

PERCEPTIONS OF AGING EAST AND WEST:
SOVIET REFUGEES SEE TWO WORLDS

ABSTRACT. Information from three-generation Soviet refugee families now settled in the West forms the basis of this comparison of aging in the USSR, Israel and the United States. Their perceptions and judgments of issues such as government policies, pensions, old age homes, family responsibilities and public and private attitudes toward the elderly reveal severe criticism of Soviet government programs and praise for Soviet family care and personal respect for the elderly. At the same time, the refugees view the situation in the West (i.e., in Israel and the United States) in reverse; that is, praise for government programs and severe criticism of personal and family attitudes and care. The effects of these perceptions on adjustment to a new cultural environment are explored.

Key Words and Phrases: aging, self-perceptions, Soviet Jewish refugees, immigration, resettlement, USSR, US, Israel comparisons

I. INTRODUCTION

Uprooted by the Soviet Union's idiosyncratic regulations regarding emigration, a large number of Soviet 'senior citizens' are now residing in the West, and with their families are providing personal insights into conditions of aging in three different countries.

During the 1970s large waves of Soviet Jewish refugees of all ages left the Soviet Union to join relatives in Israel and the United States. They emigrated in family groups, and many had one or more elderly relatives with them.

In some respects these people differed from other groups of recent refugees. They were not escaping and risking apprehension by the authorities. On the contrary, they sought and were given government permission to leave, a process that was long and painful and full of bureaucratic harassment (Simon 1985).

Migration is a difficult venture, and it was mainly parents with growing children who had the greatest motivation to struggle with the Soviet government for the opportunity to find a new life in the West (Simon and Simon 1985). Among the restrictions placed on them was that no family leave behind an aging parent or parents if no other adult child remained in the country. The Soviets made sure that no elderly without family remained for the government to worry about. As a result, large numbers of elderly persons arrived in Israel and the United States to face the hardships of resettlement.

From these older people and their families, we have been able to gain much-needed information for the understanding of aging in the Soviet

Union. From them we have also been able to solicit perspectives on aging in Israel and in the United States as seen by people who were socialized under very different cultural and political conditions.

II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

This paper is based on information from a study (Greenbaum 1985) in which members of fourteen Soviet-Jewish refugee families were interviewed in the Spring and Summer of 1981. The research was undertaken to focus on generational differences in migration and resettlement.

The fourteen families were equally divided between those who emigrated to Israel between 1970 and 1975, and those who emigrated to the United States between 1977 and 1980. Sample families were selected on a purposive basis according to two criteria: (1) family composition, and (2) location of residence in the Soviet Union.

First, each family had three generations: a child or children 16 years or older, one or two parents, and one or more grandparents. Second, families were selected based on the following residence requirements: the final sample in each land of destination had two families from the largest Soviet cities (Moscow or Leningrad); two from any of the smaller cities in the 'Russian' (European) region (e.g., Minsk, Kishinev); and two from Central Asia (e.g., Chimken, Karaganda). The seventh family in the United States came from Kharkov (a 'smaller' city); in Israel, from Tashkent (Central Asia).

Families in the United States were located through a resettlement agency, Services for Soviet Jewish Refugees, in Queens, New York. Several families fitting the necessary criteria were identified through the agency's records. Others were located by contacting refugees from the needed Soviet location and asking them to recommend families who met the family composition requirement. All families finally selected lived in the Forest Hills area of Queens or the Washington Heights area of Manhattan in New York City.

In Israel, families were located through Tel Aviv University's office of Soviet refugee research. Again, families were approached who met the family composition and residence requirements. The families who were finally selected lived in and around Tel Aviv and Netanya.

One member of each generation was interviewed; the youngest generation interviewee had to be at least 16 years of age. Families generally did not know each other, and were not aware of the information given by other interviewees in their own or other families.

The research plan was advantageous for a generational study because important variables could be held constant. For the three generations within a family, the following circumstances were the same: time and

conditions of migration; place of residence in the Soviet Union; location of residence in the country of destination; time and conditions of the interview.

III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The Soviet Jewish refugees are a relatively new immigrant group, and research in the United States and in Israel has been necessary to provide information on the unique problems they face as they resettle and adjust to a new land and a new culture. Little if any previous information was available for this group.

