish culture of the USSR, as opposed to their predecessors, who were more attached to the “thick” Jewish culture.³⁶ This

³² Zvi Gitelman, 11–12.

³³ Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans*, 68.

³⁴ Annelise Orleck, 87.

³⁵ Steven J. Gold, “Russian-Speaking Jews and Israeli Emigrants in the United States: A Comparison of Migrant Populations,” in *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 113.

³⁶ Zvi Gitelman, *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*, 14.

misunderstanding may have been at the root of many of the issues in ways that American Jews tried to assimilate the Soviet Jews into American Jewish society. As I review the literature and analyze primary materials in the coming sections of this thesis, it is important for the reader to keep in mind this history in order to fully understand the position and mindset of the Soviet Jews who arrived in the US during the late 1980s.

III. Literature Review

To understand the nuances that play into the cultural and religious integration of fourth-wave Soviet Jews in the United States, we need wider awareness not only of the historical context in the Soviet Union that led these Jews to emigrate to the US, but also of the various different connotations of the key concepts embedded in one's Jewishness, such as identity, religiosity, and culture. In the literature review that follows, I will analyze and define those key terms based on my interpretation of how the authors of my sources understand them. By grounding these definitions in a historical basis, and examining the way these terms are understood both by the American Jewish host communities and the arriving Soviet Jewish refugees, I will build a framework for using these terms to understand the non-integration of Soviet Jews into Jewish American cultural and religious life.

A large amount of scholarly work on this issue, such as pieces by Sam Kliger and Larissa Remennick, agree with the conclusion that fourth-wave adult Soviet Jews in the US have not fully integrated into American Jewish community life or become very religiously Jewish, to the disappointment of American Jews.³⁷ There is evidence that American Jews “depict Russian Jews as ‘not Jewish enough’,” as people who are not only ignorant of and indifferent to Jewish

³⁷ Larissa I. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, 197; Sam Kliger, “Russian-Jewish Immigrants in the U.S: Social Portrait, Challenges, and AJC Involvement,” 4.

religion and tradition, but are also insensitive to American Jewish culture.³⁸ Similarly, Remennick states that most of these Soviet Jews “remain secular and detached from Jewish community life,” though there is a minority that leans on the established community for a sense of identity and support.³⁹ However, this participation seems to stem not from religious motives, but from the social benefits that come from joining Jewish community institutions.

There is also a strong consensus about the necessity of examining the Soviet context in which these immigrants lived for so many years in order to understand why this non-integration occurred. In *The Soviet Jewish Americans*, Annelise Orleck discusses what Jewish life was like in the Soviet Union, providing historical context to the reasons that motivated this group of people to finally emigrate.⁴⁰ This is very much in line with how most authors present this issue. And, like Zvi Gitelman in *The New Jewish Diaspora*, Orleck describes what it actually meant to be “Jewish” in the USSR. She claims that unlike in the United States, where Jewishness is a religious and cultural identification, in the Soviet Union it was a marker of ethnicity or nationality, and was clearly spelled out on “line five” of each Soviet Jew’s internal passport.⁴¹ This conceptual distinction is crucial in understanding some of the underlying tensions that caused the Soviet Jews to stay away from Jewish communal and religious life in the US.

However, though this provides us with an understanding of how Judaism and understandings of “being Jewish” developed in the USSR, it is also important to look at sources

³⁸ Sam Kliger, “Russian-Jewish Immigrants in the U.S: Social Portrait, Challenges, and AJC Involvement,” 5.

³⁹ Larissa I. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, 193.

⁴⁰ Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans*.

⁴¹ Zvi Gitelman, *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*, 171; Annelise Orleck, *The Soviet Jewish Americans*, 60.

that speak about the context in which Judaism developed in the United States. This can help to understand the various uniquely American factors which may have affected this development, as well as the ways in which this may have affected the acculturation into Jewish religious life of the Soviet Jews. Sam Kliger, one of the academics who has done so, connects the direction of American Judaism's development to the influence of strong Protestant culture in the United States, which differs heavily from the ways in which Russian Orthodox religion and Soviet communism have influenced the development of Eastern European Judaism.⁴² Because of these influences, for Russian Jews faith is very private and intimate, "having more to do with personal feelings and thoughts rather than public actions."⁴³

Remennick elaborates on this difference. She describes the origins of the American Jewish way of life as stemming from the "pre-modern shtetl in the Pale of Settlement" (the ancestral homeland of many contemporary American Jews), and then shows that the way of life and of understanding "Jewishness" of the Soviet Jews arriving in the US in the late 1980s was already far removed from those origins.⁴⁴ In addition, when Soviet Jews do think about religion, they understand it as "a spiritual, cultural, or philosophical concept rather than a set of practices or tenets guiding personal behavior," and keep their relationship to God private, not relating faith to temple attendance or observation of certain rites.⁴⁵ In other words, "a Russian Jew may know he or she is Jewish, may be proud of it, may feel, think or even believe as a Jew, but rarely will

⁴² Sam Kliger, "Russian-Jewish Immigrants in the U.S: Social Portrait, Challenges, and AJC Involvement," 5.

⁴³ Sam Kliger, 5.

⁴⁴ Larissa I. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, 190.

⁴⁵ Larissa I. Remennick, 192.

act as one.”⁴⁶ This is yet another factor that plays into the differences between the American and Soviet Jewish communities in defining or displaying “Jewish identity,” understanding which is crucial in order to make sense of the inability of Soviet Jews to become involved in Jewish religious life in the US. Kliger describes this attitude of Soviet Jews toward organized religion as one of “detached affiliation”—meaning they keep a distance from Jewish religious life, only participating in certain events or traditions that are somehow meaningful to them.⁴⁷

Most sources acknowledge that issues between the American and Soviet Jews appeared in part because of this difference in understanding what being Jewish means. Many scholars, including Kliger, attribute this to “a mutual clash of perceptions.”⁴⁸ Quoting Anita Friedman, Kliger says that “...after so many years in America, American Jewish behavior has become much like American dominant cultural behavior, with few exceptions and with most of the same problems.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, “While considering themselves Jews, most immigrants from the European part of the former Soviet Union remain ‘Russians’ in terms of cultural and behavioral norms, moral values, and even religious views... they prefer the term *faith*, which implies the idea of a simple belief in God or an inward contemplation of God without necessarily any concomitant lifestyle.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Sam Kliger, “Russian-Jewish Immigrants in the U.S: Social Portrait, Challenges, and AJC Involvement,” 5.

⁴⁷ Sam Kliger, 6.

⁴⁸ Sam Kliger, 4.

⁴⁹ Samuel Kliger, “The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union,” 153.

⁵⁰ Samuel Kliger, 161.

