
# RHODE ISLAND
# JEWISH HISTORICAL NOTES

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NOVEMBER, 1983
VOLUME 9, NUMBER 1

Printed in the U. S. A.
by the William R. Brown Printing Co., Providence, Rhode Island

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The Library of Congress National Serials Data Program (NSDP), Washington, D.C. 20540, which operates the U.S. Serials Data System, has assigned the following International Standard Serial Number (*ISSN*) to the *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, a publication of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association: **ISSN 0556-3609.**

# JEWISH IMMIGRATION INTO PROVIDENCE: A COMPARISON OF THE SETTLEMENT OF SOVIET JEWS, 1970-1982 WITH THAT OF RUSSIAN JEWS, 1881-1924

By Brian Kempner

The experience of recent Soviet Jewish immigrants in the American urban setting has been a topic almost wholly ignored by American historians and political scientists. Since these newcomers started arriving in the United States in the 1960s, there has been very little research into how and why they came, where they settled and worked, and the problems they encountered in the transition from the old world to the new. Few scholars have examined their religious beliefs or their interaction with the rest of the American Jewish community. Even fewer have compared the current wave of immigration with that of Russian origin at the turn of the century. While this dearth of knowledge exists regarding Soviet Jewish immigrants in the United States, it is particularly true of those in Providence. Between 1970, the first year of their settlement in the city, and October 1982, over 500 Soviet Jews have entered Providence; yet little is known about them. Aside from a brief United Way report on their situation and an even shorter 1981 *Providence Journal* article, nothing has been published about their experiences. An understanding of their plight is essential, for it not only provides an insight into what life is like in the city, but gives important clues about how the city can better meet the needs of foreign immigrants in the future.

A study of the current condition would be incomplete without an examination of the history of Providence's Jewish population and institutions. The first part of this paper, thus, is devoted to an analysis of the urban life of the first wave of Russian Jews who came to Providence between 1881 and 1924. While much has been written about Russian Jewish immigration into the United States during these years, the library of books and articles on the experience of those who chose to reside in Providence is not particularly large. I have relied mainly on material in the library of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association, interviews with elderly Jews who came to Providence at the time, and discussions with local Jewish leaders familiar with the city's history. I have limited my analysis of Providence Jewry to five significant problems: 1) why they came, 2) where they lived, 3) the jobs they took, 4) their religious attitudes, and 5) assistance and benevolence associations helping in their transition. For purposes of brevity, I have left for future study such topics as Jewish political beliefs and relations with other ethnic groups.

In the second part of the paper, I examine the situation of Soviet Jews who have immigrated to Providence since 1970. In order to elucidate the current situation, a large portion of this section is concerned with comparing it to the earlier wave of immigrants. A study of this nature is difficult, for little has been written about the recent settlers. I have, thus, based my findings primarily on interviews with several Soviet refugees in the city and discussions with leaders of the Providence Jewish Family and Children's Service and the Jewish Bureau of Education, and the director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry in Washington. I have also consulted the few studies and pieces of literature available on the subject. It is my hope that a comparison of the two waves of Russian immigration will bring to light some of the problems a newcommer faces in the city — that, if nothing else, it will make their transition a little easier in the future.

## The First Wave

While 1880 is an important year in the history of Providence Jewry, by no means does it mark the beginning of the city's Jewish population. Solomon Pareira, a native of Holland, had moved to Providence over forty years earlier, in 1838, and became, according to David C. Adelman, the city's first Jewish settler.* By 1850, nine families with Jewish names were listed in the Municipal directory.[1] Usually referred to as "the Deutchen," or German Jews, these early settlers were frequently German-speaking, and came from such countries as Poland, Bavaria, Hungary, Holland, and Germany. They were mostly young people who had left their homes in Western Europe to seek economic opportunity in the United States. All but one of the new arrivals found occupation in the clothing industry, either as tailors or merchants. Several, including Pareira, opened highly successful clothing stores in what is now the downtown section of Providence; most lived near their businesses.[2] In 1854, the community organized its first synagogue — Congregation Bnai Israel.

From 1850 until after the Civil War, Providence attracted only a few additional Jews. After 1870, however, the number of Jews in the Providence area increased significantly because of the growing number of "German" immigrants. By 1880, about 150 Jewish families lived in Providence.[3] Doctor Sidney Goldstein in *Population Survey* noted that most of them were merchants of various descriptions, ranging from peddlers to owners of substantial dry goods stores.[4] Because of their small number, the city was able to absorb them rather easily, and by 1880 many were well established politically, economically, and socially.

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*This is controversial. See Segal, B., and Goldowsky, S. J., *RIJHN* 7:461-470, Nov. 1978. Ed.

Although there were a small number of Russian Jews in the early Jewish population, it was not until 1881, with the growth in Eastern European immigration, that Providence Jewry experienced really dramatic gains. In the late 19th century, the outlook for Jews in Eastern Europe became increasingly dismal. Few Jews in Russia and Russian-held Poland were allowed to live outside the Russian Pale, which consisted of the fifteen western provinces of European Russia and the ten provinces of Russian-held Poland. According to Arthur Goren in *The American Jews*, "The Jews in the Pale lived with no civil rights, ruinous restrictions on trading, and periodic expulsion from towns and villages."[5] Jews in Austria-Hungary and Romania confronted experiences that were little better.

After the assassination of Russian Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the new regime introduced policies that encouraged anti-Jewish outbursts. In *World of Our Fathers,* Irving Howe described the events which led Russian Jews to look to America for a better life:

> There had already been a trickle of Jewish emigration to America — 7,500 in the years between 1820 and 1870 and somewhat more than 40,000 in the 1870s. But the idea of America as a possible locale for collective renewal had not yet sunk deeply into the consciousness of the East European Jews. During the reign of Alexander II many of them had experienced modest hopes of winning equal rights as citizens. By the 1880s, that hope was badly shaken, perhaps destroyed.[6]

The banishment of 20,000 Jews from Moscow in 1891 and the massive pogroms, like that in Kishinev in 1903, combined to deepen the Jew's desire to leave.