Because of the generally recognized distrust these refugees have of bureaucracies, it has been difficult for many people working with them to learn about their attitudes and ideas of life in their new land. It was necessary to reassure the prospective interviewees that the interviewer was not from the government, not from an immigration agency, not offering help in any way, and not Russian.

Few if any immigration studies concentrate on the subjective reactions of recent immigrants. This knowledge is an important ingredient in sharpening theoretical concepts of migration and transition, in formulating effective policy and in adapting service delivery practices. Many of the informants in this research expressed both surprise and satisfaction that their views were considered of value for Americans and Israelis to learn about who they are and what they have observed about life in the Soviet Union and in their new land.

More specifically in regard to aging, many gerontologists have theorized on the difficulties of transitions, focusing for example on "relocation as a traumatic event" (Hendricks and Hendricks 1977: 278), the need for establishing continuity between earlier and later phases of living (Myerhoff 1978), and the unsettling nature of migration (Goldscheider 1966). There exists, however, little detailed information for individual cultural groups specifying which characteristics make the transition difficult and in which areas of life.

Relocations, big or small, are not totally traumatic. It is only through detailed study of groups in transition that we can discern which aspects are especially troublesome and which are not. The larger research study was undertaken to provide this kind of information for the recent Soviet Jewish refugees. The present paper focuses on one specific aspect — perceptions of aging in a new land.

The work of Myerhoff (1977; 1978) analyzing the process of aging among Russian Jews, immigrants of an earlier era, provides an interesting counterpoint to the group studied here. The people she studied came from the same 'roots' as those reported on in the present paper, that is, largely

from East European Jewish families of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. The great difference between lifestyles in United States and in the Soviet Union, however, resulted in two groups of people who, though sharing remnants of a mutually intelligible language, are in many ways cultural strangers. Family structures, expectations and responsibilities differ widely among the two sets of 'descendants', and the conclusions regarding one group cannot be readily transferred to the other.

On a practical level, important distinctions need to be made between human services appropriate for different immigrant populations and those suited to Americans of a similar age cohort. In Harbert and Ginsberg's work (1979), despite a recognition of ethnic differences, major practice concerns and recommendations are geared to 'mainstream' American elderly. Much of the discussion concerning issues such as outreach, transportation, escort services, housing, recreation and leisure, would have little relevance to the needs of the Soviet refugees.

The Soviet refugees revealed a fair degree of consensus on areas of concern and demonstrated selective assessments of acceptable and unacceptable aspects of life in their old and new lands. The results of this study emphasize the need to avoid overgeneralizing or stereotyping in favor of learning from research tailored to a particular cultural group and concerned with critical areas and stages of living.

In sum, this study aims to increase our anthropological knowledge of a cultural group in transition; it provides information for gerontological theory, addressing the effects of migration on the perceptions of a specific group of refugees; and it affords some bases for adapting practical human services to the particular needs of a group in the process of adjustment to a new land.

IV. IMPORTANCE OF PERCEPTIONS OF AGING

Aging is a process that people look forward to with mixed feelings. Whether young or old, how we perceive the conditions surrounding the lifestyle and the treatment of the later years affects very strongly the ease with which we can look ahead to the future and even the equanimity with which we can proceed in daily existence.

Atchley (1977: 69) gives great importance to "anticipatory socialization" in easing the "process of transition". The Hendricks' (1977: 280) discuss the general effects of "expectations . . . regarding the new location and the nature of the situation left behind". Immigrants are always making comparisons between what they left and what they came to. These comparisons influence greatly how well the newcomers adjust to their new environment. It is therefore of value to understand the contrasts that the

Soviet refugees were making in their own minds between what they left in the East, i.e., in the Soviet Union, and what they found in the West, i.e., in Israel or the United States.

The Soviet refugees are a group greatly concerned with circumstances of aging. In contrast to other immigrant groups which tend to be composed largely of younger people, the Soviet group is made up of all ages and generations, and, because of a very low birth rate, is more heavily weighted toward middle aged and older persons (Simon and Simon 1985). Given the age distribution and the fact that these refugees have no hope of ever returning to their native land, the prospect of growing old in a new country becomes a matter of almost immediate concern.

It was clear that for the refugees the topic occupied an important part of their thinking. We are fortunate to have these first hand accounts of thoughts and perceptions, and we are grateful to the respondents for their kindness and cooperation to share them with us.