This difference in understanding what it means to be Jewish often led to tension, with many American Jews openly expressing the sentiment that the immigrants were not “really Jews.” This unsurprisingly caused the Soviet Jewish populations to feel resentment, since “Soviet Jews regard their Jewishness as an intrinsic component of who they are. Jews are born Jews, and no one in the USSR challenges or questions their...Jewishness. As immigrants explain it, being a Jew is an immutable biological and social fact.”⁵¹ This misunderstanding of their Jewishness by their American hosts may have caused the Soviet Jews to further distance themselves from the American Jewish communities. To understand some of the reasons for the disappointment and frustration this caused among American Jews, it is important to look at the efforts that they led to let in members of Soviet Jewry as refugees, which went on well into the 1980s and 90s in the United States.

The movement to free Soviet Jewry and the dropout controversy⁵² are described by Fred Lazin in his *Refugee Resettlement and 'Freedom of Choice': The Case of Soviet Jewry*. In this piece, Lazin traces the evolution in the ways that American Jewish leaders and communities, as well as the American and Israeli governments, thought about “freedom of choice” (the ability of Soviet Jews to choose whether to go to Israel or the US), and highlights the hopes, fears, and expectations of these people and the ways in which they may have conflicted with official government stances.⁵³ Arguments from many American Jewish communities for the freedom to

⁵¹ Samuel Kliger, 153.

⁵² Starting in the mid-1970s, large numbers of Soviet Jewish refugees began to “drop out” and choose the US as their destination instead of Israel, which alarmed the Israeli government, who argued that Israel needed these highly skilled immigrants for its survival.

⁵³ Fred A. Lazin, “Refugee Resettlement and ‘Freedom of Choice’: The Case of Soviet Jewry.”

choose to come to the US were often motivated by the memories of helplessness during the Holocaust, when the US closed its doors on Jewish refugees from Europe, and also from the Jewish tradition of rescuing those in danger, or *pidyon shvuim*.⁵⁴

Lazin also brings to light some of the common arguments about why Soviet Jews chose the US over Israel. For example, he describes arguments made by Gitelman, Salitan, and others that Jews in later waves who chose US were overall more secular, and probably left more for economic reasons and social reasons, rather than earlier waves who had gone to Israel, and who were more religiously Jewish.⁵⁵ Howard Sachar elaborates on this view, stating that unlike the emigrants of the 1960s, these new emigres were “acculturated veterans of the Slavic heartland republics,” whose reason for leaving was unrelated to Zionist idealism, and who “would seize upon whichever destination offered them better economic or professional opportunities.”⁵⁶

Gitelman also agrees that this generation of Soviet Jews was not as attached or connected to their Jewish cultural roots: “The cultural tie... is a variant of Russian culture, the kind of ‘thin’ Russian-Jewish culture that developed among Soviet Jews over the course of seven decades. This culture has specific values—urbanity, education, fear of ‘socialism’, among others—and a distinct sense of humor. It is based on experiences shared by Soviet Jews and not by other Soviet citizens.”⁵⁷ Understanding this, as well as the history behind it, is important, because it gives us a glimpse at the motivations and expectations from US Jewish communities, presents possible

⁵⁴ Fred A. Lazin, 4.

⁵⁵ Fred A. Lazin, 3.

⁵⁶ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*, 730–31.

⁵⁷ Zvi Gitelman, *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*, 4–5.

explanations as to why Soviet immigrants may have chosen to come to the US rather than Israel, and foreshadows some of the problems that later arose that contributed to the failure of the assimilation efforts led by American Jews, as a result of the non-alignment of these motivations and expectations.

It is important to note, however, that there is often a lack of clarity or definition in some scholarly works when discussing the key terms mentioned above. This lack of specificity can lead to different understandings of those terms, and to conclusions that seemingly contradict mainstream publications on this topic. An example of this is an article by David Laitin, entitled *The De-cosmopolitanization of the Russian Diaspora: A View from Brooklyn in the “Far Abroad”*, in which he argues that fourth wave Soviet Jews in the United States have actually become religiously Jewish, and become increasingly more so as time goes on.⁵⁸ Centering in on the case of immigrants in New York City, he states that Soviet Jews in the US have begun to “consolidate around a single dominant religious identity,” a claim that is not supported by other researchers and my own findings.⁵⁹

This divergence between our arguments is interesting, since Laitin actually gives many examples that, if implemented under my criteria (and that of many of my other sources) for defining what it means to be “religiously Jewish,” could actually help prove my argument, which is the opposite of Laitin’s. Perhaps, this occurs because in his article Laitin does not explicitly define what he means by “religious” Jewish behavior and this leads to some of his evidence not

⁵⁸ David D. Laitin, “The De-Cosmopolitanization of the Russian Diaspora: A View from Brooklyn in the ‘Far Abroad,’” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 13, no. 1 (2004), <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed October 20, 2018).

⁵⁹ David D. Laitin, 1.

quite fitting under commonly used definitions of these key terms in other publications. For example, some of the examples he gives to support his claim fit more closely into what I would consider to be the category of cultural, rather than religious, practices in Jewish life. They do not fall under the “basic package”⁶⁰ of Jewish religious observance nor under the more rigorous observances outlined by Remennick.⁶¹

Since the criteria for “religiosity” can be quite varied, it seems important to define them in future studies on this topic. To a certain extent, Latin’s work highlights how easy it is to misunderstand, or be misunderstood, when speaking about “being Jewish”, or being “religious”, which seems to be at the core of miscommunication between the Soviet Jewish refugees and their American Jewish hosts.

There is a significant amount of literature written on this subject, analyzing it from various points of view. Many sources study this phenomenon through either the American or the Soviet Jewish perspectives, but a few synthesize these two perspectives in the context of understanding the efforts to assimilate Soviet Jewish immigrants in the United States and Soviet Jews’ lack of participation in American Jewish religious life. This is especially true in the case of the fourth wave of USSR to US immigration. One of my goals is to bring these two perspectives together, examine some of the common contradictions that appear when people speak or write about this topic, and, possibly, to reconcile some of these differences. In order to do so, I analyze

⁶⁰ This “basic package” of Jewish observance common within the more liberal Judaic denominations includes synagogue attendance, making donations for Jewish and Israeli causes, celebration of Shabbat, some kind of Jewish education for children, rites of birth and coming of age (circumcision of brit for the boys, and bar/bat mitzvah for boys and girls), getting married under a *chupah* with a rabbi, and celebrating high Jewish holidays, according to Remennick.

⁶¹ Larissa I. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, 191.

three different primary sources, which, in my opinion, showcase the points of view of both the American and Soviet Jews.

IV. Primary Sources

To answer the research questions proposed above, my thesis draws upon oral histories collected from interviews, handbooks published for the purpose of educating Soviet Jews about American Jewish life, as well as discussions and policy proposals presented in journal articles on this topic. I analyze these primary sources using material collected from secondary historical sources.

