

# Styles of Activism Within Refugee Communities: The Case of Soviet Jews and Vietnamese

Steven J. Gold

## Introduction

A growing body of literature has revealed the importance of ethnic-based community organizations to the success of immigrant groups in a wide variety of settings. Through the formation of collective endeavors, immigrant groups have been able to protect themselves from hostile environments and achieve economic and sometimes political power (Bonacich and Model 1980; Cummings 1980; Light 1972; Cohen 1969). Another body of literature illustrates the high levels of diversity, conflict, and competition which exist within many immigrant communities (Wirth 1928; Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Lyman 1974; Drake and Cayton 1944; Gitelman 1978; Skinner 1980).

Drawing on these two facets of the immigrant experience, this paper explores the role of refugee activists in the development of associations and subgroups within the populations of Soviet Jewish and Vietnamese refugees of the San Francisco Bay Area. Activists of both groups hope to provide benefits for themselves as well as other refugees by establishing organizations within their communities. In order to mobilize the mass of politically cynical refugees, activists attempt to appeal to the group's sense of ethnic identity.

For the purposes of this study, individuals are labeled activists if they were in one or more of the following categories: 1) members of mutual assistance associations, 2) politically active employees of refugee resettlement agencies, 3) businesspersons seeking to organize economic and/or community activities among refugees, 4) refugees seeking to represent the views of their community to Americans, and 5) refugee religious leaders.

Data for this study were collected from the following sources: 50 in-depth interviews with members of each refugee population and their resettlement staff, participant observation during 15 months of paid and volunteer work with Vietnamese resettlement agencies and 5 months as instructor of a job-finding class for Soviet émigrés, and one year of weekly home visits to Soviet Jewish and Vietnamese families as volunteer English tutor. To insure confidentiality, all names used in this report are pseudonyms. Quotes in this paper are taken directly from taped interviews.

While the Soviet Jewish and Vietnamese populations of the San Francisco Bay Area are culturally and demographically quite different, the two groups share enough similarities to provide for interesting comparisons. Similarities include the following: Both groups arrived in the Bay Area during the same historical period, from the mid-1970s to the present. Both groups are refugees from communist countries and both are beneficiaries of the same refugee-aid legislation. Both groups have a high proportion of skilled, educated, and white-collar workers. For example, 65% of Soviet Jews and 47% of Vietnamese arriving in the U.S. in 1976 had a white-collar occupation in their country of origin (Finnan 1981). Both groups are diverse and stratified in terms of class, ideological orientation,

religion (for Vietnamese) and extent of religious commitment, region of origin, and refugee experience. As refugees, many members of both groups are suspicious of political appeals by elites and often maintain an individualistic orientation in the U.S.

## The Vietnamese Community

The Vietnamese refugee population of San Francisco and Alameda County, California is a large and diverse group. Its 30,000 members (ORS 1983) are differentiated by religion, degree of education, past occupation, region of origin and degree of urbanization in Vietnam, and length of time in the U.S. A significant number of Vietnamese refugees in the San Francisco Bay Area are of Chinese ethnicity and hold varying degrees of Chinese identity.

Perhaps the strongest division within the Vietnamese community is by time of arrival in the U.S. One group arrived in 1975. They are more highly educated and speak English more fluently than later arrivals. They generally held white-collar occupations in Vietnam and never lived under communism (Montero and Dieppa 1982:77). Most Vietnamese activists arrived in the United States in 1975 or earlier.

A second group of Vietnamese arrived in the U.S. after 1978. They had less education and proficiency in English at the time of their arrival than did the earlier group: 1975 arrivals had an average of 9.5 years of education, while those arriving between 1980 and 1982 had an average of 7.05 years of education (ORR 1983:25). Recently arriving Vietnamese are more often from rural locations in Vietnam than are their earlier arriving countrymen. Sometimes called "boat people," they lived under communism and often suffered a traumatic escape from Vietnam followed by months in Asian refugee camps before their arrival in the U.S. Because of the dangerous conditions of escape, recent arrivals often left close relatives in Vietnam. There are many more males than females in this group (Skinner 1980; Gordon 1982:8).