Between 1881 and 1924, the year the United States enacted restrictive immigration laws, 2.3 million Eastern European Jews entered the United States — over 75 per cent from the Russian Pale. Fleeing to escape the pogroms and antisemitism, the settlers looked to America as a land of economic opportunity and religious refuge. Most of the immigrants settled in major cities, such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. A significant number, however, sought smaller cities, such as Providence.

By 1885, the city directory listed about 250 Jewish names. The number grew to almost 450 in the next five years and swelled to 992 by 1895 — a fourfold increase in ten years. Such growth was truly impressive, especially when compared to the growth of the city as a whole. From 1890-95, the Providence population increased 23 per cent, while the number of Jewish families increased 131 per cent.[7] By no means were Jews the only group to enter the city in those years of heavy immigration. Significant numbers of Italians, Irish and Portuguese also came.

By 1900, 1607 Jewish families were listed in the city directory. Sidney Goldstein concluded, "The Jewish community of Providence was overwhelmingly of Eastern European origin."[8] In that year, between 75 and 80 percent of the city's almost 8,000 Jews were born in Russia or Russian Poland. Both the 1910 and 1920 U.S. Census found well over 7,000 Russian Jews in the city.[9]

Immigrants who chose Providence did so primarily for two reasons: 1) the city's economic prosperity, and 2) the chance to be near other Jews. In 1900, Providence was the prosperous manufacturing center of a generally flourishing state. The jewelry industry provided over 12,000 jobs, and employment opportunities existed in textiles, cotton weaving, dyeing, hosiery, and knit wear. For many immigrants, the city's economic activity was enticing. Rhode Island's per capita income was $293, compared to the national average of $203. Also attractive was the opportunity to be near other Jews. As one third-generation American Jew recalled, "My grandfather peddled on Block Island, but he wanted to be among Jewish people and so moved to Providence."[10]

## Residence

Like other urban immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Russian Jews crowded into ethnic enclaves. Within the tight confines of the Jewish quarter, the immigrants found work, housing, and social and cultural institutions that offered continuity with the past as well as transition to the new life. Like Jews in New York's Lower East Side, Boston's North End, and Chicago's West Side, the Providence Jews crowded into the small area known as the North End. In their study of generational change in Providence Jewry, *Jewish Americans*, Sidney Goldstein and Clavin Goldscheider found that

> Preoccupied with economic survival and disoriented through migration and resettlement, they sought the comfort of their own communal institutions. The immigrants needed self-contained, segregated, and tightly knit community life as a kind of decompression chamber in which they could begin the adjustment process to the new forces of a society vastly different from the old country.[11]

Crowded into the North End along Chalkstone Avenue, Shawmut Avenue, and North Main Street, the early Jewish settlers found their transition to the new American lifestyle a little easier.

When the first wave of immigrants from Russia came in 1880, they chose the North End because the nucleus of the Providence Jewish community

already existed there. The Jewish institutions and aid societies were already established there, providing the new settlers with some assistance in their new surroundings. Further, the North End provided the immigrants, who had little money, with cheap housing.

Many Providence residents came to look on the North End as the area of the "Jewish problem". Most houses in the area were crowded and without baths. Many of the streets were unpaved. Housing consisted primarily of two-and three-story wooden frame buildings with three tenements on each upper floor. The first floor was usually occupied by a small shop or industry.[12] Jacob Riis's description of New York Jews in *How the Other Half Lives* could well apply to Providence: "The tenements grow taller and the gaps in their ranks close up rapidly as we invade the Hebrew Quarter".[13] Eleanor Horvitz's study of Jewish life in the North End at the turn of the century provides clues as to the severity of the crowding in this section of town. On just one street alone, North Davis, there was enough business traffic to support 16 grocery stores, 2 variety stores, 2 liquor stores, 3 bakeries, 2 blacksmith shops, 5 tailor shops, 7 shoemaker shops, 7 junk businesses, 2 dry goods stores, 5 tinsmiths, a capmaker, a furniture dealer and a grain dealer.[14]

A second important area of Jewish settlement at the beginning of the 1890s developed in South Providence on Gay Street, Willard Avenue, Prairie Avenue, and Robinson Street. While never attaining the size of the North End, the so-called Willard Avenue section grew into a tight community with a strong sense of identity. Communal activities were frequent and included dances, lectures, picnics, and literary debates. Since the area also contained shops supplying most of its residents' needs, the Jews of South Providence looked upon their neighborhood as a self-contained unit.[15] In her observation of the South End in 1910, Bessie Edith Bloom Wessel concluded tentatively that the area had better conditions than the North. These conclusions were mostly unfounded, however, since the South End, like the North, was seriously burdened with overcrowded tenements and unpaved and congested streets.[16]

A third smaller Jewish settlement arose in Fox Point, composed primarily of families with stores along South Main Street. This area, however, never gained much importance. While the three areas did not harbor all Providence Jews, the few scattered in other neighborhoods had little connection with the city's organized Jewish life.

