

## **New Communities in the New World: the Case of the Russian Jewish Community in Boston:**

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### **Community Demographics**

It is widely assumed that there are about 60,000 immigrants from the FSU in the State of Massachusetts. The exact number of Russian speaking Jews in Greater Boston is a very controversial topic at present. Since the immigrants have been arriving in Boston through different channels and organizations, there was no centralized collection of their demographic data. CJP has just completed its demographic study of the Jewish community in Boston (the previous study was done in 1995). In the study they used their own demographic calculations as well as the data from the 2000 US Census. According to these calculations, there are about 17,000 Russian Jews in Boston. CJP has acknowledged that they may have undercounted Russian Jews. So at this point, the real number remains elusive.

We believe that there are at least 40,000 Russian-speaking Jews who arrived in Greater Boston as Jewish political refugees during the last 35 years. This number comprises about 25 percent of the Boston Jewish population which is estimated as about 208,000.

CJP Demographic Study also shows that about 50% of American (non RS) Jews are synagogue members and about 40% of them are involved in community life. This information leaves us with a question: “What percentage of Russian Jews are involved in local Jewish community life, or to re-phrase the question - is there a particular Russian Jewish community in Boston and what kind of community models is it trying to follow?”.

### **Russian Jews and the American Jewish Community**

The resettlement history of Russian Jews from the Soviet Union in Boston is already 35 years long. The first Soviet Jews began to arrive in Boston in the beginning of the 70s. They were highly educated Jews from Moscow and Leningrad, who had left the USSR on Israeli visas, but consciously decided not to live in the Jewish State. Instead, they immigrated to other “Western” countries like the USA, Canada or Australia. By the mid-80s about 3,000 immigrants from the Soviet Union resided in Boston. These former Soviet citizens were considered to be political refugees, they were brought to the US by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and according to the accepted practice of the time, they were supported by local Jewish communities, especially in the first stages of their resettlement and integration into a new society.

The host community provided Jewish Soviet immigrants with basic necessities, assisted with housing, English language classes, paperwork and employment. Quite often immigrant children were sent to local Jewish schools which had a good reputation among immigrants as a secure environment for their children with no experience in American schools.

However, several years later, when new immigrants eventually succeeded in establishing themselves in new careers and began to join American low-middle or middle-class, they would often sever their ties with the larger host community and take their children out of Jewish schools as soon as scholarship subsidies ended and they were required to pay regular tuition fees.

Such behavior spurred disillusionment and disappointment in the American Jews who in the beginning enthusiastically accepted the newcomers. One of the contemporary Boston Jewish lay leaders said during the discussion of the place of Russian Jews in the larger community: “Of course we realized that at first Russian Jews would be too busy with landing jobs, finding apartments, changing their careers. But we hoped that as soon as they finally established themselves, they would become one of us and join our synagogues”.

A new wave of immigrants from the FSU began to arrive in Boston in the end of the 80-s - beginning of the 90s. During the following 15 years about 30,000 immigrants from the FSU came to Boston, thus enlarging the original Russian community almost ten-fold.

At first it seemed that the newcomers were repeating the pattern of their predecessors. After the initial comparatively short period of resettlement émigrés were leaving the hospitable fold of the local community and beginning their independent cruising, i.e. finding new jobs, buying apartments, taking out mortgages, etc.

However, these new arrivals had a new very important experience that the immigrants from the 70s and 80s lacked, namely participation in the Jewish communal life in “the new Russia” after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They witnessed the establishment of Jewish cultural and religious institutions, the legitimate arrival in the FSU of Israeli and international Jewish organizations like JDC, Jewish Agency, HABAD, and many others. They participated in collective celebrations of Jewish holidays in newly opened Jewish community centers and some of them sent their children to Jewish schools in Russia. The survey of the new immigrants conducted in 2002 showed that 32% of respondents participated in Jewish enrichment programs in the FSU.

### **New changes**

Out of this group of Jewishly educated émigrés came out new leaders who contributed to a process of transformation of former Soviet citizens into a Jewish community. We may also suggest that in the beginning of 2000s many of them were established enough to contribute their time and energy to communal affairs.