Vietnamese are generally unfamiliar with status as an ethnic minority but maintain a high level of dedication to Vietnamese nationalism. Having suffered under corrupt and oppressive leaders, recently arriving Vietnamese are suspicious of activists who seek to represent them. Activists who receive salaries for their community work are viewed with the greatest cynicism.

Vietnamese refugee activists are highly visible to both Americans and other refugees. While politically active Vietnamese have formed a variety of organizations and associations without external support, religious, local, state and federal government agencies, and private foundations have funded refugee resettlement activities in such a way as to encourage the development of neighborhood, ethnic-based, decentralized, and often competitive agencies. While many agencies are run by Americans, every agency I contacted employed one or more refugee staffpersons. In this way, a large number of refugees are given a paying position of visibility to the refugee community which would be otherwise unavailable. Many agencies have their own ideological goals for the community which are treated with equal or even superior importance to the official purpose of the agency. In San Francisco and Oakland, I interviewed 24 politically active refugees who were involved in 12 resettlement agencies, religious congregations, and mutual assistance associations.

While refugee activists come from a variety of backgrounds and hold a diversity of opinions regarding the development of the refugee community in the U.S., they also share common characteristics. These include high class position, college education, experience with Americans, a degree of openness to assimilation, political ambition, and several ideological commonalities.

Of the 24 refugee activists much of this discussion is based upon, all have attended college or a university for at least two years. Most have a bachelors degree and 13 have a masters or doctorate. Their education was obtained in Vietnam, France, Japan, or the United States. Several studied in more than one country. As their high levels of education might indicate, refugee activists are often from the middle to upper classes of Vietnam. Middle class status is generally maintained in the U.S. While some activists suffer from economic difficulties, especially those associated with unstable employment, they are more economically secure than recent arrivals.

Vietnamese refugee activists are very familiar with American culture. All speak and write English fluently. All handle masses of paperwork in their jobs and several have authored or contributed to English-language resettlement publications. With the exception of 4 individuals, all of the refugee activists have been in the United States for eight or more years. Vietnamese refugee activists have the following five political characteristics in common.

- 1) Vietnamese refugee activists are working to develop political power and a political constituency for themselves and/or their associations among both refugee and American communities.
- 2) In order to develop political connections and secure funding, refugee activists can refer to American political ideologies to describe their own position and their organizations' goals. This skill is useful both in communicating with Americans as well as educating and appealing to the Vietnamese community. Refugee activists often use American political ideologies with great sophistication. They often compare Vietnamese to other American ethnic minority groups. Most often, "model minority" groups are mentioned: Chinese, Japanese, and Jews. One activist mentioned Mexicans as a group similar to Vietnamese because they face many problems but are striving to organize. While many Vietnamese refugee activists feel uncomfortable with the idea of being lumped together with other "Asians," some have adopted this concept because it is politically popular in the United States.
- 3) As refugees from a defeated country, Vietnamese community activists reflect a position of penance towards the failings which led to their country's downfall and continue to express suspicion towards various refugee leaders. In doing so, they can subtly refer to the danger of following other leaders who may not be as honest as themselves.
- 4) All refugee activists are concerned with the issue of paternalism. They do not want Americans and American institutions to have too much power over Vietnamese. Activists generally claim that Vietnamese in America must be able to "do for themselves" and take a major role in resettlement activities. They frequently complain that Americans will not let well-qualified Vietnamese fill positions of power in resettlement agencies and claim that American service providers have vested interests in keeping refugees dependent. Several activists argue that the organization of the U.S. welfare system injures refugees' pride and serves as a disincentive for finding employment.
- 5) Finally, all refugee activists have something to say about the assimilation of Vietnamese to the American way of life. This usually involves a statement about which Vietnamese customs should be maintained and which should be modified in the face of American customs.