In order to gain insight into the perspective of the American Jewish community on this topic, I examined five articles published in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* between 1990 and 1998, which were written by leading members of the organized Jewish communities in the US. All these articles discuss the topic of assimilation, and the authors attempt to find methods and strategies to improve the success of the efforts to bring Soviet Jews into the American Jewish community, as well as into American Jewish religious life. They explicitly state the American Jews' dissatisfaction with the non-assimilation of the Soviet Jews, and demonstrate their struggle to change this. By analyzing the language they use and the conclusions they draw about the assimilation of Soviet Jews, I seek to identify the ways in which their conception of "Jewishness" differs from that of the Soviet Jews, how this may have contributed to the failure of their assimilation programs for Soviet Jews, as well as the contradictions in the expectations and motivations of both parties involved in this migration wave.

To understand what exactly the expectations for these Soviet Jews were, I closely examine two handbooks, entitled *Вступление в новую жизнь* (or *Entering a New Culture*), and

Espeu u mip (or *The Jewish World*), which were published by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and distributed to Soviet Jewish refugees. For many, they may have been the first real source of knowledge about life in the US and about Jewish life, and they may have left lasting impressions on their understanding of what exactly it means to “be American,” or “Jewish-American.” The purpose of these handbooks was to give arriving immigrants a quick but detailed introduction to the most basic and important aspects of American, and Jewish-American, life and culture, including sections about American history, housing, taxes, as well as sections on Jewish history, traditions, and terminology. These handbooks may have been productive of the values and meanings these refugees have carried with them since their arrival, but may also shed light on the elements of their Soviet Jewish heritage which were not compatible with the American and Jewish ways of life, and which these handbooks may be implicitly trying to subdue.

Finally, by speaking with some of these Soviet Jews in a contemporary context, I have been able to gain insight into their own lives, experiences, understandings and feelings about their migration journeys and assimilation processes. My interviews, approved by the University of Chicago IRB and completed over the summer of 2018, were conducted with six Soviet Jewish refugees who arrived in Chicago between 1986 and 1991 (during the last wave of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union). The interviews that I conducted with these subjects ranged from half an hour to two hours long, and took place in informal settings, either via Skype, in cafes, or in my subject’s homes. I asked my subjects about their lives in the USSR, their reasons for leaving, their immigration journeys, and their arrival in and first impressions of the US. However, unlike many of the interviews in older oral history projects that I have read, I was also able to ask them about their daily lives in the US now, almost 30 years after their arrival. This

added element can be suggestive of how much of a role the Jewish religion and culture have in their daily lives today. Though of course it is impossible to generalize about an entire population based on personal interviews with just 6 subjects, these interviews can provide useful examples which can demonstrate that, for the most part, Soviet Jews have not fully taken on the Jewish cultural and religious identity after their immigration, thus not fulfilling the expectations of their Jewish hosts.

I begin the primary source analysis by examining five journal articles which were published in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* between 1990 and 1998, in which we can see the responses of the organized American Jewish community to the non-assimilation of Soviet Jewish refugees. All of these articles were written by prominent members of the upper levels of American Jewish society, all of whom would have witnessed, or even directly participated in, the work done by the American Jewish community to assimilate and acculturate Soviet Jewish immigrants. The three articles published in 1990, right as the final members of the fourth wave of Soviet Jewish refugees were arriving in the US, were written by Rabbi Arthur Vernon (Director of Educational Services and Resources, Jewish Educational Service of North America), Joel M. Carp (Assistant Executive Director, Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago), and Gerald L. Showstack (Professor, Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service, Brandeis University)⁶². The fourth article I examine was published in 1994, and was written by Mark

⁶² Rabbi Arthur Vernon, "The Challenge of Acculturating Soviet Jews," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 67, no. 2 (1990): 114–17; Joel M. Carp, "Absorbing Jews Jewishly: Professional Responsibility for Jewishly Absorbing New Immigrants in Their New Communities," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 66, no. 4 (1990): 366–74; Gerald L. Showstack, "Perspectives on the Resettlement of Soviet Jews," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 67, no. 1 (1990): 66–72.

Handelman (Executive Vice President, New York Association for New Americans).⁶³ And the final article on my list was written in 1998 by Linda Pattashnick Klonsky (Planner and Coordinator of Acculturation Services, Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore), Miriam Prum-Hess (Resettlement and Acculturation Coordinator, Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles), and Rabbi Ellen Bernhardt (Principal, Albert Einstein Academy).⁶⁴ I use these authors, all involved directly in the creation of policies for Soviet Jewish assimilation, as representative of Jewish communities in the United States. By examining these publications, we can better understand the mindset of these people as they were engaged in policies and practices of assimilation of Soviet Jews into American Jewish life. This can help to explain the ways in which the American Jewish leadership and communities viewed Soviet Jews and their assimilation, and can demonstrate the reasons that their assimilation efforts were unsuccessful.

All of these authors devote a significant portion of their articles to describing the history and current state of affairs of the resettlement and assimilation process of Soviet Jews in the US. They begin by listing the numerous ways in which the American Jewish community is involved in this work. For example, in his article, Rabbi Arthur Vernon lists multiple acculturation programs led by the US Jewish communities for this purpose. These include very straightforward strategies to try to engage Soviet Jews, such as synagogue visits, invitations to join a Jewish family for the Sabbath, and free Jewish education programs, but also indirect means, such as inserting information about Judaism and Jewish life into ESL (English as a second language)

⁶³ Mark Handelman, "Cultural Adaptation in Soviet Jewish Resettlement: A Reciprocal Adjustment Process," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 75, no. 1 (1998): 7–12.

⁶⁴ Linda Pattashnick Klonsky, Miriam Prum-Hess, and Rabbi Ellen Bernhardt, "Will the Real Immigrant Please Stand Up? Transferring Models of Jewish Acculturation for Soviet Jews to the Unaffiliated American Jew," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 70, no. 4 (1994): 283–88.

classes that the refugees attended.⁶⁵ This technique of “exploiting” ESL classes for the purpose of “inculcating Jewish attitudes and values” was seemingly quite a common and encouraged technique throughout the 1970s and 80s.⁶⁶

Joel Carp includes a similar list of outreach efforts being conducted by the American Jewish community, including “aggressive and early outreach...for the express purpose of involving them in Jewish experiences,” “emphasis on nationalism—the Jewish people, the State of Israel” (including trips to Israel), and Family-to-Family programs which match American and Soviet Jewish families in order to establish relationships within the community.⁶⁷ These thorough lists show us the significant amount of time, energy, and resources that were invested by the American Jewish community into attempting to acculturate Soviet Jews and get them involved in Jewish religious and community life. However, despite all of these efforts, the American hosts began to realize that the Soviet Jews were not integrating into American Jewish life as they had hoped and planned, which caused them to become concerned.

