

## Social accompaniment of Jewish political asylum seekers in France

By Judith Talvard

*“I was continuously persecuted in my country because I was considered as a Jew and, here, I am asked: ‘Prove us that you are Jewish’”*

### The Casip-Cojasor Foundation’s Refugees Service:

Our service, the Casip-Cojasor Foundation’s Refugees Service, unique in France, is habilitated to receive political asylum seekers and stateless person status seekers within all the territory. Our service’s origins are found in the Cojasor’s social service, created in 1945 in order to welcome, assist and resettle in life families of SHOAH survivors. Over the past decades, Jewish political asylum seekers from different origins (Polish, Hungarian, Egyptian and Iranian) have found assistance in our service.

Today, our service welcomes in France about 40 new-coming families from former USSR countries. Most of these persons are aged between 30 and 40 and they arrive with young children. Accommodation and social accompaniment of the families are provided by the State services. In this field, our service ensures a complementary accompaniment. Couples and single persons are not provided with accommodation or follow-up so they entirely depend on our service’s assistance. Indeed, since a few years, the French immigration policy has continuously become stricter so life for political asylum seekers is more and more difficult.

### Classic follow-up:

Since my assumption of duties, I have realized a classic social follow-up of accompaniment for asylum seekers since their arrival and until their insertion. This social accompaniment’s elements are organized according to the main administrative steps of their asylum application.

An accomplished administrative step allows advancements and introduces new tasks. Our assistance ends when the persons are regularized or really settle: they find a job, a flat or both. At this moment, we consider that the assistance is over or, if necessary, we transmit their files to other teams of our social service.

In spite of very good insertion results, I was not totally satisfied with this type of accompaniment. Indeed, it did not offer answers to certain tensions and pains experienced by the political asylum seekers.

These problems had to be analyzed and suitable solutions had to be found.

From the beginning, I have determined two sources of tension.

The first source of tension was, from part of my colleagues and members of the Jewish community, in general, a persistent and resistant distrust toward newly arrived persons and which is always expressed by the famous question: *“Are they really Jewish, your refugees?”* Such tension with which I was continuously struggling have inevitably had repercussions on my relation with the users of our service.

Indeed, it was only a part of a multitude of rejections and denials of which asylum seekers are victims but I have personally felt this distrust, immediately and directly, as I have become myself a target due to my position.

The second source of tension that struck me was the incongruity between the expectations of the French State towards migrants and the latter's adaptation capacity.

In short, these persons, who have hastily left their country after a long period of maltreatment that was increasing and who do not speak French, have to adapt very quickly and face "interrogatories" to prove they are Jewish and their whole story.

Such expectations are certainly tinged with attitudes of distrust and rejection but they also impose a real program, constituted of numerous tasks to realize. Because of the difficulty to realize such path and the difficult tasks that have to be followed one after another, I compare such path to a "steeplechase racing". Asylum seekers would better realize, without any mistake, all these tasks to obtain their regularization.

In my efforts of comprehension and improvement of the care, my academic training in ethno psychiatry (Clinical practices with migrants and their children), that I followed between April and December 2006, has been decisive: I have discovered a new important factor that I had neglected since now and that was the *Jewish identity of newcomers*.

What has allowed me to discover this factor is the deep understanding of a host's notion and role. I have always considered as very serious the world "welcome".

My job is to welcome Jewish asylum seekers. This idea has become deeper during my training and has been completed by the notion of host, as Tobie Nathan wrote it in his book *"We Are Not Alone in the World"*: *"A same behavior has always guided me. I consider it as much as a hospitality rule as a technical provision: the foreigner, even the poorest, is rich with the languages he/she carries in him/her, rich with the odors and feelings, rich especially with the explanations, beings and objects of which, through the magic of travel, he/she becomes the representative close to us, his/her hosts"*.

Such deepening of my welcome behavior has allowed me to distance myself from all the existing distrusts and to acquire a truly open and curious behavior towards newcomers. For me, such behavior thus also presupposes an internal stability of the welcoming person. Such internal stability is necessary to perceive unknown elements of the other's culture.