While Vietnamese refugee activists often share a common class position and several common ideologies, they are divided on many issues. The most important fissure among activists stems from generational differences. The older generation lived in Vietnam until they were 30 to 40 years of age. Many were in the military and/or the government of

South Vietnam. Others were religious leaders or academics. With the exception of a Buddhist monk, all of the men I interviewed in this group were veterans. The one woman in this group was married to a Vietnamese soldier and had been employed in the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

The younger generation of activists came to the U.S. during their teens or early twenties. All of the younger activists attended college or a university in the United States. Because they came to the U.S. when they were young, none held positions of high status in Vietnam. Only one of the younger activists had military experience—as a cadet in the military academy. Members of the younger generation are well integrated into American life and are comfortable with American social and political perspectives.

The older refugee activists are accustomed to occupying positions of political power and influence. As an elite group, many knew each other before coming to the United States. This contributed to their rapid formation of mutual aid associations upon arrival in the U.S. A Vietnamese professor describes forming a refugee association:

When we were in Camp Pendleton in 1975, we were aware we needed to have something done for intellectuals. I was deputy dean of the Saigon Faculty of Law. My friends were judges, attorneys, and professors. They elected me as head of the group.

Because of their age, the older generation of activists share a view of Vietnamese history and national identity quite different from that held by younger activists: they grew up under French domination and experienced administration by the Nazi-endorsed Vichy and Japanese during the Second World War. Following the war, they lived through the Viet Minh's war of independence with France and the 1954 partitioning of Vietnam. This view of Vietnamese history is quite different from that of the younger generation, whose lives were dominated by the presence of American forces, the coups of the 1960s, and the war with Northern Communists.

The older generation of refugee activists tend to share ideology and goals concerning the Vietnamese community. They frequently derive their identity from connections with the past. They often interpret each other's behavior in terms of the status of their families in Vietnam and their geographical origin in Northern, Central, or Southern Vietnam. Many older activists maintain social connections with those of similar previous occupation.

Because they occupied high positions in South Vietnamese society, the older activists are especially concerned with their individual loss of status as well as their collective loss of legitimacy as the leaders of Vietnam. Many of their political goals are directed toward regaining lost status and reaffirming their position as the legitimate leaders of the Vietnamese community. From this position, the older activists seek to fulfill three goals within the refugee community.

First, older generation activists work to preserve something of Vietnamese society together with their high social ranks in it. Second, they maintain a high level of concern with the country of Vietnam itself. This involves helping more of their countrymen escape to the U.S. and supporting activities to fight the Communist government of Vietnam. Finally, older activists are interested in making a good impression on Americans, rewarding successful refugees, and disciplining refugee deviants.

As the former elite of the Republic of South Vietnam, older activists greatly miss their homeland and the positions they once occupied, and they work to preserve Vietnamese society and social ranks in the United States. A Vietnamese professor describes the loss of status felt by his cohort of refugees:

As intelligence people, intellectuals, we deal with status problem.

Now in here, we have to drop to the bottom of society and to work our way up to gain status.

In their desire to preserve something of the past, older generation activists frequently refer to the value of traditional Vietnamese culture in guiding refugee resettlement in the U.S. While what is referred to as traditional Vietnamese culture varies, it generally implies duty to extended family networks, deference to authority figures, and submission of individual desires to group standards.

Older activists feel that traditional Vietnamese culture can solve the economic and cultural problems of Vietnamese in the United States. They fear that American individualism poses a danger to Vietnamese tradition and will leave future generations "without roots" and in a "crisis of identity" if measures of preservation are not taken. An older activist describes how Vietnamese traditions have helped his family overcome the difficulties of resettlement:

It is easy for us because of tradition in the family. We solve problems easy because [the] family institution is a learning institution, family is a hospital, family is a bank. Some Americans ask me "why you came here with empty hands and now you have a house?"

I told them it is easier for us because my brother and sister help. Now I help them.

Everyone who is Vietnamese loves to study. We sent our children to school first for discipline and then education and so the teachers have authority and power to teach my children.

That is because of culture. It is not 100% because of intelligence. I do not think intelligence does much. They study much and could have something.

When I came here, I heard of stress. I could not understand what people meant. I looked it up in the dictionary. I do not think that we have stress at all. With the three philosophies [Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism], we have no stress.