Many of these issues and concerns are addressed by the authors, who also attempt to discern the possible reasons for these problems. Gerald Showstack describes how the growing disappointment of US Jews in the Soviet Jews’ failure to assimilate contributes to the development of negative mutual stereotypes between the two groups: “These [negative mutual stereotypes] increased the mutual disenchantment as neither group lived up to the unrealistic images that had blossomed in the heyday of the struggle to free Soviet Jewry and the early

⁶⁵ Rabbi Arthur Vernon, “The Challenge of Acculturating Soviet Jews,” 115.

⁶⁶ Steven J. Gold, “Russian-Speaking Jews and Israeli Emigrants in the United States: A Comparison of Migrant Populations,” 113.

⁶⁷ Joel M. Carp, “Absorbing Jews Jewishly: Professional Responsibility for Jewishly Absorbing New Immigrants in Their New Communities,” 372.

efforts at resettling Soviet Jews,” Showstack states.⁶⁸ Many of the contributing factors to this disenchantment seem to stem from fundamental differences in the understanding of what it means to be Jewish by both groups, not to mention significant cultural differences. We can see these differences come to life when we read the ways in which the authors of these articles describe both the “Jewishness” of the Soviet Jews and the ways in which the American Jewish assimilation programs and efforts are seeking to change it. However, it is important to note that there are often even contradictions in the ways that the “Jewishness” of the Soviet Jews is described by the American Jewish leaders themselves, as we will see in some of the following examples.

Mark Handelman as well as several other authors, recognized in his article that “...most of the immigrants from the FSU⁶⁹ came to the United States with little knowledge of Jewish ritual and history. And while many may have intuitively held a positive sense of Jewish identity as individuals, most did not identify with any organized or communal expression of being Jewish.”⁷⁰ Along these lines, Carp cites several studies which “...paint a picture of a deeper and more complex sense of Jewish identity, albeit one that is different in many important ways from that with which most of us are familiar or accept.”⁷¹ These observations all show that the American Jewish organizational leadership recognized that Soviet Jews have a different relationship with their “Jewishness” than do American Jews. They also recognize that the

⁶⁸ Gerald L. Showstack, “Perspectives on the Resettlement of Soviet Jews,” 67.

⁶⁹ Former Soviet Union

⁷⁰ Mark Handelman, “Cultural Adaptation in Soviet Jewish Resettlement: A Reciprocal Adjustment Process,” 8–9.

⁷¹ Joel M. Carp, “Absorbing Jews Jewishly: Professional Responsibility for Jewishly Absorbing New Immigrants in Their New Communities,” 370.

American Jewish community at large may not be so well-informed or understanding of this difference, as Carp states that “perhaps this explains why many Jewish communal workers and lay leaders have tended erroneously to disavow the existence of Jewish identity among Soviet Jews.”⁷²

In their article, Klonsky, Prum-Hess, and Bernhardt, however, take a slightly different view on the “Jewishness” of Soviet Jewish refugees. For example, the authors of this article disregard the difference in the ways in which “Jewishness” or “Jewish identity” are understood by American and Soviet Jews, and takes “Jewish identity” to mean “religious identity.” This is evident in examples such as the following: “...a high correlation exists between Jewish identity and Jewish education. Eighty-five percent of Jewish men who identify by religion became a Bar Mitzvah as opposed to 36% of born Jews with no religious affiliation.”⁷³ Here, “Jewish identity” and “religious identity” are conflated by the authors. Because of this, in all of their following remarks about Soviet Jews, it is implied that they have no real “Jewish identity,” and that this needs to be fixed. In addition, this article states that “most Soviet Jewish emigres...do not have an appreciation of their Jewish heritage.”⁷⁴ But what do they mean here by “appreciation”?

It is evident from sources I have already examined in this paper that Soviet Jews do indeed have a recognition and appreciation of their Jewish heritage—sometimes to a larger extent, even, than American Jews, since they have always felt and been seen as Jews in the USSR (some perceived this as an imposed identity). This misunderstanding of Soviet Jewishness

⁷² Joel M. Carp, 370.

⁷³ Linda Pattashnick Klonsky, Miriam Prum-Hess, and Rabbi Ellen Bernhardt, “Will the Real Immigrant Please Stand Up? Transferring Models of Jewish Acculturation for Soviet Jews to the Unaffiliated American Jew,” 284.

⁷⁴ Linda Pattashnick Klonsky, Miriam Prum-Hess, and Rabbi Ellen Bernhardt, 284.

comes up again when the article notes that “although Soviet Jews perceive themselves as Jews, most often this identification is formed without positive connotations.” Though this may be true in some cases, it is hard to agree with this opinion, because it seems inaccurate to extend this generalization to an entire population, especially given the fact that Soviet Jews have been shown to feel pride about the fact that they are Jews, and that most have positive associations with the sense of “belonging” they feel in regards to their Jewishness.⁷⁵

These sorts of formulations about “Jewishness” or “un-Jewishness” could have in part helped contribute to the sense of alienation felt by the Soviet Jewish immigrants.⁷⁶ The presence of these statements in formal Jewish publications also shows that often, even in the higher ranks of American Jewish organizations, there wasn’t a full understanding of or consensus on how Soviet Jews related to their “Jewishness”. It also demonstrates that the leaders of these communities may not have understood the historical reasons because of which Soviet Jews understand Jewishness differently than American Jews. Though some of the authors briefly mention the history of Judaism and the Jewish people in the USSR (usually simply stating that there was a lot of antisemitism and this caused Soviet Jews to have negative associations with their Jewishness), they never mention the specific ways in which Judaism underwent very (Soviet and Russian) culturally-specific changes over several generations which have formed the ways in which the fourth-wave Soviet Jews identified. As Sam Kliger says, “American Jews have tried to reach Russian Jews as Jews while derogating or failing to understand their

⁷⁵ Sam Kliger, “Russian Jews in America: Status, Identity, and Integration” (Russian-speaking Jewry in Global Perspective: Assimilation, Integration, and Community-building”, Bar Ilan University, Israel, 2004), 5.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Dekel-Chen, “Rethinking Boundaries in the Jewish Diaspora from the FSU,” in *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 83.

distinctive Russian identity,”⁷⁷ Had the Jewish leaders who wrote these articles tried to explain this distinctive identity, perhaps they would have been able to provide American Jewish audiences with a better understanding of Soviet Jews. The American Jewish community at large would then have been better informed about the ways in which Soviet Jews themselves may have wanted, or not wanted, to be involved in American Jewish communal and religious life.

Some of these very same issues and contradictions are recognized by the authors in the many policy suggestions that they include in almost all of these articles. Often, the policy suggestions explicitly recognize the issue at hand, and suggest steps to address it, in examples such as the following: “American Jews must be fully aware of the different cultural and ethnic background of Soviet Jews...barriers to integration include major differences in language and culture, as well as personality.”⁷⁸ Here, Showstack recognizes the lack of understanding in the larger Jewish community about Soviet Jews, at the same time letting the reader know that he himself does to some extent have this understanding. He then proceeds to make several proposals on how to fix this problem, including having more personal interactions (such as family visits, dinners, etc.) rather than formal or organizational involvement with Soviet Jews.⁷⁹ These proposals seem to be well founded, since they were formulated at a seminar of dialogue conducted between Soviet Jewish immigrants and professional and lay leaders of the Boston Jewish community. The stated purpose of this conference was to focus on “the images and expectations that each group held of each other and how as Jews the immigrants and the

⁷⁷ Samuel Kliger, “The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union,” in *New York Glory: Religions in the City* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 152.