#### Extensive interviews with two persons:

In order for me to have a more precise idea of our users' Jewish identity - as my public's specificity is to be Jewish - I have dedicated about 6 hours listening to each of the two interviewed. My goal was to follow the roots and development of their Jewish identity, from their childhood until today.

Indeed, to my greatest surprise, during these interviews, I discovered that political asylum seekers' Jewish identity was not so cut up and maltreated that I had imagined.

These persons told me Jewish stories and clearly demonstrated a Jewish identity. I simply had to take some time for them and listen to them.

Therefore, how is it that there exists a misunderstanding between them and the Jewish community?

My users do not present themselves as the same way as the Jewish French people. The latter use a group and verbal and non-verbal signs that inform us that they belong to the Jewish community.

Moreover, I have already noticed that they have a very special behavior - a way I could not describe precisely - when they enter one of their community's service.

They express their membership to the community and the feeling of being "at home". Such information guide us, talk to us.

Naturally, there is nothing like that from part of political asylum seekers. Even their appearance hides their origins: for example, women often dye their hair blonde, in a Slavonic way.

Their membership and culture have been so well hidden for decades that they can no longer mobilize them easily. The identity's development becomes more complicated with the citizenship system, more precisely the ethnic group membership system in the former Soviet Union.

A baby's birth certificate mentions his/her two parents' ethnic group membership. When he/she turns 16, when applying for an internal passport, a kind of identity card, the child has to choose one of the two ethnic group memberships.

*That is to say that a youth can, without any problem, choose the Jewish ethnic group membership is his/her father if a Jew and not his/her mother. The State will recognize this membership.*

Even if these persons tell a Jewish story, they express themselves their doubts concerning their identity.

By dint of trying to hide and forget their membership, today, they are not sure of anything and they are asking themselves the same questions as the suspicious members of the community. These questions are: "Am I Jewish?" and "I do not practice, is the Jewish community can consider me as one of its member?"

We can observe well the crossing of two kinds of doubts: on the one hand, the asylum seekers' personal doubts and, on the other hand, the doubts and distrust from the Jewish community members towards them. The result of such a crossing can only be a mutual rejection.

It is obvious as well that by changing our behavior, we can allow users to regain confidence and, then, they will let their memories and stories emerge.

After these interviews, I have also understand that if I wanted to do more than listening, if I want to help these people re-join their community, of which they express their wish, I have to accompany them.

Because if we talk about a community, we do suppose that a group exists and the group's goal is to act as a whole. I grew up in the European culture, an individualist culture, and I have discovered, during my training, this notion of care by the group.

In my small service, we do what we can. I have organized an accompaniment for any action done by myself and my interpreter-assistant, who is well known by our users, as she attends all interviews.

I am now going to describe the first two actions engaged by my service so that political asylum seekers re-join the Jewish community.

#### Purim at the synagogue:

We have planned to go to the synagogue for Purim with a certain number of users. I proposed to accompany people who feel doubts and uncertainties concerning their Jewish identity and people married to or living with to a non-Jewish person or people who are simply not sure of themselves.

Actually, this project had a so big success that other persons, more integrated in the community, absolutely wanted to join us. In this action, I voluntarily put aside the question consisting in determining who can be officially considered as Jews.

I consider that persons who were persecuted as Jews or spouses of Jews can expect from the community an intelligent answer to what happened to them.

The Jewish community's history is the history of waves of persecutions suffered but also the history of survival to these persecutions. In our culture and rites, there must be rich elements of answers to their sufferings. We are indubitably the most prepared persons to give them hope and a meaning to life.

When attached to the community and conversant with Jewish laws, these persons are completely able to take a personal decision by wishing or not to take the steps to officialize their membership to the community.

In order to be sure that I was acting the right way, I asked the synagogue's rabbi for his opinion. He reassured me on the fact that my group, although mixed from an Orthodox point of view, could participate to the ceremony without any problem.

Finally, we were between fifteen and twenty persons to meet at the synagogue. This experience was totally positive for men, as they were closer to the events, but less interesting for women, separated by barred-windows.

Nevertheless, women expressed their desire to renew the experience but in another synagogue even by being separated from men but not from rituals.