Members of each generation had something to say about conditions of aging in the Soviet Union and in their land of resettlement. While many aspects of aging were discussed, it became clear that their interest focused on the following topics: government policies toward the elderly, pensions/retirement benefits, old age homes, family responsibilities, and public and private attitudes toward the elderly. These were areas that related to how satisfactory one's later years would be in the Soviet Union. It was these perceptions that they brought with them and that were most important in their assessment of their new life.

Discussion in this paper will center around the topics of concern to the Soviet refugees. Factual information from and about the Soviet Union will be provided as background and a perspective for the informants' comments. Conclusions about the interaction of perceptions and cultural adjustment will be presented, and the value for theory and practice indicated.

V. SOME FACTS ABOUT AGING IN THE SOVIET UNION

The aged represent a large and growing segment of the Soviet population. In 1978, of the over 265 million people in the USSR, more than 26 million (10%) were age 65 or older. It is estimated that during the first quarter of the 21st Century, the proportion will climb to over 14% (United Nations 1982). The rates are higher in the European sector of the Soviet Union and lower in Central Asia because of the differential in birth rates; birth rates are high in Central Asia and low in the European sector.

Soviet policy has long been concerned with 'social protection' for the aged. Typical of this policy was a comment in the Soviet press a few

years ago referring to the care of the aged by government officials as "one of the noblest missions" (CDSP (Current Digest of Soviet Press) May 16, 1984: 1).

The pension system, the central core of government responsibility for the elderly, has been steadily revised and expanded (Mitchell 1983). As early as 1936, the Soviet Constitution established the right of its citizens to old age pensions. With some few exceptions, retirement age for women is 55 years of age, and for men, age 60. Women must work a minimum of 20 years to be eligible for a pension, and men, 25 years. Minimum and maximum pensions are now set at 50 rubles and 120 rubles per month. Increased benefits to a maximum of 300 rubles per month, and in some cases even more, are available to a very small privileged group who have given outstanding service to the party or to the state. A more detailed discussion of the pension amounts follows in the next section.

Because of labor shortages and other state requirements, in many parts of the country retired persons are allowed to continue employment while receiving pensions. There were about 37 million old-age pensioners in the Soviet Union in 1984, of whom more than 9 million were continuing to work (CDSP May 16, 1984).

The other area of Soviet care for the elderly is the provision of old age homes. Despite meager efforts in the past, much attention is being given currently to expanding the number of old age homes and to the establishment of services for the elderly in their own homes (CDSP May 16, 1984).

VI. PERCEPTIONS OF AGING

A. *Government Policies*

Despite Soviet efforts to improve life for the elderly, the refugees see government policies and accomplishments in an unusually dismal light. The following comments are typical:

In Russia, the aged are not considered productive. The government provides poor care (47-year-old mother from Kharkov, now in New York City).

The government mistreats the elderly (22-year-old son from Kharkov, now in New York City).

In Russia, there are poor health services and no one cares at all about the elderly (49-year-old father from Chimkem, Kazakhstan, now in New York City).

In Russia, the aged, mentally sick or handicapped are treated as if they do not exist (50-year-old mother from Moscow, now in New York City).

Sick, handicapped and old people are treated by the Soviet government as if they are not human (64-year-old grandmother from Moscow, now in New York City).

For many people, the contrast between the Soviet Union and the West was startling, as the following statements indicate:

In Israel, it is better for the elderly without any question. It is too good. Israel cannot afford all this (47-year-old father from Chernovitz, now in Israel).

Care of the elderly is much better in Israel (67-year-old grandmother from Tashkent, now in Israel).

In the United States there are terrific programs for the aged. They are treated humanely and with respect. They get good care (50-year-old mother from Moscow, now in New York City).

There is no comparison between the care of the aged in the United States and the USSR. Here in America you have all the care and facilities. In Russia the care is very poor (47-year-old mother from Kharkov, now in New York City).

When asked for reasons for these highly contrasting judgments, people discussed the size of pensions and old age home care.

B. Government Pensions

The difference in the size of pension money in the East and the West was uppermost in the minds of the refugees when talking about the subject of the elderly.

(1) *Some facts about size of pensions.* After several changes in the size of pensions in the Soviet Union over the years, the legal minimum in 1971 was 50 rubles per month and the maximum, 120 rubles per month. Pensions awarded are generally closer to the minimum than to the maximum, with below minimum amounts to those people not meeting the statutory length of service required.