⁷⁸ Gerald L. Showstack, “Perspectives on the Resettlement of Soviet Jews,” 68.

⁷⁹ Gerald L. Showstack, 70.

community leaders could understand each other better.”⁸⁰ Some other insightful “best practice” proposals, such as those made by Carp, include being more patient with Soviet Jews, involving the entire family in acculturation activities, teaching Soviet Jews about topics they show interest in within Judaism, allowing them to sustain their Soviet culture, employing non-judgmental American staff, and continuing to link American Jewish families to Soviet Jewish ones through things such as the Family-to-Family program.⁸¹

Stemming from the above-mentioned policy suggestions and proposals, several of these authors also include specific “measures of success,” which they suggest are used to determine the success of their acculturation efforts. Some examples of these in Carp’s piece include “the extent of participation in Jewish holiday experiences in the home and in the community,” “the number of visitors to Israel,” and “the nature of parental Jewish choices.”⁸² The Klonsky et al. article also lists measures of success, including frequency of event attendance, rates of including participants in the planning of programming, and whether the Soviet Jews are joining established Jewish communal organizations.⁸³ Some of these goals were feasible and, as we will later see in my interview analysis, sometimes successful. However, other goals in these lists seem to ignore the fundamental difference between Soviet and American Jews which was established earlier in this paper, both by primary and secondary sources: that “American Jews more often identify themselves along religious lines as a community, and Russian Jews identify themselves through

⁸⁰ Gerald L. Showstack, 66.

⁸¹ Joel M. Carp, “Absorbing Jews Jewishly: Professional Responsibility for Jewishly Absorbing New Immigrants in Their New Communities,” 370–72.

⁸² Joel M. Carp, 373.

⁸³ Linda Pattashnick Klonsky, Miriam Prum-Hess, and Rabbi Ellen Bernhardt, “Will the Real Immigrant Please Stand Up? Transferring Models of Jewish Acculturation for Soviet Jews to the Unaffiliated American Jew,” 287.

ethnicity and Russian cultural lines.”⁸⁴ The fact that American Jewish organizers want to measure success in Soviet Jewish assimilation by looking at rates of religious and community involvement, possibly the two areas of Jewish life which Soviet Jews identify with the least, shows that there remain some fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of Soviet “Jewishness” both at the higher levels of American Jewish organizations and on the ground in the Jewish communities.

As a whole, these five articles from the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* reveal to us both the extraordinary efforts of the American Jews to assimilate and acculturate Soviet Jews in America, as well as the downfalls in the ways in which they envisioned this assimilation’s process and goals. These downfalls are demonstrated by the contradictions in the explanations about Soviet Jewish refugees, and are also revealing of an imbalance of information on this topic at various levels of the Jewish communities in the US. The policy proposals and measures of success listed in these sources explicitly demonstrate the expectations of the American Jewish hosts for how the Soviet Jews would assimilate, as well as their responses to the fact that the Soviet Jews were not assimilating quite as they had hoped they would. Often the Jewish leaders who wrote these articles were very insightful with their observations and recognition of the need for more information about how best to assimilate Soviet Jews. However, the ways in which they framed the “Jewishness” of the refugees still demonstrates a deep lack of knowledge and understanding about this group, even at the higher levels of American Jewish organizations.

In order to understand this lack of knowledge about Soviet “Jewishness” better, it is helpful to look at concrete objects that were involved in this immigration and assimilation

⁸⁴ Samuel Kliger, “The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union,” 161.

process. Good examples of such objects are handbooks, which were published by American Jewish organizations for the Soviet Jewish refugees. These resources served as an avenue for communication between the American and Soviet Jews, and were used to relay information to the refugees before they even landed in the US. However, they also served as tools through which the American Jews could articulate their expectations of the Soviet Jews, which also demonstrate their lack of knowledge about the “Jewishness” of the refugees.

The two handbooks I analyze, called *Entering a New Culture* (*Вступление в новую жизнь*) and *The Jewish World* (*Евреи и мир*), were published by HIAS throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, with the purpose of giving an introduction of American Jewish life to the Soviet Jewish refugees. They are bilingual, with the Russian translation appearing alongside the English text on every page. They were written by David Harris, an American Jewish activist who was at the time working for HIAS as a caseworker, processing thousands of Soviet Jewish refugees as they passed through Rome on the way to the United States. According to his book, *In the Trenches: Selected Speeches and Writings of an American Jewish Activist*, he was inspired to write these books when he realized that there existed a “gaping hole” in the Jewish organizations’ programs for the refugees in Rome—Jewish culture and education.⁸⁵ These handbooks were an attempt to fill that gap, and they were intended to be given to every Soviet Jew who arrived in the US.⁸⁶ These books were published in several different, updated editions

⁸⁵ David A. Harris, *In the Trenches: Selected Speeches and Writings of an American Jewish Activist*, vol. 4 (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 2006), 371.

⁸⁶ Based on my research findings, this wasn’t the case. None of my interviewees remember receiving this book, and my mother also told me that she didn’t recall ever being given this resource, although she notes that it would have been most useful in helping her to understand life in America.

throughout the years. The editions I will be using are from 1989 (*The Jewish World*) and 1993 (*Entering a New Culture*).

These handbooks contain a large amount of practical and useful information about Judaism and life in America, even down to such things as how taxes and education work in the United States. This information would have been invaluable to the immigrants in their first years in the US, and perhaps critical to their successful assimilation into American daily life. It also seems, based on the content of these books, that they would have been very useful in helping to integrate the Soviet Jews into specifically Jewish life in America. They make this goal of the American Jews explicitly clear. As we have seen, however, American Jewish efforts to assimilate and acculturate these immigrants “Jewishly” were not successful. From this, the question arises: what was the contribution of these handbooks, if any, to the non-assimilation of the Soviet Jews? By analyzing the content of these books, their framework, and the language the author uses, we can deduct the motivations and expectations of their American Jewish creators, as well as potential reasons for the failure of the American Jewish assimilation policies.

Entering a New Culture begins with a short introduction, which states the determination of the American Jews “to help [the Soviet Jews] make the transition into [their] new lives in free societies and as Jews.”⁸⁷ It is interesting to note that in the Russian translation of this passage, it says that the American Jews want to help the refugees “feel like true Jews” (“почувствовать себя истинными евреями”).⁸⁸ This slight reformulation of the text in translation is very significant, since it carries a completely different connotation, and could be seen as potentially

⁸⁷ David A. Harris, *Entering a New Culture*, 6th ed. (New York: The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, 1993), 10.