As the early settlers became better established economically and as the North End and South Providence became overcrowded with new immigrants and the children of the earlier ones, expansion into new parts of the city was inevitable. Alice Goldstein, in her study of Jewish residential

mobility at the turn of the century, concluded that the development of the Jewish community in Providence indicated high levels of immigration as well as considerable movement within the city. Migration out of the North End to the East Side began early in the 20th century, as families moved across North Main Street into the blocks ascending the hill — onto Pratt, Pleasant, Howell, Lippitt, and Benefit Streets and Carrington Avenue. Moving to the East Side was considered a real step up the social ladder. "The Jews who remained behind in the North End thought of it as the hoity-toity section," according to Alice Goldstein.[17] Jews from South Providence were more likely to move into the blocks between Broad Street and Elmwood Avenue. The cleavage between the North End and South Providence was thus maintained, even as Jews left their initial areas of settlement. While there was certainly considerable movement within the city, the North End nevertheless remained the dominant section until the 1930s.

## Occupation

In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan described the background of most Jews who entered America in the late 19th century: "They arrived with no money, few skills", and little education.[18] The newcomers were also the victims of a language barrier which hindered economic advancement. Even those having some job skill were obliged to enter low-level jobs because of their poor command of English. To earn money, immigrants labored in slaughterhouses, docks, construction gangs, factories, mills, and sweatshops. Most worked long hours in the most abject conditions and received low wages. "Penury and poverty are wedded everywhere to dirt and disease, and Jewtown is no exception," wrote Riis.[19]

While some Jews remained as workers, others soon entered businesses for themselves, as peddlers or small shop owners. They went on their own not only because of the deplorable factory conditions, but also because of the long inflexible work hours which interfered with their religious rituals. In business for themselves, Jews could more faithfully observe the Sabbath and Holy Days. One second generation Jew recalled, "They had to look for their own business where they did not have to go to work on Shabbos (Sabbath). If you went to work for someone, you had to work their hours."[20]

"Having come to the United States with considerable entrepreneurial experience, but little ready cash, peddling was a logical avenue of commerce for Russian Jews," observed Thomas Kessner in *The Golden Door*.[21] In a short time, peddling and the installment business were widely taken up by recent immigrants. Most observers of the Jewish section were astounded at the high concentration of small businesses and peddlers in such a small

area of the city. Further, the growth of the Jewish population created a demand for stores catering to Jewish needs — kosher bakeries and meat shops.

The 1905 Rhode Island State Census showed that 21 per cent of all employed male Russian Jews were peddlers, and a further 22 per cent were retail dealers or salesmen, while the rest were engaged in a wide variety of occupations. Conducting a random sample of the employment of 100 Jewish families throughout Providence in 1910, Bessie Edith Bloom confirmed this diversity of occupations among recent Russian immigrants. She gave the following breakdown.[23]

| | |
|---|---|
| Peddlers 24 | Butchers 2 |
| Storeowners 17 | Painters 1 |
| Jewelry Workers 12 | Real Estate 1 |
| Tailors 8 | Expressmen 1 |
| Tinsmiths 7 | Carpenters 1 |
| Laborers 6 | Glaziers 1 |
| Shoemakers 6 | Capmakers 1 |
| Bakers 2 | Others 10 |

Though the numbers are small, they are representative of poor Jewish districts.

As the years passed, many of the immigrants acquired some wealth. Though Bloom's figures do not bear this out, by 1910 the numbers of retail merchants, proprietors of medium-sized businesses, white-collar workers, and professionals, though still small, constituted a much larger share of the gainfully employed Jews than had existed a decade or two earlier.

Most Jews settling in the Providence community were originally Orthodox, as were the majority of Jews who migrated to the United States at the turn of the century. Through synagogue attendance, community activities, and religious festivals they tried to maintain their old culture in the new urban setting. In fact, the city's earliest synagogues were almost exclusively Orthodox. Although the first congregation in Providence had been organized in 1855, it was not until the late 19th century, with the influx of Russian Orthodox Jews, that Providence witnessed a significant growth in the numbers of Jewish congregations. Between 1855 and 1920, 23 separate synagogues were chartered in the city. A number of others existed on a less formal basis. These places of worship played an important role in the immigrant's urban experience, both religious and social. Worship brought the newcomers together and helped ease the transition between the old world and the new. They sponsored sports teams, dances, religious gatherings, and educational classes.

By the late 1880s, a number of Orthodox congregations had already been established. They met in rented halls, places of business, and even private homes. Among them were Sons of Jacob established on Goddard Street, Sons of Zion on Canal Street, Sons of David on Chalkstone Avenue, and Congregation Tiferes Israel on Shawmut Street. *The Providence Journal* story of the opening of one of the city's first synagogue buildings, Chevra Bnai Zion in 1892, points up the importance of religious worship to Providence Jewry: "... the entire Hebrew population in the northern section of the city turned out to witness the dedication of the new edifice."[24]

For most Jews, retaining their Orthodox heritage in the new urban society was a great struggle. City life made the observance of Orthodox customs very difficult. A group of German Jewish intellectuals, recognizing this dilemma, in 1877 established a Reform movement.[25] They attempted to reconcile Judaism with the demands of the city by relaxing the rigorous laws and rituals of Orthodoxy which could be difficult to observe. Russian immigrants at first spurned Reform Judaism and struggled with much difficulty to preserve their old customs. For many the economic necessity of violating the Sabbath posed a dilemma. A further problem was the inadequacy of Hebrew education in America and the declining strength of the rabbinate. Also, many found that the old religious practices inhibited their acceptance into the secular world of the city and tended to separate Jews from their Christian brethren.

Most immigrant parents saw to it that their children received some sort of Orthodox Jewish education. In 1892, the first Talmud Torah, or Hebrew School, was opened in Providence. Modeled after the European Talmud Torah, a charity school for those unable to afford tuition, these schools admitted children from poor families free of charge. By 1910, there were two large Talmud Torahs in Providence, where the children were taught the scriptures in Hebrew, and at least three Sabbath schools, where the children were taught Jewish history in English.[26]. As for public schooling, the majority attended State Street or Chalkstone Avenue Primary Schools, went on to Candace Street Grammar School, and then on to Hope High School.