The small size of Soviet pensions is a reflection of the generally low incomes that people in the Soviet Union earn during their productive years. Because of these low salaries, all kinds of illicit sources of income are known to exist. When a worker retires and must survive on only a fraction of his/her wages, the hardship is even more severe.

Soviet incomes during the 1960s (when the refugees were still in the USSR) averaged between 60 and 150 rubles per month for men and between 37 and 108 rubles per month for women (Lapidus 1982). According to Lantsev and Shchennikova (1982), pensions are normally about 70% of a worker's previous income. Pensions would range on the average therefore from 50 rubles per month (the legal minimum) to about 100 rubles per month. In 1981 the ruble was equivalent to \$1.11 (Peet 1972); therefore Soviet pensions would be about \$60 or \$70 per month. The United States on the other hand offered a single person, who was of retirement age and living alone in 1981, an SSI (supplemental security income) payment of \$264.70 per month. SSI was available to elderly

Soviet refugees and in many cases was three or four times what they might have received in the USSR.

In the United States and Israel, refugees of retirement age were automatically entitled to a government stipend. These were not officially pensions, but rather in the category of welfare payments. The refugees did not make this distinction since welfare to the aged simply on the basis of need does not seem to exist in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, receiving something from the government is not unexpected by Soviet standards.

(2) *Perceptions of size of pension in three countries.* In the light of the above information, it is not surprising that refugees' comments would reflect the purchasing power of government stipends.

The following were their perceptions of pensions in the Soviet Union:

In the USSR there is no good social security and pensions are too low (47-year-old mother from Leningrad, now in Israel).

There are not good pensions for the aged in Russia (73-year-old grandfather from Chernovitz, now in Israel).

In Russia a person cannot live on their old age pension (41-year-old mother from Chernovitz, now in Israel).

Pensions were very low in Russia, and my son was keeping me (76-year-old grandmother from Kishinev, now in Israel).

In the Soviet Union, there is very little money if you do not work. For the old people, the children help if possible. Otherwise it is very, very bad (50-year-old mother from Kishinev, now in Israel).

A dissenting view was expressed by an 81-year-old grandfather from Leningrad, now in Israel. He said:

As a retired engineer, I got half-salary as pension in my later years. I think the care of the aged is better in the Soviet Union.

In contrast, here is what was said about payments to the aged in Israel and the United States:

In Israel, a man can live on his pension without any other help (81-year-old grandfather from Chernovitz, now in Israel).

In Israel, the aged can live on their pension. Even if their family members go away, the elderly can live on the money they receive (44-year-old mother from Chernovitz, now in Israel).

The care of the aged is better in Israel because there is more money (79-year-old grandmother from Kishinev, now in Israel).

I enjoy being very important in the United States, especially since I receive my own money (from SSI) (81-year-old grandmother from Kharkov, now in New York City).

I am still surprised that I get SSI in the United States. I didn't expect any assistance

here. After all, I didn't earn it. And the amount! It is four times more than my pension in Russia. There I could hardly survive! My family had to help me from time to time (71-year-old grandmother from Moscow, now in New York).

Since my arrival here, I feel very respected by the United States government. I get my own money — SSI and food stamps. It makes me feel very proud. I can buy my own food, have my own apartment and be independent. I get very excited around the time that I expect my check in the mail. I am leaving soon to spend the summer in the Catskill mountains, and I hope my checks will not get lost meanwhile (a 78-year-old grandmother from Odessa, now in New York).

In Russia, I never went to school and never worked outside the house. When I became a widow, my sons supported me while I took care of the house. Now in the United States, I get my own money. I am really very pleased with that (72-year-old grandmother from Chimkem, Kazakhstan, now in New York City).

A dissenting opinion came from a 73-year-old grandfather who was the Director of an Institute in Leningrad, and now living in Israel. He said:

It was better for me in Russia. Here in Israel, at age 60 a person can no longer work. And social security money allows you to live only at a minimum level. I had a higher standard of living in the Soviet Union.

Elderly refugees generally felt pleased with money payments in the West, and especially with the new government's positive appraisal of their worth. The fact that they received money even though they had not worked in their country of destination (and some had never worked outside their homes at all) was a great boost to their self-esteem.

By contrast, the two dissenting voices above are clearly those of the elite. Their level of benefits had been greater in Russia than in Israel or the United States, and their loss was in living standards as well as in prestige.