⁸⁸ David A. Harris, 11.

problematic. In Russian, *истинный* (*istinnyi*) does not just mean “true” or “genuine,” but “of a higher truth”. As we have already established, Soviet Jews already had an intrinsic sense of their own Jewishness, felt that they were Jews, and were often very proud of this fact. This passage, however, implies that they are “false Jews”, and that they need the help and intervention of American Jews to turn them into “real” Jews. This phrasing could have easily been seen as insulting to the proud Soviet Jews, and contributed to the sense of alienation they felt toward US Jewish communities. This example is demonstrative of the misunderstanding by American Jews of the ways in which Soviet Jews view their own Jewish identity. Its placement at the very beginning of this handbook could have potentially caused the Soviet Jews to become turned off to the American Jewish communities’ efforts to help, and distanced them from these communities when they arrived in the US. In addition, this statement is revealing of the preconceived notion that American Jews had of the Soviet Jews: before the refugees even got to the US, their hosts already expected them to be not quite “Jewish,” and thus were driven to remedy this and take them into the Jewish community, making them, as the handbook states, into “true Jews.”

Both of these handbooks also talk in some detail about the American Jewish organizations who work with Soviet Jewish refugees, providing a brief history of these organizations, and often emphasizing just how much an organization, for example HIAS, has already helped them.⁸⁹ However, though they include information on how these organizations will continue helping with the logistics of resettlement, such as getting a green card or helping other relatives immigrate to the US, they do not give a clue about the efforts to “Jewishly”

⁸⁹ David A. Harris, 12–17; David A. Harris, *The Jewish World* (Liberty Publishing House, Inc., 1989), 380–96.

assimilate these refugees by American Jewish community organizations and volunteers that await them when they arrive in the US. These handbooks actually give the misleading impression that the Soviet Jews would be able to decide by themselves and at their own pace how involved they want to be in Jewish life: “You are free to explore your relationship to Judaism and decide for yourself and your family.”⁹⁰

The same formulation is present in the handbooks’ descriptions of the American Jewish community at large. The handbook states that “What is left entirely to the individual is how closely he wishes to identify with the Jewish community. Whether he joins a synagogue, and which one. How many other Jewish organizations he joins, and which ones. Whether he contributes to Jewish charities, and which ones.”⁹¹ However, this again may be slightly misleading, as the Soviet Jews would face major efforts to get them involved in Jewish communal and religious life in the US, which they may not have been altogether comfortable with or wanted. In his journal article that I examined previously, Showstack actually predicts this issue and suggests a possible solution: “There is a need for careful orientation of Soviet Jewish immigrants to the nature of volunteerism in the American Jewish community...need for information about the workings of the American Jewish community.”⁹² Though the handbooks give a short introduction to the American Jewish community by way of a brief historical overview, they do not include what Showstack suggests. This sort of information in these handbooks would have been quite helpful at potentially preparing the Soviet Jews for their involvement with Jewish communities in the US, since “...as refugees from a society lacking in

⁹⁰ David A. Harris, *Entering a New Culture*, 20.

⁹¹ David A. Harris, 32.

⁹² Gerald L. Showstack, “Perspectives on the Resettlement of Soviet Jews,” 69.

a tradition of volunteerism, Russian-speaking Jews are highly individualistic and tend to avoid participating in communal organizations—a major feature of the collective lives of American Jews.”⁹³ The lack of this information once again displays the fact that the American Jews did not understand the cultural context from which the refugees were coming to the US, and which made them unprepared for the assimilation efforts they faced in their new country.

Some sections of these handbooks, however, do echo some of the ideas and policy suggestions presented in the journal articles. For example, they both include sections on Jewish education available in the US, synagogue youth groups, and American and Jewish holidays (the Jewish holidays in *Entering a New Culture* have significantly longer descriptions than the American holidays). These are all areas of Jewish American life which were highlighted in some of the journal articles as being important in the assimilation of Soviet Jews. Both handbooks also include sections in which they describe Israel’s history, as well as the American Jewry’s dedication to Israel. In *The Jewish World*, the section about Israel takes up 116 pages, and the author comments that when the refugees get settled into their new life, they may want to “plan a trip to Israel.”⁹⁴ This again mirrors one of the “measures of success” mentioned in the articles—instilling dedication to Israel in the Soviet Jews was clearly important to the American Jews and, as we will later see, may be one of their assimilation goals that was actually fulfilled.

The Jewish World also contains much longer and more detailed sections on the history of Judaism, Jewish religious traditions, holidays, and even a glossary of commonly used Jewish terms with which the Soviet Jews were most likely unfamiliar. This information may have been

⁹³ Steven J. Gold, “Russian-Speaking Jews and Israeli Emigrants in the United States: A Comparison of Migrant Populations,” 116.

⁹⁴ David A. Harris, *The Jewish World*, 20.

of great interest to the Soviet Jews, as many of them were likely seeing it openly for the first time, and it may have stimulated their interest about their Jewish heritage. However, this book also includes several passages which describe the various denominations of Judaism that exist in the US (such as the Hasidic, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform branches). Though seemingly helpful, this information may have actually confused the Soviet Jewish refugees, who were unfamiliar with these denominations. According to Steven Gold, “Further separating American Jews from Russian Immigrants is the fact that they are not very comfortable with the Western denominations with which the vast majority of American Jews associate.”⁹⁵ The inclusion of this section in the book may have been another contributing factor to the feeling of alienation that the Soviet Jews had toward American Jewish society and religious structure.

Though these handbooks were well intentioned, and may have proved useful to the refugees as guides to navigating daily life in the US, overall they were insufficient in preparing the Soviet Jews to the assimilation efforts they would encounter in the US, and are full of problematic moments which show us just how deeply the American Jews misunderstood the identity and culture of the Soviet Jews. They reveal the motivations of the American Jews to teach the refugees how to be “Jewish,” as they provide a large amount of information about Judaism that the Soviet Jews had previously not had access to. They also show us some of the specific expectations of the American Jews for how the refugees would engage with their “Jewishness,” and even specifically with the handbooks, in the future. For example, Harris states his hope that the Soviet Jews would keep these books and continue to use and consult them throughout their life in America. This wish of his may have been fulfilled—I was able to get a

⁹⁵ Steven J. Gold, “Russian-Speaking Jews and Israeli Emigrants in the United States: A Comparison of Migrant Populations,” 116.

copy of *The Jewish World* from my grandfather, who got it from one of his friends who also came to the US as a Soviet Jewish refugee. However, though these books were well meant, intention does not always guarantee result: they were still not enough to get the Soviet Jews to engage in American Jewish communal and religious life, as we will see from examples in the following section.