Older activists claim that a major motivation for working for their community is duty. The notion of duty is applied both to themselves as well as other refugees. Young activists, on the other hand, seldom refer to "duty." Instead, they speak of their motivation for community work in terms of humanism and their ability to contribute. A Vietnamese doctor, now practicing in the San Francisco expresses the notion of duty:

As a doctor, I feel obliged to help the boat people. For our whole history, the educated men of Vietnam have to do something for the community. As one of the only Vietnamese doctors, I have something to offer. Those who settle first must help the later arrivals.

The older generation of activists retain their identification with the country of Vietnam. Many dream that someday the Communists will be defeated, and they support movements directed toward that goal. They also seek to help Vietnamese in camps overseas. As Alex Huynh of the Vietnamese Veterans Association states:

So we urge veterans here who can make a living and assimilate to American society already to think about over there and contribute over there. Write letters over there, encourage them in their depression. If they need, send them money, clothes. We ask governments in the Free World to use power to ask Communist government to let people out.

Members of the older generation of activists seem to be more concerned with the issue of making a good impression on Americans than are younger activists. Perhaps because of their high position in Vietnam, they wish to unify their community in a manner never attained in the past. As a result, older activists try to maintain high standards of behavior for Vietnamese refugees.

If other refugees in the United States do something wrong, it is very shameful and we feel very hurt. We try to do something to help so we won't be criticized by the American public. He's a Vietnamese, he does something wrong. We are Vietnamese, so we feel hurt. That is why we have to do something to help each other.

In their efforts to make a good impression on Americans, older activists are especially concerned with welfare and other public expenditures on refugees. Many commented that welfare robs refugees of their dignity and makes Americans view them as "freeloaders." They hope to reduce the numbers of Vietnamese on public assistance in order to convince politicians that additional arrivals will not be a burden. Alex Huynh of the Veterans Association comments:

Each individual in this country can get off welfare, the other person in camp can come in and take their place. So we must prove to government official so they won't be burden. It will help American society instead of being a burden.

Young activists, on the other hand, while seeking employment for refugees, generally wish to maximize benefits available so that the suffering of newcomers might be eased. The younger refugee activists have a perspective that is more based in America than in Vietnam. They have attended institutions of higher learning in the United States.

Several of the young activists came to the U.S. as students or immigrants before 1975. While there were very few Vietnamese in the United States before 1975, those who came here before that date are very well represented among the employees of resettlement agencies, especially in management-level positions. Pre-1975 arrivals, who account for 3% of the total Vietnamese population of the U.S. (INS 1975: table 34; ORR 1983:19), held 80% of the Vietnamese-held management-level positions in my sample of Vietnamese refugee agencies.

Because many of the young activists came to the United States before a large Vietnamese community had been established, they describe their experience of adjustment to American society as being very difficult and lonely. Many members of the younger generation of Vietnamese activists refer to this solitary period of assimilation as shaping their perspective on life in America and motivating them to work with later arrivals.

Most younger activists express gratitude for having gone through this period of solitary adjustment. Because they encountered American society alone, without the benefit of a refugee community and resettlement services, they feel they were able to really learn about American life and are now fully bicultural. A school teacher comments: "I am a refugee and in another way, I am an immigrant and I am at a point of view where I can assess the situation fairly and squarely from both sides, from both perspectives." A community worker views her situation in a like manner:

But since as long as I felt very comfortable with two cultures it's a kind of inter-culture. Usually, you find a Vietnamese girl my age, I don't think you find any one of them able to do like I do, because I was on my own.

The young activists' experience of going through a painful period of unaided resettlement, and the high degree of knowledge about American life which resulted, serves as ideal preparation for work in refugee resettlement. Because they suffered, they can sympathize with the experience of recent arrivals; because they know the American system, they can offer newcomers excellent advice. Tran Van Duc, refugee social worker, describes his

position:

Well after being here for about 17 years, I believe I understand how the system works. At least I have some idea of how it works. So by choosing to be a service provider to the community, with the experience that I have in this country, I think that I can make some kind of contribution to the growth and development of the community.