C. *Old Age Homes*

None of the refugees had anything good to say about old age homes in the USSR. Some descriptive information about old age homes in the Soviet Union may shed light on this situation.

(1) *Some data on Soviet old age homes.* Although information on old age homes and the need for such facilities is sparse, some insights can be obtained from a series of newspaper stories appearing in the Soviet press in 1983 and 1984 (CDSP May 16, 1984). Quoting from the newspaper, *Sovetskaya Rossia*, in response to the question about actual needs, the paper states:

Just what is the actual need? I'm afraid no one really knows . . . Let's be frank—the level of medical care and everyday services in many of our nursing homes is such that people avoid going there except in cases of dire need.

In connection with the question of caring for elderly people who live alone and need urgent daily care, the paper further says:

Is something being done to solve this problem? Yes, but so far it's very, very little.

In *Izvestia*, a letter from an elderly chronically ill war veteran, a resident of an old age home in 1983, is summarized as follows:

What bothers him is that people (in the old age home) don't care about easing his pain, which increases with each passing day, and let it be known that there's no point in voicing one's opinion about shortcomings in care or asking for help. That only brings rude treatment . . . "We front-line veterans have put this question to local agencies but our complaints are reviewed by the same people who are to blame for this atmosphere . . . we are not seeking special benefits. We want only one thing—the respect that we have earned."

In regard to medical care in old age homes, the following statement appeared in an editors' roundtable discussion reported on in *Sovetskaya Rossia* in early 1984:

As long as no specially trained physician . . . medical attendant or nurse who won't grumble in response to an old person's querulousness is at the elderly person's side, things are bad! Especially when that person is weak, when he has to be fed with a spoon. It seems to me that this problem is a long way from being solved in our country.

In a description of the problems of where old age homes should be built, an editor describes a place that was built for 60 people on the banks of the river Ob. This uninhabited area

. . . was totally cut off from the outside world . . . There was no water — wells had to be drilled, and for four years water was carried in buckets from the Ob. The nursing home wasn't near a store or even a primitive booth selling basic necessities.

The fact that these comments were reported in public newspapers in the Soviet Union in recent years is a strong indication that problems with old age homes are severe. Comments of the Soviet refugees corroborate this judgment.

(2) *Perceptions of old age homes.* Old age homes in the Soviet Union were viewed very negatively by the refugees. Judgments seemed to be based on hearsay evidence since none of the elderly refugees had ever lived in one and none of the younger informants had visited any. The following, nevertheless, were typical of the views expressed:

In the USSR, very few old age homes exist. Those that are around have very bad conditions, and there are not enough places for people anyway (50-year-old parent from Kishinev, now in Israel).

Only a very few old age homes exist in Russia. They are very bad. Sometimes food is stolen from the elderly by the staff working there (50-year-old parent from Moscow, now living in New York).

Impressions of old age homes in Israel and the United States seemed also to be based on hearsay. None of the people indicated that they had ever visited a home in either country. Nevertheless, their impressions were more positive, as the following typical comment indicates:

Old age homes in Israel are not always good, but they are much better than in Russia (50-year-old parent from Kishinev, now in Israel).

D. Family Care of the Elderly

In contrast to the clear preference for governmental provisions for the elderly in the new lands over those in the USSR, the refugees had very different things to say about how families relate to aging members. Without exception, the attitudes and care given in the Soviet family were seen as far superior to what was observed in either Israel or the United States. Some information on the nature of the Soviet family may help in understanding these views.

(1) *The Soviet family.* The family has been and continues to be the strongest bond in the life of the Soviet people. This tradition existed before the Russian Revolution and, after some unsuccessful attempts to undermine its influence, the Soviet government has embarked on a strong policy of encouraging and supporting family life.

In a study comparing peasant life before the Revolution with collective farm life in the 1950s, Soviet researchers had the following to say about family attitudes:

The head of the peasant family in the past was the oldest male member; in his absence it became the oldest female member (usually the mother and, in rare cases, the grandmother). At the present time this order still prevails in cases where a young married couple lives with parents; in most such situations the head of the family is a member of the older generation, even in cases of extreme old age and loss of ability to work In contemporary family relationships one must bear in mind in addition that the preservation of the old father's position as the head of the family is frequently merely a formality, done out of respect to the old man (Sulat 1970: 250).