While most Jews upon arrival opted to remain Orthodox, over a period of time many became less pious in their new urban environment. This turning away from Orthodoxy was particularly evident among second generation Jews, who were less devoted to the strict Orthodox culture of their parents and were more impelled to become a part of middle class city life. By the 1920s, the first Conservative congregation in Providence was established. Comprised primarily of second generation Russian immigrants, Conservative Judaism was a compromise between their American middle class desire for secular integration and their ties to the traditional culture. Unlike

Reform Judaism, which was viewed as too liberal, Conservative Judaism retained many of the old customs, while doing away with some of the ancient rituals which they considered outdated. Though this new brand of Judaism became increasingly popular, not all Russian immigrants switched their allegiance. Many remained steadfast in their Orthodoxy.

## Assistance And Benevolence Associations

Adjustment to urban life was difficult for Providence's Russian Jews. Many, especially those who came before 1900, had never been exposed to a city before. The massiveness of the buildings, the throngs of people, and the quick-paced life were terrifying to many of the newcomers. Knowing no English, possessing few job skills and little education, these early settlers often needed assistance in their efforts to start a new life. Never having experienced life in which they were granted religious, civil, and political freedom, many Jews did not understand how to deal with it. Though many of those who came after 1900 were more skilled, had attained higher levels of education, and to an increasing extent had been exposed to some city life back home, the transition to new surroundings was still difficult.

By the time Eastern European Jews arrived in Providence in large numbers, "German" Jews were already favorably established in the community. Many owned businesses and had become wealthy. These middle class "American" Jews saw the large numbers of Russian immigrants as a serious problem.[27] They were sensitive to the mounting anti-immigrant and antisemitic feelings that the influx was creating among Gentiles, fearful that, by association, they would lose some of their social status. Many non-Jews in the city saw the Russians as dirty, physically inferior, and vulgar. The "German" Jews, too, felt superior to the recent immigrants, whom they viewed as unrefined and unsophisticated.

Despite the antipathy of the Americanized Jews to the newcomers, the "German" Jews did accept some responsibility for the social adjustment and physical welfare of the recent immigrants.[28] Arthur Goren, in *The American Jews,* explained the reaction of the established Jews thus:

> In part their response was self-serving: expediting the integration of the new arrivals would remove the stigma the immigrants placed on all of them. However, American Jews also felt compassion for victims of oppression and recognized their common identity. While they complained of the continued flow of immigration, they opened their philanthropic institutions to the Russian Jews, raised funds to meet their needs, and fought efforts to limit immigration by law.[29]

The community responded to the newcomers initially by expanding some of the existing facilities and establishing several new ones. Most of the early work was done by the synagogues, which, through charitable funds, took care of some of the immigrants' needs. While the synagogues continued to serve an important function in this regard, as time went on, new beneficial and charitable organizations were established. By 1889, the problems of the newcomers were sufficiently pressing to inspire a small group of women in the North End to establish the Ladies Hebrew Union Aid Association for the purpose of giving aid and charity to the poor. Concerned with the care of the sick and destitute, they opened the Jewish Home for the Aged at 161 Orms Street. By 1912, they needed more space and purchased a new house at 191 Orms Street, where it was to remain until 1932.

The Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA), a social, beneficial, and literary group, obtained a charter in 1898, while the Young Women's Hebrew Association (YWHA) was chartered in 1900. Devoted to educating the new immigrants, these groups sponsored lectures, literary debates, Jewish history classes for adults, and Bible classes for children. They further sponsored athletic teams, dances, and other social gatherings for the newcomers.[30]

The Gemilath Chesed, or Providence Hebrew Free Loan Association, which met for the first time in 1903 at 317 North Main Street, was an invaluable organization for the Russian settlers. The organization lent money without interest to immigrants, to be paid back in small installments.[31] It was essential to the immigrant, who, without money, relied on the association to enable him to start a business or obtain merchandise for peddling. During these years, the first national organization of Jewish women was established. Founded in 1893 to deal with the problems of philanthropy, education, and religion, the National Council of Jewish Women established a Providence branch at the turn of the century. In 1908, the Council spent over $1000 for the North End Dispensary. Located at 49 Orms Street, its purpose was to provide surgical and medical treatment to the poor and needy sick of all denominations. Rendering much needed help to the newcomers, in one year alone, 1908, the dispensary provided a total of 4868 treatments, including 44 operations, to 1579 patients.[32]

Other groups were formed to look after needy immigrants, such as the Miriam Society, a group of twelve women, organized for the purpose of maintaining beds in area hospitals for newcomers. For a period of 18 months, during 1908-09, they contributed $425 to various hospitals. One thousand patients were treated at the Rhode Island Hospital through their efforts.[33] The Jewish Orphanage of Providence, founded in 1910 at 1213 North Main Street, sheltered 51 Jewish children, many of whom were

themselves Russian immigrants. The year 1909 saw the formation of the Providence Hebrew Butchers Associaton and the North End Traders Mutual Aid Association to provide mutual aid to their members. Besides the numerous charities and mutual aid associations, there were six literary societies and several social clubs, which sponsored English classes, balls, athletic teams, and other functions for the Jewish community and newcomers.