The ideology and goals of the younger activists tend to be very different from those of the older generation. A great deal of the orientation of the younger activists can be seen as originating in their ambivalence or hostility towards the ruling elite of the Republic of South Vietnam. Young activists explain that while the mass of Vietnamese (themselves included) had no say in the policies of their country, they had to pay the greatest price for the Saigon administration's mistakes.

Many of those who arrived in the United States before South Vietnam was defeated came, at least partially, to escape the corruption and destruction brought on by the war. One pre-1975 young activist describes the views of Vietnamese who arrived in the States before 1975:

I have to tell you this, that some of these old mentalities, and I am not going to say who, they are not going to work.

They have the bureaucratic mindset of the old sinecure Saigon government. They were corrupted. The Saigon government was to a large extent corrupted by Thieu.

You know, there are so many different categories, but I think that most people who were here before '75, in fact all of the people, Vietnamese people, I don't really know any one who are for Thieu and his henchmen.

But that doesn't mean that all of the people who were here before '75 were for the Communists either. . . . They weren't rooting for the other side. They were just against the killing and the war and like that.

Because of their ambivalence and mistrust towards "the sinecure Saigon elite," many young activists are strongly opposed to its members gaining power and influence within the Vietnamese community in America. Many fear that links between the smooth-talking Saigon elite and American bureaucrats, so destructive to the mass of Vietnamese during the war, will be re-established in the U.S. vis-à-vis resettlement programs.

Young activists often attack the older generation's obsession with fighting the Communist government of Vietnam. Not only do they see this as a hopeless endeavor, but further, they feel that it wastes the limited economic and moral resources of the refugee community. Tran Van Duc comments:

Of course we need to develop more in community resources. We don't need the people to be on top, we need to expand the base, to bring it up. I think that's very important.

I believe we are here to live and to die here, so I believe that it is more important for us to somehow improve the community here rather than spending energy and time and effort somewhere else. I'm talking the community here instead of what's going on in Vietnam.

Nguyet Pham agrees:

[They say] "If you love your country and love your people then you have to support this and support that."

I have to say no. It's not the way its supposed to be. Yes, your people right here. They need help, they need help. They need a house or whatever. If you want to help, help right here. They need help right here. Why don't you get together and help them?

Because the younger generation of refugee activists reject many of the ideologies of the older generation and because they are comfortable with American culture, they often draw upon American ideologies to understand and plan their image of the future of the refugee community. In this way, young activists may criticize "traditional Vietnamese culture" which, to many older activists, is the means to successful resettlement.

Young activists' objections to traditional Vietnamese culture can be summarized with the following three positions: 1) What the old generation claims to be traditional Vietnamese culture is not an accurate representation of reality. 2) Traditional Vietnamese customs have oppressed or demeaned minority groups such as ethnic Chinese, women, Montagnards, and certain occupational groups. 3) The Vietnamese family's emphasis on authoritarian control over children is inappropriate for socializing Vietnamese children in American society where a high degree of personal independence and motivation is required for success in school and in professional employment.

The goals set for the refugee community by the younger activists are often based on American notions of minority group politics. To the young activists, the idea of Vietnamese being included among Asian-Americans is appealing.

In terms of growth and development, we cannot afford to be separate. It is the same thing with other Asian groups. We need somehow to be included with Asian-American or other ethnic minority. Instead of Vietnamese minority or ethnic Chinese minority or Japanese we cannot afford to do that. Despite difference, we have a lot, I think better off getting together.

While the older activists often seek to rebuild lost status and hence frown on political organization by non-elite refugees, younger activists seek to avoid the maintenance of the paternalistic political system of the past. They hold that a diversity of political ideologies and groups within the refugee community is a positive illustration of Vietnamese people learning to cope with democracy. An employment counselor states his view on the advantages of community diversity:

The thing is, [there are] a lot of social service providers but we have to look at the one that can provide the best service to the community. Not the one who can stay there for their salary or for their credit. And also, the more conflict, the good that comes of it. Because if you compare with a garden: the flowers. Every flower will pop up and then the beautiful flowers will stand together. And the people will pick it. That is the good way. Let grow up all of what they have and then we choose it, so that's good.