Writing about the Soviet situation in 1982, two members of the Soviet Scientific Institute of Labour stated:

In accordance with established tradition, most old people live with their sons or daughters. In a great many areas of the USSR there are still numerous families, consisting of three generations, in which elderly parents live with the families of their grown-up children . . . (Lantsev and Shchennikova 1982: 542).

And in discussing Soviet constitutional provisions regarding the family, Juviler (1984: 2—3) states:

Forty years of Soviet commitment to 'strengthening the family' culminated in the first

constitutional references to it . . . Article 66 of the 1977 USSR Constitution notes the mutual obligation of parents and children, which the government supplements with its own institutions and assistance, but which it has been unwilling and unable to replace.

Article 66 states in part:

Children are obligated to care for their parents and to help them.

(2) *Comments on family life and the elderly.* All the refugees made very favorable assessments of family care of aging members in the Soviet Union. The following are some typical statements.

The elderly cannot survive in Russia if they have no families (22-year-old son from Kharkov, now in New York).

In Russia, only families take care of the aged (46-year-old mother from Kharkov, now in New York).

If an older person has no family in Russia, you are treated like an animal (50-year-old mother from Moscow, now in New York).

I survived in Russia because my family was well off and they took care of me (55-year-old grandmother from Kutaisi, Georgia, now in Israel).

I was widowed and one of my sons was killed. But I got no help from the government. My children had to take care of me in Russia (67-year-old grandmother from Tashkent, now in Israel).

In Russia if the aged person has no family, his life is worth nothing (40-year-old father from Moscow, now in New York).

In Russia, I was a factory worker until I retired. Then I lived on a pension, but I had to be supported by my family to survive (81-year-old grandmother from Kharkov, now in New York).

Given the important responsibilities that Soviet families have in caring for their elderly members, the refugees saw Western family life, especially American families, in a negative light. Some typical comments follow.

American Jews don't treat their elderly well. They send them to old age homes instead of caring for them (52-year-old father from Odessa, now in New York).

I can't understand why families here detach themselves from their elderly relatives (46-year-old mother from Kharkov, now in New York).

E. Public and Private Attitudes

The perceptions of the Soviet refugees on the subject of the care of the elderly showed a surprising amount of consensus. People from all parts of the Soviet Union and from all three generations had with few exceptions the same things to say. They were highly critical of Soviet government programs, particularly pensions and old age homes. Their criticisms were couched in some of the severest terms, full of hostility to a system that, despite its claims, was seen as inhumane in its care. At the same time, the

refugees saw people in the Soviet Union as being far more caring and personally concerned. The refugees did not totally reject the life they had left in the East, and were not totally accepting of what they found in their new lands. Many statements summed up these contrasting views. Except for the two divergent opinions mentioned in an earlier section, the following judgments were shared by everyone interviewed:

Government care is much better in Israel, but in Russia family attitudes and personal feelings for the aged are much, much better (55-year-old grandmother from Kutaisi, Georgia, now in Israel).

Israel has better programs for the old people, but in Russia the aged are personally treated a lot better (44-year-old mother from Tashkent, now in Israel).

In Russia, everyone treats older people better; everyone is more polite and caring. In Israel, nobody would even get up and let an older person sit down on the bus. Israelis are more egoistic and think more about money than they do about old people (21-year-old son from Tashkent, now in Israel).

In Russia, people are much more polite and treat the elderly with more care and respect. That is better than in Israel (24-year-old son from Chernovitz, now in Israel).

Things are more impersonal in Israel. Israel has better technical care, but personal feelings are not as close and warm as in Russia (79-year-old grandmother from Kishinev, now in Israel).

Life for the older person is better in Russia. Only the Soviet government, the political regime, is bad (81-year-old grandfather from Leningrad, now in Israel).

In the United States, the government is good, but the people are not kind (56-year-old father from Tashkent, now in Israel).

In America, the government does good things for the older people, especially gives them enough money. But American people don't respect the elderly like they do in Russia (52-year-old father from Odessa, now in New York).

And these attitudes were summed up by a 22-year-old son from Kharkov now living in New York. He said:

Care of the aged is materially good in the United States, but the elderly are lonely. There are very good facilities in this country, but the quality of personal attention is not good. In Russia, people respect older people, but the government mistreats them. In America, the government does well, but the people do not.