Having now examined primary sources which are mostly representative of the point of view of the organized American Jewish community, I will continue by including a source which gives a voice to those who were most directly involved in this migration and consequent resettlement efforts: interviews with the Soviet Jewish refugees themselves. It is important to remember that these interviews are limited in number, and the set of questions used within them was broad and, at the time of the interviews, still not fully focused on the topic being analyzed in this paper. Because of this, the stories and information gained from these interviews act simply as examples of the phenomena presented earlier by other sources, not as concrete evidence which can be used to make generalizations about an entire population. Keeping this in mind, I analyze this material from the point of view of a few common themes which highlight some of the issues I found in alternate primary sources.

In many ways, the American Jewish community organizers were correct in their journal articles about certain ways in which Soviet Jews would engage with their “Jewishness” once they settled in America. Their assimilation policies were sometimes even successful, by some of the measures from in one of the journal articles. For example, one of the “parameters of success” cited in Carp’s paper (among others) was “The number of visitors to Israel” (after arrival and

settlement in the US).⁹⁶ It seems that within the Soviet Jewish community here in the US, Israel is one of the uniting factors that brings them together with American Jews, and is a topic they feel very strongly about. Concern for Israel is also one of the factors that Laitin describes as being revealing of the Soviet Jews' cultural identity.⁹⁷ Several of my interviewees confirmed this idea, even though, ironically, they chose not to immigrate to Israel when they left the USSR. For example, Regina⁹⁸, one of my interviewees, told me that she loves visiting Israel and recently has been traveling there every year. Another one of my interviewees, Elena, said that though she has not yet been able to visit Israel, she would love to go: "I really love Israel...I understand that Israel is the heart of the world...so I always worry about Israeli events." This may have been just the sort of concern and support for Israel that the American Jews had hoped would develop within the Soviet Jewish community.

Another parameter of success listed in the article was "The nature of parental Jewish choices" (i.e., are they raising their child "Jewishly"?).⁹⁹ Several of my interviewees demonstrated that they put significant effort into raising their children in a Jewish manner, whether or not their children have continued to follow Jewish traditions later in their adult life. Elena (my only interviewee who actually has become very religiously Jewish during her time in the US) told me that her son had some Jewish education, and had a bar mitzvah. However, she complained to me that that has not left an impression on him, and she really hopes that he will

⁹⁶ Joel M. Carp, "Absorbing Jews Jewishly: Professional Responsibility for Jewishly Absorbing New Immigrants in Their New Communities," 373.

⁹⁷ David D. Laitin, "The De-Cosmopolitanization of the Russian Diaspora: A View from Brooklyn in the 'Far Abroad,'" 19.

⁹⁸ All names of interview subjects have been changed for confidentiality purposes

⁹⁹ Joel M. Carp, "Absorbing Jews Jewishly: Professional Responsibility for Jewishly Absorbing New Immigrants in Their New Communities," 373.

eventually come back to his Jewish roots: “I tell him that it is important to me that he finds a Jewish girl...I don’t know if this is possible, but this is important to me.”

Another interviewee, Victoria, told me that both of her daughters went to Sunday school at the local Jewish Community Center when they were younger, and that unlike Elena’s son, they have actually retained what they learned about being Jewish in their childhood: “I can’t say that they pray... I don’t know how...but they try to abide by the traditions... And [my daughter] knows more about Jewishness than I do.” Yulia, the only person I interviewed who actually came to the US with her family as a child, also told me about her Jewish education: “I went to a Jewish school for...after kindergarten... First grade. So I think I would come home and try to get them (her parents) to celebrate more things because that’s what we were learning about in school. I don’t remember specific things that we did.” This was the very intention of American Jewish organizations in setting up this particular parameter of success—get the children involved in Jewish life, and their parents would follow. As Carp stated in his article, “Most Soviet Jewish parents are quite concerned that their children have the opportunity to become positive, knowledgeable members of the Jewish community. This suggests that the initial engagement of parents can be achieved by relating directly to this prime area of self-interest.”¹⁰⁰ In some cases, this may have been successful.

However, when it comes to their overall mission to bring Soviet Jews into American Jewish communal and religious life, the American hosts did not have such luck. There are exceptions to this, of course, like Elena, who says that she has become religious, and who goes to synagogue, as well as to lessons with a rabbi every Tuesday. However, in many cases, when

¹⁰⁰ Joel M. Carp, 371.

Soviet Jews do engage in Jewish life, they are often doing it for completely different reasons than what American Jews want or expect. For example, Bella, who originally came to Chicago but has since moved around the country and been exposed to various Jewish communities, told me about her relationship with the local synagogue: “Well, I am a paying member of Temple Isaiah, which is a Reform temple...where I live...[joining the synagogue] was a social purpose more than religious for me. Cause I’m not a religious person. So my temple membership is a social opportunity more than anything.” Victoria, who is from Latvia originally, had a slightly different situation. Her elderly father, who immigrated with them to the US, grew up in a very Jewish household in Riga. Though as an adult it was harder to follow a very Jewish way of life, it appears that like many elderly people who came in the last wave of immigration, he still had very strong memories from his childhood, and still spoke Yiddish and a bit of Hebrew. Therefore, when they came to the US, he joined a synagogue and became part of the community there. Victoria and her husband, Leonid, told me that they did go to synagogue, but not on a regular basis: “We went, kind of, for holidays...to meet [my father]...after the great fast we picked him up, we had this ritual, to participate a little bit...” These examples line up with Larissa Remennick’s observation that many Soviet Jews participate in Jewish community and religious institutions because of the social benefit or social framework they can derive from this.¹⁰¹ They may pick certain contexts and times in which to participate and to feel a part of the social organization of Jews in America, but this doesn’t always translate into religious conviction or motivation.

¹⁰¹ Larissa I. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, 193.

This picking and choosing of what to engage in can carry over into other areas of Jewish life as well. A perfect example of this is how Soviet Jews navigate the realm of Jewish celebrations and holidays. During our interview, Regina told me, “I myself am not religious. But I really respect tradition...It gives me pleasure to attend holidays, it gives me pleasure to go to Shabbat, and spend time [with people].” Bella, who earlier also stated that she is not religious, also chooses to celebrate certain holidays: “As far as Jewish holidays, we did start celebrating Passover, maybe the bigger tradition, because the Passover story, the Seder story, really also very closely resonates with my personal sentiment about crossing the boundary from one life to another. One land to another. So the story of exodus is my story and my family’s story.” This same sentiment is evident in the majority of my interviewees: they celebrate the holidays that are somehow personally meaningful to them, and which they often connect with their own immigration story.