While the young activists are critical of many aspects of Vietnamese culture, at the same time they see many traditions as worthy of preservation. Their resettlement agencies and mutual assistance associations seek to preserve what they see as positive elements of Vietnamese culture.

Because they are well-acquainted with American life, young activists feel they are in a position to understand the relationship between American and Vietnamese culture. Duc Van Tran comments:

I have developed a strong sense of cultural identity and I see that as a Vietnamese individual, as a member from ethnic minority.

If we do not voice concerns, then we will be the ones who are short change in the long run.

While the two generations of Vietnamese activists have many conflicts with each other, on certain issues they occasionally unite. Most activists of either generation recognize the merits of each other's position and their common past and future. Certain older refugees, for example, were critical of the obsession with tradition as expressed by their cohort. Likewise, some young activists valued various traditions and esteemed older



generation leaders above those of their own group. Older generation activist Ty Huynh illustrates the merging of generations as he looks to the leadership of the younger generation:

You know our history, so much conflict.

But to most of the refugee they are young and radical. What happens in the past does not mean what will happen in the future. We very open, we are willing to learn and we are willing to cooperate.

Finally, some refugees see a division of labor among refugee activists. The highly Americanized young activists are deemed best at dealing with the American community, while others, yet to be discovered, will represent the community on general matters. Vu Tran, a refugee businessman who is not himself an activist but knows the community well, comments:

Vietnamese association, there are so many and always fighting. It is our culture. So I don't join. When there is one or two organization, then I join. There are no leaders now, we cannot lead and the old people they cannot lead. We need to have a good leader that everyone will believe.

John Nguyen [the young activist director of Resettlement Center] is a good leader for here, for American problems, but some people think he is Communist. But for a leader for us, we don't have yet.

## The Soviet Jewish Community

The Soviet Jews of the San Francisco Bay Area are a smaller and somewhat more homogeneous group than the Vietnamese. While the 5000 to 6000 émigrés are marked by differences in region of origin (Gitelman 1978) and past occupation, they share many common characteristics. They are generally highly educated—13.5 years versus 7.5 years average for Vietnamese (Simon and Brooks 1983:57; ORR 1983) and white collar in previous occupation.

In contrast to Vietnamese, Soviet Jews are accustomed to status as an ethnic minority group but tend to be ambivalent about their investment in Russian nationality. Emigrés are individualistic and form few voluntary associations. They seldom participate in organized religious activities and view politics with a high degree of cynicism. There is an absence of individuals who are accepted as leaders of the Soviet Jewish community. In my fieldwork, I heard of no persons of high standing from the USSR who are admired in the U.S. Further, the small number of émigrés employed by the Jewish agencies which provide resettlement services do not receive special status. At the same time, the high quality of services available through Jewish agencies might reduce motivation for forming Soviet Jewish associations.

Soviet Jewish activist intellectuals generally seek to act as intermediaries between the Soviet Jews and the larger American community. While they share the individualistic orientation and mutual suspicion which marks their immigration, their belief in democracy and their moral obligations to Americans (and especially American Jews) motivates them to become involved as representatives of their community. Many were members of a loose association of émigrés called "New Americans."

The New Americans group met at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center (JCC). Its members were also involved in a JCC-sponsored Russian-language newspaper. All 8 of the intellectual activists I interviewed had been in the U.S. for over 4 years. They were skilled in English, had a good understanding of American society, and had close personal and/or work relationships with Americans. All were married and had children. In every case, the husband had professional employment or ran his own business. In many

cases, the wife was also professionally employed, although in one case, the wife was a doctor seeking a residency. Activists had their origins throughout the USSR, but like the émigré community as a whole, the majority were from cities in the Ukraine including Dnepropetrovsk, Lvov, Odessa and Kiev (Gilson 1981:32; Simon and Brooks 1983:58).