VII. CONCLUSION

Perhaps the greatest influence on the perceptions of aging among Soviet Jewish refugees is the continuity in their thinking from their Soviet experiences to their new life in Israel or the United States. What they felt was important in the Soviet Union became the criteria by which to judge their new existence. The concept of continuity has many facets, and its importance in life's situations can be broadened to add to Myerhoff's contribution, referred to earlier in this paper. She found the critical need

people have to tie their earlier life's memories into the experiences and activities of their later years. In this study, we find an immediate transfer of judgments, assessments and adjustment mechanisms based on values and expectations deriving from the country of origin and not from the country of resettlement.

The Soviet refugees brought several significant attitudes with them. First, the government is seen as (1) very powerful in determining one's survival and welfare; (2) a determinant in large part of one's self-esteem; and (3) an unreliable source of ultimate caretaking. Second, one's importance in and contribution to the workforce is seen as the determinant of public care and public recognition. Third, pension income is the symbol of one's public importance in later years. And finally, the family is regarded as the ultimate source of emotional and instrumental functions after one retires, and the determinant of satisfaction and comfort in one's old age. These attitudes seem to be the result of old pre-Soviet patterns of family behavior and of post-revolutionary Soviet priorities in the distribution of benefits and in the bases on which economic rewards are given.

The topics the refugees chose to discuss with regard to aging left little doubt of the importance of the attitudes listed above: the size of pension money, government attitudes toward the elderly, government-run homes for the elderly, family attention to and care of its older members, and public and private attitudes toward the aging.

The sharp criticisms of the Soviet government reflected hardships they themselves experienced or saw others experience in terms of lack of money and lack of self-esteem based on niggardly government programs. The sad condition of Soviet old age home care was treated as common knowledge among the refugees and is corroborated in the stories appearing in Soviet newspapers and journals.

The United States and Israel on the other hand impressed the refugees as unusual examples of a caring government, quite beyond what they would expect given their basic assumptions about work and government motivations. Rather than feeling that they were being given 'handouts' or charity by a philanthropic state, as might be the case with people from another background, they felt a personal sense of worth and dignity. They were favorably disposed toward a government that recognized their human value beyond their economic function. There was little awareness that Americans or Israelis might not perceive government in the same way.

We should note that the difference between Soviet and Israeli or United States, programs for the elderly can be understood in part by the difference in political systems. These differences seem to override some important similarities among all three countries. In terms of similarities, the Soviet Union, Israel and the United States all have a growing number and proportion of elderly people. In all three countries the leaders of the national government have for the most part been people of very advanced

years. All three countries have an avowed public policy of government care for the elderly.

Politically however, the United States and Israel are democratic countries which rely on an electorate to determine the government in power. In both countries the elderly are among the most politically active in the population. Therefore, both Israel and the United States are responsive to the pressures and thus to the needs of their aging populations. The Soviet Union on the other hand operates on dictatorial rather than democratic principles and has little need to accommodate an electorate. Further, whatever influence the general public can exert on its government often comes through the workplace. Here there are discussions, opportunities for policy criticism within limits, and vehicles for offering ideas and suggestions within limits. The retirees are obviously excluded from even this indirect means of influencing public policy. In short, political systems in the West need the support of the aged; in the East the elderly are politically dispensable.

In terms of family patterns, it is clear that the refugees see their family as the haven, the source of support, the refuge from a harsh world and a place for needed solace. The family is an extended one, close knit, and a dependable unit literally from the cradle to the grave. This family pattern is the result of two important traditions: the character of the family in pre-Soviet times was close knit, patriarchal, rural based and the center of social, emotional and economic life; further, the refugees were the descendants of Jewish families who in earlier times had been segregated into ghettos and felt the lash of harsh persecution, Russian, Polish, and German. This heritage, combined with current Soviet anti-semitism and Soviet political repression, has made the Soviet Jewish family the only place where its members feel some sense of trust and security.

The strength and vital importance of the family as the major survival mechanism was stressed over and over again. For the elderly, the family is the prime caretaker in general, and especially so in times of frailty and great need. Members of the older generation also have important roles to play within the family unit in terms of child care, domestic duties, and decision making in the lives of all its members.

Because of the closeness of the Soviet family and the importance of the role of the older generation in family life, the younger generation grows up with feelings of warmth, responsibility and respect for elders. These feelings carry over into public as well as private domains, and result in a strong moral commitment to personal care and courtesy for the aged.

