

**Apparent Needs, Hidden Knowledge:
What Can We Learn from Soviet Holocaust Survivors?**

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Newcomers from the Former Soviet Union (or the “Russians”, as they are labeled) often carry a specific stigma of ambiguous identity in the many communities where they have settled. For the aging Holocaust survivors who have arrived with the recent intense wave of Russian immigration, this stigma, in many aspects, defines their new social environment. They are often seen as different, and so they feel: distant, alienated, and estranged. In the Soviet Union, Jews were constantly reminded, through state anti-Semitism, that they could never entirely belong to the mainstream culture. They have ample experiences of being and feeling “different”. Having immigrated and settled in Western Jewish communities, once again they face and accept without much analysis the barriers between themselves and the mainstream “others”.

Russian-speaking survivors do not conform to the typical image of a *Holocaust survivor*. They rarely volunteer for Holocaust education programs or public speaking; they do not trust psychotherapies or survivors’ groups. Their stories do not reach the mainstream media, and their unique voices are not heard among the many voices in our Jewish communities. Many Soviet survivors are stereotypically perceived by social service providers as “difficult” clients, because they do not fit into the established programs, rarely use services that are so effective with other seniors, but instead present specific, unconventional needs, which cannot be met by our routine interventions.

When I mention the alienation of Soviet survivors, I cannot speak for all Jewish communities. Least of all can I speak about the communities in Israel. Albina and I have drawn our conclusions from the years of our work in Calgary and our conversations with people who live and work elsewhere in Canada and the US. These conclusions also resulted from my recent research. In Calgary, we are a very small community: in a rapidly growing Canadian city of 1-million general population, there are about 8,500 Jews. Seniors represent about 10.6% of Calgary Jewish population.

In a small town, many aspects of community relationships and social services are unique. On the one hand, in this environment we have limited resources, less diversity, and a much narrower range of programs than in larger cities. On the other hand, we might have an advantage of closer vision. Public events are perceived as larger, more conspicuous. Social connections are not necessarily closer, but are more intense and meaningful. For the purposes of communal services, relationships might be better informed, warmer, and less impersonal. And for the purposes of observation and analysis, the fabric of community relationships might be more transparent.

Official statistics of Calgary Jewish Community Council in 2001 stated that there were 360 Holocaust survivors living in our city. Since 2001, the numbers might have changed. We also believe that the figure 360 might *not* have been entirely accurate: our observations imply that a relatively large portion of Soviet Holocaust survivors were not included in the official Calgary list. The names of Russian survivors belong to many other lists: the list of those living below poverty line, the list of isolated seniors, seniors with disabilities and housing problems,

and new immigrants with no English skills. These are the lists of need. They reflect the expectation that this group will be a burden for the community. It is rarely recognized that as survivors of the Holocaust who came from one of the largest and oldest Jewish worlds, they should be welcomed as our communities' valued members who bring a precious addition to our community capital. Few people realize that their arrival and presence beside us can be perceived as a gift.

I am here today to raise questions, articulate problems, and ask for advice from people who have more diverse experiences than mine. I will not speak much about the needs of aging Soviet Holocaust survivors. I suggest focusing on the richness of these people's history and culture, their immense knowledge, resilience, and emotional strengths, and on the value they can bring to our communities. I argue that by recognizing this group as contributors to our community capital, by listening to their voices and adjusting services to their specific needs, we can gain strength and knowledge, and also give these people much more than conventional social support and instrumental assistance.

The concept of community capital only indirectly relates to historical testimonies or factual knowledge. It relates more to culture, relationships, all the richness that we call *Yiddishkeit*, collective memories and shared meanings that we associate with the Holocaust and resilience of the Jewish people. Community capital also signifies building on the culture of care: as a community, we both *contribute to* and *gain from* the seniors' resiliency and ability to cope, which is closely associated with their feeling accepted, acknowledged, and valued. It is true that Soviet survivors are very different from the mainstream Jewish seniors, – but so are many other groups in our diverse communities – so why don't we accept these differences and celebrate them? It is important that Soviet survivors realize that their stories are included as a part of the whole story of the Holocaust and the post-Holocaust Jewish life, and that their memories are finally integrated into the Jewish collective memory in this part of the world.

Relationships of acceptance or exclusion, in this context, are not tangible or measurable phenomena. It is a challenge to facilitate a change in these relationships in the framework of community services. This is not a trivial concept that can be easily applied to our social service planning. However, we should be aware that the subtle air of recognition or non-recognition in social discourse influences our lives, even if not verbalized. The prevalent discourses and socially constructed images can provide a powerful background for people's perception of their personal experiences, their ability to integrate their traumatic memories, and adjust to the transitions of aging. To illustrate the meaning of this statement, let me draw a parallel with the history of societal attitudes towards the Holocaust survivors' memories shortly after the war.