One of the major purposes of the New Americans group was to encourage settled émigrés to contribute to Jewish Welfare, a charity which provides émigrés with economic support and resettlement services during their early period in the U.S. as well as funding other Jewish activities. In addition to their participation in New Americans, many of the activists were involved in other Soviet Jewish community activities. For example, Ilena Karatov wrote articles in the Russian-language newspaper and Tony Kalenoff, a structural engineer, taught a course to help new arrivals find employment. As business owners, Joe Diamond and Sasha Doctorovitch helped newcomers find jobs. Joe Brodsky, a realtor, helped émigrés start their own businesses, offered investment advice, and had plans for a Soviet Jewish condominium complex and a cultural center. Several of the activists were also involved in protests against the Soviet Union.

Soviet Jewish activists take the fact that they are refugees quite seriously. They emphasize the moral implications of their embitterment with and flight from the Soviet Union and make efforts to participate in the moral community of American society. They tend to be idealistic individuals. As one-time believers in the Soviet system who have been disillusioned, émigré activists retain their sense of outrage at anti-Semitism and other failings of the Worker's State. In American democracy they hope to regain a lost feeling of belonging. Activist Helena Silberstein comments on her desire to be a full participant in American society:

Adjustment is difficult in a different country. And some people, adjustment, they just don't even want to adjust in a good way. But if you want to be a good member of society, I mean working member, I don't mean with a job, I mean just thinking and everything, and giving everything, which is most important point, not only to take but to give. It's important. For me it was difficult. It wasn't difficult to find a car or buy an apartment, no. But language and understanding and reading the papers and realizing at least what's going on and how this country is built and everything, I think for me to live here my whole life doesn't give me enough experience.

The activists of the Soviet Jewish community consider themselves to be an elite. They are more educated and more socially concerned than the mass of Soviet émigrés. In this way, they sometimes maintain a superior but well-meaning attitude towards the émigré community. Ilena Karatov comments:

You see in Russia, you have a million population city. I could very easily find people to be alike and form some kind of group, formal and informal, whatever. But here you have 5000 immigrants. 2000, 3000 they just work and care about everyday life. And you have a couple of hundred people who care about fulfillment with reasoning.

The group is too small and it's very difficult to find a group who would meet all of your expectations, have the same values, have the same ideas. And you get together, you have 20 people and 20 opinions and no one really trained to compromise.

One of the major factors which émigré activists have in common is a high level of concern over leaving the USSR. They claim to have thought a great deal about their exit because they had strong ties to the Soviet Union. Tony Kalenoff comments:

When you leave your country, and I think it is my country, I don't think those sons of bitches who run that country have more rights than I have.

So we had to go away and they stayed. And this is something I can't forgive, ever.

And second, you lose your friends, you lose your language, you lose all your ties. You lose the countryside that you love and there is nothing in the world that will substitute for that.

The high value placed upon conformity in the USSR is, to activists, one of the worst elements of Soviet life. Tony Kalenoff claims that this trait is basically foreign to the Jewish personality and its presence within the émigré community is the result of having lived under the Soviet system. He terms the lack of individual initiative "the Soviet sickness." In the following quote, Kalenoff describes his reaction to being forced to conform:

There was no special reason for me to hate the Communists for what they have done for me except this particular case. Say put it this way. A person that was raped and had a deep emotional reaction on it, never will forgive the rapist.

You ask me what the rape was, and the rape was not that they have done something to me, but that they made me a part of the system. And after a while, you understand that you really become a part of that system and they pass whatever they do through you and there is no way that you can escape it. And that is what I name a rape.

While activists are sometimes critical of American life, they hold that the U.S. is a good society and feel obliged to be good citizens:

America is a beautiful country. Everybody is different and you will ask 1000 people and you will hear 1000 opinions. And that is nice, that is what I like.

Like all highly educated Soviet citizens, activists received years of courses in politics in addition to the curriculum of their typically technical or hard-science professions. Skills developed in their political education are used to examine their own position, argue against communism, and work within the émigré community.