There was also a change in the attitudes of established American Jewish leadership towards emerging Russian community. They came to realize that there needed to be a shift from the resettlement goals to community outreach and inclusion. They began to identify and hire qualified Russian Jews for various levels of communal work from local social service agencies to federations.

Other factors that contributed to the strengthening of the emerging Russian Jewish community were political events in the beginning of the 21st century, namely Second Intifada in Israel and September 11 in the US.

All of a sudden American Russian Jewish émigrés all of whom have friends and relatives in Israel, felt that they were one people sharing the same dangers of the world’s terrorism. At this time we could observe a significant shift in the values and attitudes of

the local RS Jews. The most visible demonstration of this shift was very active participation of RS Jews in Israel Day celebrations and solidarity missions to Israel.

### **First Community Projects (1997-2002)**

All these changes have resulted in meaningful and effective initiatives which brought to life concrete projects serving the actual needs of new RS members of Jewish community:

#### **a. Russian Teen Outreach Program**

- a program based at a local high school with a very high concentration of Russian-speaking students. The program helped students overcome social isolation, find meaningful activities, improve academic performance and learn about communal life and Jewish values.

#### **b. Russian Jewish Sunday School**

- the first Jewish school aimed at Russian-speaking children. The school offers classes in Jewish history, Tradition and Hebrew, as well as art and music. All classes are taught in Russian.

#### **c. Domestic Violence Prevention**

- the program has helped to break a taboo on issues of domestic violence in Russian families and has been providing a very needed service.

#### **d. Celebration of the Russian Jewish Culture**

- regular festivals of the Russian Jewish Culture held through various communal venues began to attract both, volunteer participants and performers, and large audiences.

### **New trends and developments in the last 5 years**

#### **a. Charity**

Charitable giving was a new concept for the majority of Russian Jews arriving in Boston. In the former Soviet Union fundraising was an illegal activity. Besides, most Russian speaking Jews were not economically comfortable enough to contribute significantly to the Jewish causes. Therefore participation of the Russian Jews in the fundraising campaigns by the Boston Jewish Federation (CJP) has not been significant for a long time. The change began to occur alongside other changes in the community, we have described.

Russian Jews working in American Jewish organizations and increased community activism in response to events in Israel combined to encourage motivation, interest and practical knowledge in communal fundraising. The Russian Jewish community in Greater Boston began to raise funds independently from the rest of the Jewish community in an effort to dispel stereotypes that their community did not give to charity.

Initially these efforts required some CJP support, but in the beginning of the 2000's a comparatively new phenomenon emerged – grass-roots charity initiatives. During the last two years they have been getting stronger and more people have been joining them.

The following Russian Jewish groups and organizations in Boston are raising money at present:

**Boston Supports Israel** – a group of community volunteers raising funds for victims of terror in Israel

**Dr. Mila Magidsky** and a group of her friends – for ZAKA

**Russian elderly residents** in several housing developments – for Israel

**Shaloh House** – for the needs of their Russian Jewish Synagogue and School

**Veteran Association** – for Israel and for holiday celebrations for the elderly

**Russian Jewish Community Fund** – for the needs of the Boston Russian community, and for various causes in Israel. Currently the Fund of participating in the fundraising for the “Children of Sderot” initiative.

The largest among these new organizations is the Russian Jewish Community Fund. Created almost 2 years ago, this grass-roots organization has been gaining an increasingly prominent place and recognition in the Russian community and beyond. Last year they held their second Charity Ball and raised about \$40,000 for the Russian community needs and help for Israel.

The Fund was started by a group of community activists who had taken over the organization of Russian Charity Balls. These Balls had been first initiated at the Jewish Family & Children's Service, when I began to work there as the Director of Russian Services, and later continued by the current Director, Ena Feinberg.

The community activists who established the Fund have modeled their structure after the Brookline-Brighton Jewish Community Fund – a CJP committee, which

distributes small grants to various grass-roots Jewish organizations within this geographic area, which has traditionally had a large Jewish population. A few members of RJCF served as volunteers on BBJCF board and learned basic methods of writing proposal requests, using collegial approach to considering proposals and making awards, and working with community groups.