As a digression, I have a mention a detail that illustrates well how difficult it is nowadays to enter in a synagogue in Paris and how impossible it is for my users to find alone their way to the community. A 21-year-old young man, let us call him Mikael, arrived early, as he always does, at the synagogue.

The security agents were very impressed by his tall height, his fair hair and, certainly, his lack of usual signs of Judaism in his behavior and communication, a fact I have already discussed. Moreover, he arrived there after his daily jogging so he had three pairs of sneakers in his rucksack.

After having carefully searched the young man, the security agents found him suspect and called the police. When then police arrived, my service's interpreter also arrived and warned the rabbi, who knew we were about to come. The young man was searched once more, sneaker by sneaker, and was later free to enter the synagogue.

After all, this incident has marked the group and a debriefing session was necessary at the synagogue to calm the atmosphere.

This common experience has brought us closer and really created a group. During these interviews organized after this meeting, the stories, until now unknown, have surfaced again by reinforcing our mutual trust.

### Prayer for the Dead:

We went further and directly used the community's mourning rituals, for example, to relieve the families who experienced one or more violent assassinations. These ceremonies can frame and guide mourning persons and determine their relationship with the dead.

The only experience of an assassination in the family constitutes an extraordinary trauma which inevitably requires a treatment.

Departures too close, too hastily to the moment of burial or deaths occurring very far from the expatriated persons who are not informed of the death or cannot organize or attend to the burial ceremony, make the situation worse.

During summer 2006, for the first time, I asked a rabbi to solemnize an end-of-mourning ceremony for a family who lost an assassinated child and had to hastily leave after the burial, in a feeling of panic, to save their other child still alive.

The deceased child was buried during a laic ceremony and the family had no contact with their country's Jewish community. I took this decision considering the mother's depressive condition and because the family was not progressing learning French even with more French lessons for beginners.

The family was isolated. On the one hand, they were not able to communicate concerning their 10-year-old son's death and asked me to avoid the subject.

On the other hand, the family totally agreed, and seemed visibly relieved to go to the synagogue and solemnize this ritual. By acting this way, the family recognized the rabbi's authority and ability in this situation.

To go with the family to the synagogue, I asked for Daniel's assistance. Daniel is a young Russian man who went to Israel before coming to France.

As he is integrated in the community and knows the concerned rabbi and synagogue, he organized a small preparation for the family concerning the ritual, on a public garden's bench. Again, I was amazed by the elements of knowledge emerging on that occasion.

For example, Mr. Chabalin asked me: "*Do I have to wear a white or a black kippah for the ceremony?*" Before, he had never pronounced nor used a word or an expression that could have suggested he had certain knowledge of Judaism.

The languages used, for the preparation and during the ceremony, were Hebrew and Russian. The Russian language was used for interpretation. Strangely, the French language was bypassed.

This effort was made to the family's understanding. Jews from Russia, France and Israel were united to live a very ancient ritual, together. They succeeded in overcoming a linguistic obstacle in order to understand each others.

Since the ceremony, the family has remained very reserved but has made surprising good progresses in learning French.

Mr. Chabalin told me a remark that comforted me in the idea that an accompaniment towards the Jewish community is important: "*If Daniel goes back to the synagogue, I would live to go with him*". Daniel is the name of the young man who went there with them.

That is to say that returning to the synagogue is only imaginable with an accompaniment that ensures an immediate link with the group and reduces the fear of rejection.

I would like to generalize this practice and use the rabbis' competence to manage the difficult cases of mourning.

### Conclusion:

Bringing the truth out, that my service's political asylum seekers are Jewish political asylum seekers and that my service is the Jewish community's service, has deeply transformed the functioning.

Today, I work with a small group of Jews among which some have multiple identities. The users have multiple contacts with them, they rely on each other and they inform and support themselves.

Instead of certain embarrassments and tensions, confidence has been installed. Perhaps it is too early to say it but they rely on their group, on their community.

Since a certain time now, I have modified my service's functioning and I have tried to apply my new knowledge in ethno psychiatry. My reflection is not yet over and I have demonstrated to you only a part of the path.

The most important result for me is that I found my service and users livelier than before. For me, there is nothing more important than liberating the life's forces when we work with Jewish people who experienced persecutions and whose parents are Shoah survivors.