In "The Year 1905 in Rhode Island," Beryl Segal described a new type of communal activity that took place in the city between 1903 and 1914. The 1903 Russian pogroms and two years of violence that followed spurred a burst of activity on the part of Providence's Jewish community. Ad hoc coordinating bodies raised emergency money for relief purposes, organized protests, and negotiated with members of the American government to intercede on behalf of Russia's Jews.[34]

Despite the array of social, philanthropic, and charitable organizations, there was much room for improvement. The societies were often poorly organized and operated haphazardly. Frequently short of fund, they received in those days no support from the federal government. There was no central organizing bureau to coordinate activity or to prevent overlap of functions. As Bessie Edith Bloom noted, "Thousands and thousands of dollars are spent for charity every year, and various societies are working for similiar ends. Organization, experienced leadership, and scientific methods would lead to greater economy and to better results."[35] Though there were many programs for immigrants, due to the sheer size of the influx or the lack of caring, the newcomers, with few skills and a tremendous language handicap, never received the attention they needed in a new country. While the Council of Jewish Women and the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) were in existence at the time to help them, the immigrants encountered many difficulties upon arrival.

Some were met at the docks by relatives, hustled through immigration, and given comprehensive assistance for a temporary settlement, but many arrived in the city with no advisers to guide them or see to it that their early days in the community went smoothly and that they found a job and had enough to eat. Most were forced to fend for themselves, which for many immigrants was an onerous burden.

## Soviet Jews

By the late 1920s, many of Providence's second generation Jews had moved to the East Side. Here they built major Jewish institutions that continue to serve Jewish people throughout the city and state. It was not

until 1950 that a significant number of Providence Jews began to move out of the city and into surrounding suburbs. Synagogues and other organizations were established in Cranston and Warwick. Soon, Jewish communities were formed in Kingston, Narragansett, Westerly, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Barrington, and East Greenwich. In fact, today, there are few areas of the state in which Jews do not live.

In order to coordinate the activities of the expanding Jewish community, to prevent waste of resources, and to insure comprehensive programming, the General Jewish Committee of Providence was formed in 1945. Reorganized as the Jewish Federation of Rhode Island in 1971, it is now located at 130 Sessions Street in Providence and serves as the central funding body for many of the state's Jewish agencies. As of this writing, there are over 22,000 Jews in the state, according to an *American Jewish Yearbook* survey. Less than half reside in Providence, the remainder choosing the outlying suburbs.[36] The most recent group of Jewish settlers in the city are the Soviet Jews.

In the years after World War II, very few Jews left the Soviet Union. From October 1968 to October 1982, however, 261,994 Jews were granted exit visas. Over 162,000 of them went to Israel. Most of the remainder came to the United States. According to Zvi Gitelman in "Why are they Choosing America?", there are several reasons why Jews favor the United States over Israel. These include the belief that the United States holds more vocational and economic opportunities, the fear of war in Israel, and the desire to live in a powerful country.[37]

Since 1970, when the first Soviet Jews settled in Providence, over 500 have entered the city. Due to some out-migration, usually for employment purposes, there are currently just over 400 in the city. They constitute a small, but important community. About half of them arrived in 1979. During 1982, only three are believed to have entered the city, reflecting the recent Soviet cutback in emigration. Over 50 per cent of the immigrants from the Soviet Union chose to live in New York; those who came to Providence did so for a number of reasons. Some did so because they already had friends or relatives in the city, some to settle in a place where life would be calmer than in the major cities, and others because they were directed to Providence by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in Rome. Isaac Vaisfeld, who came to Providence from Odessa in 1975, described his reasons thus: "We looked at the map, me and my wife, and we see it is close to the ocean. Odessa is on the Black Sea, and we say it will be good."[38]

A detailed explanation of the complicated dynamics of how and why the Soviets let Jews out in some years, but not in others, would exceed the scope of this paper. Basically, however, as Jack Spitzer, President Of B'nai B'rith

International explained, "Jews are pawns of U.S.-Soviet relations."[39] Starting in 1965, Soviet authorities, determined to enter into a period of detente with the United States, began to let Jews leave. When the Soviets want improved relations with the United States or are interested in purchasing U.S. merchandise, they let Jews out as a signal of good behavior. When relations between the two countries are strained, as they are today, few Jews get out. From a high of 51,000 departures in 1979, only about 3,000 Jews were expected to leave in 1982.

In many cases, Soviet Jews came to America for reasons other than those of the settlers at the turn of the century. Unlike the earlier period, Jews in the Soviet Union today are not confined to the Pale or subject to violent pogroms. They are, however, victims of a virulent, government-sponsored antisemitic campaign, which prevents them from access to top jobs in government and industry, from the universities, and from economic advancement. Those who are courageous enough to apply for visas often lose their jobs, are stripped of academic credentials, ostracized by friends, and thrown into jail. Unlike earlier times, however, most Jews in the Soviet Union today are not religious and do not practice Judaism. They are forbidden by the government to speak Hebrew, own Bibles, or participate in the culture with which they are identified. For the most part, the principal motivation for emigration was to find better economic conditions, and not for religious reasons. As Dan Jacobs points out in *Studies of the Third Wave*, "Only to the extent that anitsemitism hampered their opportunities was it a motivation for leaving."[40] Mira Eides, a Providence resident since 1973, explained why she came: "There was no future for us in the Soviet Union. We left so our children could have a better chance to make it."[41] Jews also came to seek political freedom and to escape a totalitarian society plagued by economic shortages.

Jews at the turn of the century, likewise, left to find better economic opportunities, but they had a much better sense of religion because of their Judaic background and their identity as victims of organized persecution, pogroms, and banishments. For the earlier immigrants, fleeing for their lives, America was important not only as a land of opportunity, but, to a much larger extent than today, as a land of religious freedom and refuge from life-threatening persecution.

## Assistance And Benevolence Associations

The transition from a closed, totalitarian society, where the government provides most of life's needs and where, as a result, individual initiative and responsibility are reduced, to an open society based on responsibility and individual action is difficult for most Soviet Jews.[42] Though, unlike the

earlier period, many Soviets have been exposed to the fast pace of city living back home, it is still hard for the newcomers to make choices which were once the prerogative of the state — which job to take and where to live. Most immigrants are deeply suspicious of their neighbors and authority, including resettlement workers, and have a rough time understanding their new freedom. Further, though often educated and skilled, few can speak English, a barrier which makes their transition much more burdensome than it would otherwise be.