Many émigrés organizations applied to RJCF for grants last year and received them.

#### **b. Israel as the rallying point for the Russian community**

Israel remains the focal point of the communal involvement among the Russian Jews in Boston. In the past several years this involvement has grown and expanded in response both to the changing situation in Israel, and to the assistance and support provided by CJP to various grass-roots initiatives. There are numerous examples of such activities.

“Boston Supports Israel” is a group of volunteers who for 4 years have been organizing an annual community-wide fundraiser in the form of a concert and an art show. Collected funds are then delivered to families and individuals in Israel who have been victims of terrorist attacks.

Another group of volunteers has been collecting funds to buy equipment for organizations in Israel which are usually first responders to the sites of suicide bombings. Two years ago this group purchased a fully equipped ambulance for Magen David Adom. This year they have been collecting money to purchase motorcycles and other equipment. An above-mentioned Russian Jewish Community Fund raises money both for local Russian community needs and to support Israel. They have sent money from their last fundraiser to Friends of IDF; LIBI; Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, and Hatzolah Israel.

Russian Jews take a very active part in other Israel-related activities and events. They participate in great numbers in the Israel Day celebrations, rallies, demonstrations and missions to Israel. And they not only participate, but also organize such events themselves.

**The latest such events and initiatives include:**

- Community-wide fundraising to bring 20 children from Sderot to a summer camp near Boston.
- Boston Supports Israel event in March, 07
- Israel in Crisis event in August, 06
- last year's Israel Day Celebration was shown in "We Love Israel" documentary, produced and filmed by a local Russian filmmaker and supported both by RJCF and CJP.

**CJP-sponsored Boston-Haifa Russian** partnership has been growing in popularity and scope. Currently it involves Russian-born high school students in Boston and Haifa who have exchanged visits and have formed close friendships. The next phase of the program will involve young adults and young families in similar exchanges.

**c. Culture and education**

There have been a number of cultural events, such as Babi Yar commemoration, Boston Supports Israel concerts, performances by "Firelech" Jewish Musical Theater and "Krug" Youth Theater.

**Russian Jewish activists in "American" civic organizations.**

Involvement of Russian Jewish activists in American civic organizations is a relatively new phenomenon in Boston. Over the years a few members of the Russian community served on committees and boards of American Jewish organizations, but their number was not significant. The situation has been steadily improving in the last 5 years. There are now Russian board members in such organizations as American Jewish Committee, Jewish Community Relations Council, Jewish Family Services, Brookline-Brighton Jewish Community Fund, CJP Board of Governors, and others.

**Russian – Jewish community and the larger community of Boston**

This past year's Boston City Council elections provided a glimpse into how responsive political leaders are to the Russian Jewish community, which is concentrated in the Allston-Brighton area of Boston. Every candidate, including Mayor Thomas Menino, held meetings with members of the community, and Allston councilor Jerry

McDermott frequently consults with Sergey Bologov, President of the Russian Community Association of Massachusetts and other community leaders.

A recently established League of New American Voters has further increased its visibility in February of 2007 by organizing a community meeting with Deval Patrick, the then frontrunner in the Massachusetts gubernatorial elections and a current Governor of Massachusetts.

To date the League continues to grow and mature. They now have a Board of about 15 people and a large group of volunteers around them. The League is engaged in organizing and educating Russian voters and helping elect public officials who are sympathetic to the Russian community needs. The clout of the Russian community is all the more striking given its small size – roughly 60,000 statewide – relative to other immigrant groups.

### **Current challenges and future perspectives.**

#### **Relations between Russian and host community**

Two main centers of Russian Jewish activity in Boston are Makor Community Center and Shaloh House Russian Jewish School and Synagogue. During the last two years both these organizations have been growing, but in different ways and different directions.