Activist émigrés are interested in becoming a part of the Jewish community in America, but they feel it is wrong to participate in religious activities which they do not understand or believe in. Further, despite a generally negative feeling toward Russia, émigré activists feel that it is essential to acknowledge their investment in Russian identity. As a result, they feel that if their community is to really develop a positive relationship with American Jews and overcome its political cynicism, the existence of Russian/Jewish identity must be accepted by both émigrés and American Jews alike. In the words of Ilena Karatov:

I want the American community to understand who we are, because I feel personally a lot of our problems and a lot of our, you know, negative feelings towards each other, is because people don't understand each other.

If you talk about the [Soviet Jewish] community in general, it's a non-religious community and that's it. Because they don't have religious ground. You have to form this ground first, but I don't think this will be an overnight thing.

Right now, I try really to impress to American community for us, its Jewishness, its non-religious.

or Tony Kalenoff:

I feel that what I am Jewish with Russian culture living in United States and trying to be American. And this is as much as we can do in this situation.

Activists criticize their community. They are most annoyed by their fellows' unwillingness to become full participants, morally and economically, in American life. One comments:

I find very unattractive racist feelings among Russian Jews coming here towards other minorities. Many people are hostile towards blacks, towards Chinese or other Asians. I had many distressing conversations where I broke relations with many people over this fact.

Activists are also critical of fellow émigrés who are unwilling to accept low-status employment and instead stay on welfare.

As believers in American democracy who came to the U.S. to escape the minority status they were forced to occupy in the USSR, Soviet Jewish activists tend to reject the particularistic Jewish views maintained by many Soviet émigrés as well as American Jews. For example, an activist claimed she withdrew her children from the Hebrew Academy, not only because of the excessive time spent on religious training (also mentioned by other émigrés) but also because an exclusively Jewish environment deprived her children of experience with other ethnic groups:

That's what I explained to Rabbi Lichtenstein, that I want . . . my kids not in Hebrew school, not in a Catholic school, just in a normal public school. Because life is different. I couldn't hold their life, make a fence from the people and separate them from the real life.

Everything can happen and they should get along with . . . the different people. They should have their own experience. It's easier to teach kids step by step and from the beginning than later on to make it too much for them.

Now, while the kids are young, they should learn about other people.

Although they often criticize their fellow émigrés, at the same time, Soviet Jewish activists take pride in their group. They feel the Soviet Jews of San Francisco are already successful and have an even brighter future.

Realtor Joe Brodsky comments:

Most of the people came here without any language, without any history, without religious training. When they [become] established, they will look around and come together.

Like now, a lot of people they start talking with established people from the previous immigration, they don't be talking equal. In a few years, they will start talking equal, and it will help them to understand each other.

Like the Vietnamese activists, Soviet Jewish activists create definitions of their group's ethnicity in order to facilitate community organization. For Soviet Jewish activists, ethnicity suggests the moral implications of Jews' status as a minority group. From this point of view, they find that America is superior to the Soviet Union because America is better able to tolerate non-conformity, diversity, and individualism. Although they value their Jewish background and see in themselves and others character traits which are claimed to be Jewish, émigré activists are open about the fact that they have no knowledge or experience with Jewish culture.

Because activists understand Soviet Jewish ethnicity as an essentially symbolic position, they believe that even if émigrés disagree with each other, they share a common fate as victims and refugees from the USSR and so are linked together. This definition of ethnicity, I believe, is why émigré activists, unlike other Soviet Jews, promote formal collective activity in a community marked by political cynicism.

## Conclusion

Within highly stratified and politically cynical immigrant communities, like those of the Soviet Jewish and Vietnamese of the San Francisco Bay Area, the creation of formal associations is a difficult task. At the same time, community organization promises to provide members of these refugee groups with social, cultural, and economic benefits.

In an effort to organize their communities, activists of both groups create definitions of their groups' ethnicity in such a way as to legitimate claims for power, refute accusations made by competing groups, and resolve problems of group identity. Because members of both the Soviet Jewish and Vietnamese refugee population tend to view political activity with suspicion, activists hope that communities will be more receptive to appeals to their ethnic identity.

At the same time, activists of both groups utilize their connections to the larger American community to develop for themselves the role of intermediary between refugees and the native population. With the support of refugees and Americans, refugee activists are working to organize and guide their communities.

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