In late 19th and early 20th century Providence, there were several aid groups, each devoted to meeting a certain aspect of the settler's needs. There was, however, no central agency to make sure that all of the immigrant's wants were met. The various assistance groups were not well coordinated, were often poorly financed, and could not adequately meet all of the newcomer's transition needs. Today, however, the resettlement of Jews is well funded and highly organized. From the moment the immigrant steps off the plane, all of his requirements are taken care of by the Jewish Family and Children's Service, an agency funded by the Jewish Federation. Social workers at the Service take on major responsibilities for the initial resettlement of new families until they are reasonably well established and able to make it on their own.

In 1900, unless an immigrant had family in Providence, nobody was likely to meet him at the docks upon arrival, and no organization existed to provide him with money to relieve the burden of his first several months in the city or to see that he secured a decent job or adequate residence. Today, however, Esther Miller, supervisor of the refugee program at the Jewish Family and Children's Service, is notified ahead of time by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society that a new immigrant will be coming. For over ten years, she has met every Soviet arriving at Theodore Francis Green Airport. With the help of volunteers from the National Council of Jewish Women, Ms. Miller rents a totally furnished apartment and stocks it with groceries even before the family arrives in America. "The minute they come into America, they can set up housekeeping," Ms. Miller explained.[43]

Each family is completely supported for three months with a check from the Service while the members learn English. Though Ms. Miller would not reveal the amount provided per family in 1982, the 1976 figure was $80 a week for a family of four.[44] Some hardship cases require more than three months of help and may be provided for for up to one year. Unlike the earlier period in which the federal government gave no money to communities to help resettle the Jews. It now gives the city $900 for each newcomer. This is almost one-half the average total cost to the community of $1850 for each settler.[45] Praising the ability of the Jewish population to absorb the Soviets, the United Way

concluded, "Because of the small size of the Russian community and the ability of the Jewish community to meet most refugees' needs," there have been few Jewish immigrants on public assistance or welfare programs.[46]

To ease the pains of adjustment, all of the immigrant's needs are cared for. Adults are enrolled free of charge for three months in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the Jewish Community Center almost immediately upon arriving in the city. These classes are mandatory for those who want to receive aid from the community. Younger children are enrolled in the Hebrew Day School. In 1981, 30 Soviet Jewish children studied there. The immigrant is given free membership in the recreational and social/educational programs at the Jewish Community Center for the first year and offered reduced membership rates thereafter.[47] Full free medical care is provided at The Miriam Hospital. The Bureau of Jewish Education sponsors free cultural and educational services, while various congregations in the state have also been actively involved in the resettlement work, including Temples Beth-El and Emanuel in Providence and Temple Torat Yisrael in Cranston.[48] Most important, the Jewish Family and Children's Service has been highly successful in its efforts to place immigrants in decent employment through Jewish contacts in the business world. Most Soviet Jews have acquired jobs within several weeks.[49]

Within a relatively short time, when the settlers are earning their own wages and are more accustomed to their new society, they are taken off the Service's rolls. The role of the Service, however, does not end. Social workers make themselves available for routine support and crisis counseling throughout the Jewish immigrant's early years in Providence.[50] Primarily through the work of the Service, the transition of the Soviet Jew, though difficult, is less onerous than that of his predecessor at the turn of the century.

Several non-Jewish agencies have also played important roles in Soviet Jewish resettlement. The International Institute, largely because of its Russian-speaking director, has helped to counsel and advise refugees, while the Rochambeau branch of the Providence Public Library on the East Side has started a collection of Russian books.[51]

## Residence

Russian settlers at the turn of the century lived primarily in the North End and in South Providence. Often residing in small, run-down tenements on unkempt streets, Jews were crowded among their co-religionists and dominated whole neighborhoods of the city. Observers knew very well

where the Jewish section was, for the Jews there were a majority. The situation for Soviet immigrants today is very different, since they are too few to be a majority in any neighborhood. They have been settled in comfortable single and multiple family dwellings, located along clean, tree-lined streets. The Jewish Family and Children's Service assures that the immigrant's very first house is in a respectable neighborhood and has ample room and sufficient furniture. Since they are fewer in number than the early settlers, recent immigrants have not experienced the housing shortages which occurred in the early days from the vast influx of immigrants. New Soviet arrivals are not crowded together in tiny apartments as were the earlier group and, in fact, the majority have relocated at least once in search of better housing.

Two-thirds of the newcomers were settled on the East Side of Providence, many in the area between Rochambeau Avenue and Twelfth Street, primarily because of the considerable Jewish community already in that area.[53] The East Side houses more Jews than any other section of the city and contains one of the community's most important social institutions, the Jewish Community Center at 401 Elmgrove Avenue. Former Soviet Jews do not dominate the East Side as their predecessors once did the North End sections or South Providence at the turn of the century. While many new Soviet immigrants live close to one another, many other groups also inhabit the East Side. In fact, 10 per cent of the Soviet Jewish newcomers live in South Providence.[54]

As in the earlier period, there is a good deal of residential mobility. As the immigrants become adjusted and improve their lot, many move to more attractive apartments or homes. Some have moved as many as four times since coming to Rhode Island.[55] According to Esther Miller, "They stay on the East Side if they make a little money. If they do very well, they go to the suburbs."[56] Fifteen per cent of the settlers have bought homes in Cranston, Warwick, or Pawtucket. Some, in fact, have bought homes in South Providence because real estate is less costly in this area than in some other sections.