Soon after the liberation, many European Jewish survivors moved to the Western countries or Israel. They were encouraged to assimilate into their new countries and forget their past. Many were silenced and could not talk about their Holocaust experiences, at least in the first decades after their immigration. The western establishments were not ready to listen to their stories. We are familiar with the concept of *conspiracy of silence* (Danieli, 2000): the prevalent social discourse that effectively prevented the survivors' memories from becoming part of the collective memory – their voices from being heard. Moreover, in those early years after the war, Holocaust survivors – newcomers from Europe – often were marginalized and isolated, partially as a result of suspicions associated with the circumstances of their survival and their assumed deep psychological damage. In 2001, Eva Fogelman used the term "*psychological myths*" in describing this stigma. For decades survivors carried a stigma of "otherness" – until the late

1970s when Holocaust memory was gradually introduced into western collective memory and culture (Novick, 1999). At that time, the public awareness of the Holocaust began to be taken for granted. Most contemporary young people are not even aware of this transformation of our societal attitudes. Many of us do not realize the extent to which these public discourses have affected the survivors' ability to cope with their trauma. Many of us cannot begin to understand how much our communities might have lost through segregating these people and rejecting their stories in those early years after the Holocaust.

We know that shortly after the war, this situation was common among the newcomers to the US, Canada, Australia, and even Israel (Cohen, 2005; Helmreich, 1992). Recently these countries saw another immigration wave of Holocaust survivors from the Former Soviet Union. *Unlike* the young survivors of the first wave of immigration, these people are now aging. Many bring heavy baggage of oppression and secondary trauma that lasted throughout their lives. But *similar* to the first-wave immigration survivors, Soviet newcomers carry intense, painful memories, stories of courageous recovery and altruistic giving, and rich, authentically Jewish culture. Also *similar* to the earlier immigrants, these people, sadly, are not readily embraced by western communities. Once again, we expect these aging survivors to assimilate and become "like us". We often expect that they contribute to the community *in the same ways as we do*, observe same remembrance rituals, and benefit from the same social assistance programs as other seniors. Once again, these expectations prove unrealistic. And when we encounter the unexpected, we might fall into the trap of attaching labels, judging, and alienating.

Are we witnessing the repeating of history – this time with Russian survivors? Are we developing new *psychological myths* about these people's "mixed identities", their lack of Jewish education, being "culturally Russian" and psychologically damaged by the Soviet regime (Kliger, 2004)? Can we *afford* ignoring the voices of people who have been in the centre of all the European historical turmoil and its aftermath, and managed to preserve their Jewish identities (Gitelman, 2002) and live accomplished, fulfilling lives – the participants of a History that is part of our common Jewish heritage? These questions must be addressed by action, before it is too late.

There is another side of the barrier between the Soviet survivors and western communities. Similarly to the newcomers from the Holocaust-torn Europe shortly after the war, the now aging Soviet survivors are not readily open to disclosing their memories. Our typical image of a Holocaust survivor tunes our minds into the expectation of dignity, strong survivors' identity, and readiness to bear witness, testify, and educate. Soviet survivors do not conform to this image. Perhaps it would be helpful to draw a parallel again, and imagine how far from reality would this image seem if applied to survivors in the early 1950s. This parallel might reveal our misplaced expectations as we try to understand Soviet survivors. In the Soviet Union, the official ideology suppressed the public memory of the Holocaust for many decades, making it an "ideological taboo" (Altman, 2005). The Jews who stayed after the war in the Soviet Union had profound experiences of rejection by their society. The voiceless state of Soviet Jews was imposed by the dominant public modes of interpreting history. The survivors' stories became invisible, "hidden" in the Soviet public discourse. For Soviet survivors, it has been too long that their voices were not supposed to be heard. Most only *began* identifying themselves as survivors after exposure to their new social environments. We might have to accept that Soviet survivors will not speak out often, because many are not prepared to ever trust a listener – especially a collective listener.

When Soviet Holocaust survivors come to live in our communities, they often remain hidden, isolated, unnoticed. We recognize their great needs, and try to offer social support and assistance (although we all know that we could do much more). But even though we try to do as much as we can to support these aging newcomers, we still tend to perceive them as “others” – still marginalized, segregated, labeled “difficult”. It is important to advocate for social, medical, and instrumental help for these people – but this help must be tailored to their specific needs and strengths. The advocacy proved ineffective without the call for sincere inclusion and the embracement of *their past* as part of ours, *their identity* as legitimate Jewish survivors’ identity, and their *unique needs* as *validated rights*. Our communities will be enriched by giving Soviet survivors respect, celebrating their lives, and honoring their voices.

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