**“Makor” Russian Jewish Community Center** has just completed its second year in its new official home – Temple Bnai Moshe in Brighton. Even though there is still a lot of work to be done to make the Center fiscally, programmatically and administratively sound, the Center has a great potential to become a hub of community activities. It has attracted a growing number of community groups which use its space. Currently Makor Center hosts Jewish Sunday School, two theatrical groups, War Veterans’ Association, Retired Scientists’ Club, Chess Club, Ulpan, many activities and classes for children and adults; and numerous performances and holiday celebrations

**The other center – Shaloh House** is connected to HABAD, which has always been interested in attracting former Soviet Jews. As early as in 1989 HABAD-affiliated

Shaloh House expanded, opening the Jewish Russian Center and the first Russian Jewish synagogue in Boston. Now Shaloh House in Brighton comprises Preschool and Day School for children ages 2.5 to 12, Jewish Russian Synagogue and Jewish Russian Community Center. Shaloh House group has been very aggressive and creative in their efforts to attract more people from the Russian community and to position themselves as important players in the community.

A wide spectrum of immigrants participate in its programs - from strictly observant families to parents attracted by a vigorous academic school curriculum or an affordable summer camp, and general public attending Jewish holiday celebrations or secular concerts and performances.

### **Intra-communal relations**

Russian Jews have been always politically active, both as dissidents in the former Soviet Union, and as members of the Jewish community in Boston. There is a great diversity of political views and opinions, often predicated by the length of immigrant experience and a degree of acculturation. Most of the disagreements reflect political divisions found in the larger Jewish and American communities. They include support of either Democratic or Republican parties in the US, and attitudes towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Shaloh House also hosts “The Land of Israel Committee” – a group of community activists who belong to this Habad synagogue. They are generally aligned with the Republicans, and also share religious and political views of people who live in settlements in Israel. Therefore, they oppose “official” position on this issue, attack American Jewish “establishment” for supporting official Israeli position, and engage in various activities in support of settlements (including financial assistance, protests, etc.) The group has been at times quite hostile towards CJP and organized American Jewish community. But its operations are modeled after established American Jewish organizations, and they contribute money and attend Charity Balls.

It’s important to point out, however, that due to the group’s vocal activism, they are sometimes perceived by Americans as representatives of the entire Russian community

(as can be seen from the quotation below in the Jewish Advocate). In reality they represent a very small segment of the community.

***American Jews are known to be politically left of center, often suffering from bleeding heart syndrome. Forget such a condition with the Russian Jews: often hawkish, they will not back down from what they want. By establishing and channeling funds through Russian Jewish organizations, members of this community are demonstrating that they are now in control of their money. Of course, they are proud of the fact, too, that they have money they can donate.***

**Russian Jews have succeeded August 3, 2006 Jewish Advocate**

### **Conclusion and predictions**

In our paper we tried to show that during the last fifteen years a specific Jewish Russian community has emerged in Boston. Now we can talk not just of a group of Jews from the FSU with a thirty-year long history of resettlement in Boston, but rather of a dynamic Russian Jewish community of Boston, with institutions and leaders of its own, with its own cultural traditions and social events. The community leaders as well as other community members are involved in the decision-making process which affects not only the “Russian” community, but the larger Jewish community as well.

We believe that in the foreseeable future the process of Russian Jewish community building in the USA in general, and in Boston in particular, will continue. More and more Russian Jews will participate in the activities of communal Russian institutions. These activities will grow in scale and probably become more coordinated. The Russian-Jewish-American community will be developing in its own “Russian” fashion (with Israel as one of the salient elements of communal activities), and at the same time it will borrow many methods and institutional forms from the larger American Jewish community. For the next several years it will keep its cultural institutions and probably establish some new educational ones. Maintaining ties with Israel will continue to be one of the central elements of the communal activities. The coordination and cooperation between Russian and “mainstream” communities will become more close and the “Russian” participation will become more prominent in the larger Jewish American community. More and more Russian Jewish activists will join “American” civic organizations.

In several decades Russian Jews will be fully integrated and “assimilated” into the mainstream American Jewish community like their grandparents who arrived in America in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and eventually joined the establishment of the veteran Jewish community. But we may also assume that the “Russian accent” will still be heard in this community for at least another decade and even longer.