That being said, these are not always Jewish holidays. One of my interviewees, Iosif, didn’t mention any Jewish holidays at all when asked what his family now celebrates. And five out of my six interviewees told me that they celebrate Thanksgiving as well as New Year’s (possibly the most celebrated and well-loved Soviet holiday), in addition to a mixture of other American and Soviet holidays. This is a perfect example of Sam Kliger’s description of the attitude of Soviet Jews as one of “detached affiliation,” when they keep a distance from Jewish religious life, only participating in certain events or traditions that are somehow meaningful to them.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Sam Kliger, “Russian-Jewish Immigrants in the U.S: Social Portrait, Challenges, and AJC Involvement,” 6.

This “detached affiliation” in relation to Jewish holidays can also be seen in the selection by Soviet Jews of which Jewish rules and traditions to follow (and which not to follow). Many of my interviewees mentioned to me that they or some members of their family now follow some Jewish rules and traditions. But to what extent does this occur? “We follow [what rules] we can,” stated Victoria in our interview, soon after her husband, Leonid, told me that they still work during the Sabbath and eat pork. “What, it tastes good! Food shouldn’t be limited by religion.” This refusal to see religion as something that should guide personal behavior is demonstrative of Sam Kliger’s observation about Soviet Jews. Though they obviously know and feel themselves to be Jewish, they do not always exemplify this in a way that American Jews may understand, thus supporting Kliger’s claim that “a Russian Jew may know he or she is Jewish, may be proud of it, may feel, think or even believe as a Jew, but rarely will act as one.”¹⁰³ On the other hand, Regina has started eating kosher. However, it seems that she is still not “kosher enough” to fit into her local American Jewish community. She told me that any friendships she has with religious¹⁰⁴ American Jews “are one-sided friendships,” because they are all a lot stricter about what they eat and how their food is prepared, which causes difficulties because she can never have them over for a meal or on Sabbath.

It may be partially due to issues such as this that Soviet Jews have not integrated en masse into the American Jewish communities themselves—something that may frustrate American Jews, as it seems from the journal articles that this communal integration was a very important part of the assimilation and acculturation American Jews hoped to see from Soviet Jews. All of my interviewees told me that their primary group of friends is still mostly comprised

¹⁰³ Sam Kliger, 5.

¹⁰⁴ My interview subject did not specify which denomination or stream of Judaism these friends pertain to.

of other Russian-speaking Jews, often those who came in the same immigration wave as they did. When asked if she was part of any community here in the US, Bella told me, “I am a member of the Russian-Jewish...not community, I just have friends...Most of them Russian speaking... My biggest community that I feel very strongly a feeling of belonging to is Riga, Riga Jewish community. People who knew my parents, people with whom we went to school together, or something like that. We have known each other from long time ago.” Regina also told me that, not counting her “one-sided friendships” with American Jews, 99% of the people she interacts with are immigrants from Russia. And Elena, who also stated that she is mostly friends with Russian-speakers, even hosts a Russian-language Facebook page called “Jews of Chicago, unite!”, on which she has cultivated an online community and which she is very proud of. It seems that, though many of my interview subjects mentioned that they are friendly with some Americans, the majority of their community still consists of Russian-speaking Jews. Given all of the effort made by the American Jews to include the Soviet Jews in their community, including hosting them for dinners, taking them to synagogue, the Family-to-Family programs, and even things such as helping them navigate the logistics of American life during their initial period in their new country, it is easy to understand the disappointment and confusion of the American hosts about the non-assimilation of Soviet Jews in the US.

These interviews contribute to our view of how fourth-wave Soviet Jews in the US see themselves and their own identity. We see here that there is not just one fixed way in which this group engages with their “Jewishness”—this engagement can take many different forms, from choosing to follow certain rules or traditions, to attending synagogue to become part of a social circle, and to making sure that their children get some Jewish education. None of these ways of engaging are motivated by the same reasons, yet they all demonstrate the influences that their

Soviet secular upbringing had on the way in which they understand what “being a Jew” means, and this suggests why they may not have assimilated as “Jewishly” as their American hosts would have liked. However, these interviews also reveal the innate sense of Jewishness that these immigrants have to this very day, and which may be difficult for an American Jew to understand, since it differs from their own understanding of this identity. These interviews, combined with the information garnered from the journal articles and handbooks, reveal why the assimilation of the Soviet Jews did not go as planned by the American Jews, and partially explain some of the responses we saw from the American Jewish communities.

V. Conclusion

By examining the issue of Soviet Jewish non-assimilation in the United States from the perspectives of both the American Jewish hosts and the Soviet Jewish refugees themselves, we have found plausible explanations of why this non-assimilation occurred. Also, we have seen the ways in which American Jews’ responses to the non-assimilation of Soviet Jews may have been weakened by their misunderstanding of what “Jewishness” means to the Soviet Jews. This misunderstanding is reflected both in their policy suggestions and measures of success, and shows that overall there was an acute lack of comprehensive knowledge about Soviet Jews, which would have been crucial both in helping the Soviet Jews to assimilate into American Jewish society, and allowing the American Jews to be more understanding and tolerant of instances when the Soviet Jews didn’t assimilate in the ways which they expected.

This deep level of misunderstanding of Soviet Jewishness is also reflected in the language used to describe to the Soviet Jews how they will be able to engage in their “Jewishness” in the US. Such language, which may have been confusing or even offensive to the Soviet Jews, may have distanced the refugees away from the American Jewish communities.

This also shows that the Americans had a preconceived notion and expectation of the lack of “Jewishness” in the Soviet Jews. We can see from this why American Jewish assimilation policies were unsuccessful, and that although well intentioned, these policies may have still been damaging to the assimilation efforts since they did not take into account the deep cultural differences that exist between the American Jews and the Soviet Jewish refugees.

Finally, we saw very clearly the attitude of “detached affiliation” of Soviet Jews in the ways they think about and engage in Jewish life. It is evident that although the Soviet Jews sometimes participate in Jewish community and religious life in America, visit synagogues or give their children a Jewish education, their actions are often motivated not by religious conviction, but more by personal choices. These observations help to prove my argument: that since their arrival in the US around 30 years ago, fourth-wave Soviet Jews have to this day not integrated into American Jewish communal and religious life as the American hosts had hoped they would, and engage in their “Jewishness” in ways that are specifically useful or meaningful to them.

This research is important not only in the context of fourth-wave Soviet Jewish migration and assimilation, but also because it helps to understand similar issues which could appear in contemporary and future immigrant or refugee assimilation efforts. No matter how well-intentioned assimilation and resettlement efforts are, in order to be successful they still need to take into account the fundamental differences in the ways that incoming immigrants view themselves, their immigration, and their identity as they assimilate in their new country. By using the example of Soviet Jews, and learning from the problems and mistakes encountered in this situation, we can increase our level of understanding of these groups, as well as the potential differences that may exist between their worldview and our own. Understanding this can help us

to eliminate the barriers that may arise between groups of our society, and help those directly involved in assimilation and resettlement programs realize that their expectations of the incoming immigrants must match reality. If this is done, the process of assimilating newcomers into American society will be much smoother, with less tension and unfulfilled expectations for all sides.

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