The native Providence Jewish community has been more sympathetic toward immigrants than were German Jews in the late 19th century. Nevertheless, the Soviet refugees, at least at first, are not completely accepted socially by the resident Jews. They are viewed by some as foreigners with a strange language, culture, and attitude. "While there is not hostility as in the early days, there has not been complete social acceptance either," observed Elliot Schwartz, Director of the Bureau of Jewish Education.[57] For the first few years, the refugees tend to socialize primarily

with one another. Feeling like outsiders in the new society, they seek relationships with one another to help ease the transition between the old world and the new. Over time, however, the newcomers have generally been accepted by both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, particularly as they have learned English and become more accustomed to American culture and institutions.

## Occupation

The Soviet Jews who come to America are very different from their earlier counterparts. Most today are skilled workers with solid educational backgrounds. To be sure, there are still some with little education and scant vocational training, but they are a minority. The United Way has concluded, "The Soviet Jews as a group are relatively well positioned culturally, educationally, and by work experience to make a successful adjustment to life in this country."[58] The transition, however, has not been entirely smooth or trouble-free.

In a study, "Soviet Jews' Adjustment to the United States," Rita and Julius Simon found that the current wave of immigrants "bring much human capital with them."[59] Their 1982 survey revealed that the mean level of education nationwide is 14 years for adult male immigrants and 13 years for females. Sixty-four per cent received diplomas from an institute of higher education, which is equivalent to an American baccalaureate degree. Ten per cent had studies toward a higher degree, and five per cent had completed the degree.[60]

Many had similar achievements in their occupations. In 1977, the *American Jewish Yearbook* categorized immigrants according to the jobs they had held in the Soviet Union. Of those who came between 1971-75, 28 per cent were professionals, 11 per cent engineers, and 12 per cent technicians, while 14 per cent were white-collar workers (managerial, clerical, sales). Only 17 per cent were blue-collar workers (machine trades, benchwork, structural work), 12 per cent in service trades, two per cent in transportation, and only one per cent unskilled.[61] Appreciably more skilled than their counterparts at the turn of the century, Soviet Jews today are better equipped for rapid economic advancement than were the early settlers.

Despite the high level of skills and education, however, the transition from the Soviet to the American economy is difficult for most workers. Because of language barriers, problems of professionals and technicians in gaining certification and acquiring western knowledge and skills, and mismatches between job categories in the two countries, few immigrants are able at first to find employment similar to that which they held in the Soviet

Union.[62] Most must settle for jobs for which they are overqualified until they have sufficient knowledge of English. Engineers work as draftsmen and doctors as medical assistants. Esther Miller described their predicament:

> In the beginning, it is very hard for them. They can be resentful at having to do some menial work. Somehow it is not what they expected. But after six months they start to realize that whatever work they are doing is a beginning for them, that when you are in a new country, you have to start from the bottom.[63]

It takes time for them to start believing they will ever attain the level of skills or position they held in Russia. Very few understand the concept of economic mobility.[64]

All Soviet Jews who have entered Providence found employment within a few weeks of arrival through the efforts of the Jewish Family and Children's Service. In this respect, they have been fortunate, as local Jewish businesses have been able to absorb the small numbers involved. In other cities, where the influx has been larger and the Jewish community less helpful, Jews have not been as fortunate. Nationwide, within six months after entry, only 60 per cent of the males and 34 per cent of the females found employment. Within a year, this number had risen to only 78 per cent and 56 per cent.[65] "I get the first job for them, usually in a business or factory," said Ms. Miller. "The men who give the jobs are aware that they will not get full value for their money for a while."[66]

Success stories in the employment field are becoming more and more evident. Dual incomes, resulting from the strong Soviet tradition of women working outside the home, have permitted many Jews to become homeowners, possibly as many as 30 per cent.[67] As the English language is learned and recertification and retraining completed, the better educated and skilled immigrants have made significant gains in employment. Some now fill positions comparable to those they held in the Soviet Union. More than 15 are engineers, and at least eight have opened their own businesses. Recent immigrants own Providence branches of the International House of Pancakes and of Dunkin' Donuts, a delicatessen, and an auto body shop.[68] While many work in the jewelry shops and factories, as in 1900, a much smaller proportion today are involved in peddling or small businesses. On the other hand, a much larger number are in the professions and skilled trades, a number that will increase as more Soviets become familiar with the English language and American customs. An occupational breakdown for recent immigrants is contained in the Appendix. For more recent immigrants and those who had a hard time learning the language, economic

advancement was slow. Some remained in unskilled jobs at close to the minimum wage, particularly those with few skills.[69]

## Religious Life

Unlike the earlier settlers, the current wave come to America with little regard for religion, let alone Orthodoxy. Brought up in an intensely anti-religious society, where Hebrew and the Bible were banned, Jewish schools outlawed, and Jews discriminated against, few retained the spirituality or "Jewishness" of their ancestors. The thriving Jewish culture of the Pale has, for the most part, been replaced by a secularized Soviet Jewish society. It is a great paradox that Jews are not allowed to learn about or participate in that which has marked them for abuse — their religion. Certainly, a few have retained their pious tradition. They, however, are to a large extent the elderly, alive before religion was outlawed or those old enough to have parents who still observe the faith.

Only 2.1 per cent of the Soviet Jews in America considered themselves to be "very religious" in the Soviet Union. Another 13.3 per cent described themselves as "somewhat or fairly religious." The largest number, however, 66.3 per cent, considered themselves "not at all religious" in their homeland. Only 10 per cent described themselves as having had some form of Jewish education while they were living in the Soviet Union.[70] The United Way study revealed that "Unlike earlier waves of Jewish immigration to this country, the Soviet Jews found themselves with few cultural and religious links to their nominal co-religionists who presented themselves as their hosts."[71] As a result, the integration of the immigrants into the Jewish community, not only socially, but religiously has been extremely difficult.