The difference between the functioning of the Soviet family and that of American or Israeli families in regard to the aged struck the refugees very starkly. The relative independence of family members in the West, separations for long periods of time and covering great geographic distances, the shifting of care and responsibility — both economic and personal — to

outside government and non-government agencies, the lack of visible signs of respect in personal and community actions, were all noted with disdain and dislike by the refugees. It becomes understandable, therefore, that they found the Western family lacking in many ways, and felt their own families morally and functionally preferable.

In terms of the theoretical view of transitions, the situation of the Soviet refugees brings to light two contrasting aspects. Transition as a traumatic event and fleeing to freedom are often regarded separately, the first in negative terms and the second as a positive occurrence. But what are the effects on those for whom the change encompasses both of these characteristics? Much more study is needed to understand the interaction of positive and the negative aspects of migration and change.

In the present study, we see some of the effects of this interaction in the conflicting feelings of the refugees. The general consensus of opinion from three generations, from several different parts of the Soviet Union, and in two different countries of destination, indicated selective reactions rather than a single response (positive or negative) to what they left behind or to their new life.

On a practical level, how are these perceptions likely to affect their future? First there is a fair amount of disappointment that everything in regard to aging is not better in their new locations. No doubt this situation is repeated for them in many other aspects of their new life, and is perhaps the greatest obstacle in the adjustment process.

Still, many people, especially the elderly themselves, find great solace in their new-found self-esteem. The higher government payment they receive in Israel or the United States does not carry the stigma of 'welfare' in a Western sense because the Soviet people are accustomed to the government taking care of many aspects of life. These stipends on the contrary carry with them a measure of appreciation from the government as well as the opportunity for most of the elderly to enjoy a standard of living totally unexpected and very desirable. These perceptions can only be an asset to people in the process of resettlement and adjustment. This situation is positive for the younger generations (parents and children) as well, since a view of their later years would include a perception of material comforts their older relatives now enjoy.

The perceptions of the relative lack of caring in families and by the general public can have negative effects. The oldest generation (the grandparents) may find it hard to cope with the outside world. Instead of the gracious courtesy they were taught to expect, they may have problems knowing how to react to what they consider crude and unkind treatment. Several older people did mention that they do not venture out of the house without some member of their family. Part of the reason for this behavior is the fear that they will not find caring people in the outside world, clearly an obstacle to satisfactory readjustment in a new environment.

For the parent and child generations, there are other problems arising from the conflict between their expectations and observations in their new lands. While the oldest generation is still protected by the families with whom they migrated and can expect family demonstrations of care from their children and grandchildren, the two younger generations may not be as fortunate. Exposure to American or Israeli attitudes may begin to affect younger family members. Marriages between Soviet refugees and Americans or Israelis will likely result in an attenuation of the strong feelings and practices of family responsibility for the elderly. In-laws and children from these marriages may view the situation of family responsibility in a very different light. Family dissension on this subject may be a legacy for many years to come.

Sensitive handling of the effects of these differences in perceptions and expectations would be of great importance not only in the present adjustment process, but in helping these people to cope with the change in cultural norms well into the future. Practitioners would do well to keep in mind the great need to include the family as the major vehicle for any assistance needed by an aging person. Demonstration of caring and respectful attitudes are particularly important in dealing with this group of refugees. Recognition of the basic distrust of outside agencies, whether government or non-government, will be needed in understanding and assisting this group of people for a long time to come.

Many questions are raised by the results of this paper. The findings are based on interviews with families during the early years of resettlement in a new land. As time goes by, what changes will occur in their perceptions and assessments? Will the attitudes that the refugees brought with them be effective in changing any views of the non-Soviet residents among whom they live? What are the differential effects on the various generations?

This study focused on the Soviet Jewish refugees. But what of other immigrants? What are the perceptions of people socialized under other social and political conditions? Koreans? Haitians? Salvadoreans? People coming from vastly different backgrounds bring with them different cultural values which in each case becomes the basis for continuity in a new land. From both a theoretical and a practical standpoint, we need to isolate the uniqueness of each group. It is unlikely that any one theory or set of practical suggestions will accommodate the variations among the many immigrant groups.

This study of Soviet Jewish refugees has added some perspectives to the question of transitions. The focus on generational differences in changing environments holds promise for future work. Isolation of both positive and negative effects of change can further expand our knowledge. And recognizing the variations in perceptions based on different cultural backgrounds can improve our understanding and handling of the complex problems arising from migration.

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