In 1900 considerable stress was placed upon Americanization of large numbers of Russian Jewish settlers, who were steeped in Orthodox religion. Religious Jews were encouraged to become less observant in order to become more a part of secular city life. Today, however, the pull of the Jewish community is in the opposite direction, to expose them to religion and educate them about their Judaic heritage. According to Elliott Schwartz, most of the Providence newcomers know nothing about Judaism. A few of the older ones speak Yiddish, but it is unknown to the youths. None know any Hebrew.[72]

Like the Jewish Family and Children's Service, The Jewish Bureau of Education plays an integral role in the resettlement process. The Bureau has taken primary responsibility for the newcomers' Jewish education. Their reorientation into Jewish life is started almost immedately upon arrival. The English as a Second Language courses, mandatory for all settlers, have a

Judaic content. The materials used to teach English, while simplified for purposes of instruction, all relate stories about the Jewish religion.[73] Children under high school age are sent free of charge to the Providence Hebrew Day School, where they learn about Jewish culture, along with their daily lessons. The city's congregations and the Jewish Community Center have all offered free one-year membership.

The Jewish Commnunity Center has also set up weekly lectures on tradition and history, along with discussion sessions and bus trips to such Jewish attractions as the Touro Synagogue in Newport.[74] In April 1981, the Jewish Community Center sponsored a Passover service for Soviet Jews. One hundred fifty immigrants appeared, many hearing for the first time the story of the Jews' release from slavery in Egypt.[75] Several congregations extended their concern for Soviet Jews beyond free membership. Torat Yisrael in Cranston and Temple Emanuel in Providence have special discussion sessions and services for Russian immigrants.

The reaction of the immigrants to Jewish education is mixed. Some are interested in learning about the religion which caused them such hardship in the Soviet Union. Others show little enthusiasm. Many want to escape Judaism in the unaccustomed free environment and start over with a new life.[76] While no studies have been conducted to analyze the reaction of Soviet Jews to Judaism once in Providence, the work of Rita and Julius Simon may provide some hints. Conducted in 1982, their nationwide survey found that 25.6 per cent of the Soviet Jews in America consider themselves "somewhat religious," 12.1 per cent "fairly religious" and 3.8 per cent "very religious" compared to 16 per cent who said they were either "somewhat, fairly, or very" religious in the Soviet Union.[77] It appears that, over time, Soviet Jews in America become increasingly religious. In the earlier wave of immigration, the opposite was true. Unlike Jews at the turn of the century, however, Soviet Jews spend little time in the synagogue. According to the Simonses, only 7 per cent "attend regularly." Of these 89 per cent are affiliated with a congregation — 37 per cent Conservative, and 34 per cent Reform.[78]

## Conclusion

The experiences of Soviet Jews in Providence differ significantly from those of Russian Jews who came to the city at the turn of the century. Far fewer in number, recent Soviet immigrants for the most part are better educated, more highly skilled, and less religious than their earlier counterparts. Further, the Jewish community which the Soviet emigrés have encountered since 1970 has little resemblance to that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Larger and better organized, the established Jewish

community of today is more sympathetic to newcomers than was that of the turn of the century. The transition for the recent settlers has not been as difficult as that of the first waves of Russian immigrants. Entering America better equipped for city life, Soviet settlers since 1970 have found a Jewish community very willing to extend a helping hand.

While groups experienced serious dislocations in the move from the old world to the new, the Soviet Jews have had an easier time adjusting to Providence than did their predecessors.

## APPENDIX

### Employment Patterns Of Soviet Jews Who Came To Providence Between 1970-1980

While a complete listing of the occupations of the newcomers is not available, below is a break-down of 167 Soviet Jews who settled in Providence between 1970-1980.

Machine Operators 18
Jewelry Worker 15
Engineer 15
Student 11
Bookkeeper 7
Auto mechanic 6
Draftsperson 6
Seamstress 4
Programmer 3
Carpenter 2
Sewing machine mechanic 2
Electrician 2
Medical assistant 2
Proprietor of jewelry business 2
Proprietor of delicatessen shop 2
Chemist 2
Keypunch operator 2
Technician 2
Toolmaker 2
Nurses aide 2
Typist 1
Proprietor of pancake restaurant 1
Proprietor of doughnut shop 1
Shoemaker 1
Bench worker 1
Mental worker 1
Manicurist 1
Chef 1
Department manager 1
Resettlement worker 1
Volinist 1
Pianist 1
Oceanographer 1
Real estate agent 1
Boxmaker 1
Office worker 1
Purchasing agent 1
Laundryman 1
Dressmaker 1
Printer 1
Supervisor 1
Polisher 1
Refrigerator mechanic 1
Plasterer 1
Physicist 1
Math. teacher 1
Proprietor of cleaning business 1

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Retired 22
Housewife 6
Unemployed 4
Disabled 1

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

## RUSSIAN JEWISH IMMIGRATION TO RHODE ISLAND

Brian Kempner has compared Russian Jewish immigrants who arrived in the 1970s with those who arrived around the turn of the century. David C. Adelman extracted from the Providence City Directories the names of Jewish residents of Providence for the years 1850 through 1900, taken at five-year intervals. These, in addition to lists from other town and city directories and naturalization lists, appeared in the first three volumes of the *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes.*[1] Based on this material, Dr. Marvin Pitterman analyzed and tabulated the occupations of Jewish residents, mostly immigrants from eastern Europe, during this period.[2] In a more recent paper Joel Perlmann of Harvard University discusses the occupations of Russian Jewish immigrants to Providence during the years 1900-1915.[3]

Taken together these several studies provide a fairly complete occupational history of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to Providence covering more than a century.

S.J.G.

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