

Russian Jewish Immigrants in Germany Since 1990 (updated and revised Fall 2005)

by

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Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, Jews from the former Soviet Union have immigrated to Germany in record numbers making it the fastest growing Jewish community in the world and the third largest Jewish community in Europe after France and the United Kingdom. So great is the influx of Russian speaking Jews that in 2003, 2004 and 2005 Germany resettled more Jews than did the State of Israel. As of January 1, 2006, over 200,000 Russian speaking Jews had resettled in Germany. Although the influx to Germany pales in comparison with the hundreds of thousands of Russian speaking Jews who have resettled in Israel since 1990, Germany has become the second principle country of the Jewish Diaspora after the United States. In one of this century's most unlikely waves of emigration, tens of thousands of Russian speaking Jews have left their homeland and voluntarily chose to live in a country that nearly annihilated them over a half century ago.

Yet, out of this large number of Russian speaking Jewish immigrants who are living in Germany only an estimated 80,000 are officially registered with Germany's 84 Jewish communities. The total number of Jews officially belonging to Germany's Jewish community is estimated at 105,000 thereby giving Russian speaking Jews an overwhelming majority. The low rate of official participation in Germany's established Jewish communal structures by the Russian speaking émigrés can be attributed to the political environment of the former Soviet Union where religion and religious practice was forbidden under the communist system. As a result, Jewish communal existence in the former Soviet Union was virtually obliterated and Russian speaking Jewish migrants in Germany bring with them little to no understanding of Jewish religious practice and communal life upon resettlement.

Before the collapse of the Berlin Wall Russian speaking Jews immigrated primarily to Israel and the United States. Between 1968-1988, roughly 170,000 Russian Jews immigrated to Israel. At the same time an estimated 300,000 emigrated from the USSR to other Western countries, mainly the United States. During that time, Russian Jews who made their way out of the Soviet Union and who wished to resettle in the U.S. were accorded automatic refugee status under U.S. immigration law. Conversely, those Jews who wished to settle in Israel were permitted to do so under Israel's Law of Return which gives every Jew the right to settle in Israel. The global changes which took place at the end of the 1980s, however, ushered in a new wave of Jewish emigration from the USSR. With the collapse of communism in the late 1980s a major wave of Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union ensued. In the fifteen years that followed (1990-2005) an estimated one-million-one-hundred-thousand (1.1 million) Jews left the former USSR: approximately 800,000 emigrated to Israel; 300,000 emigrated to the U.S.; and over 200,000 emigrated to Germany.

In the late 1980s the Jewish community in Germany was slowly dying out. Numbering roughly 30,000, in 1990 the small Jewish community in Germany was predominantly elderly and their children inclined to go abroad. In fact, the situation was so grave that Jewish leaders concluded that for all practical purposes the community would cease to exist in about 2007. How did Germany become the principal land of immigration for Russian speaking Jews in the 21st Century? In the late 1980s revolutionary changes occurred on the international and German domestic scene which set the stage to reverse this decline:

- 1) The collapse of communism and the subsequent rise of democratic forces throughout Eastern Europe.
- 2) The decision of the U.S. Government to rescind the refugee status of Russian speaking Jews in the fall of 1989 thereby restricting their entry.
- 3) The German government's decision to open its borders to Russian speaking Jews.

The abrupt change in U.S. policy contributed to the growing number of Russians speaking Jews who did not wish to resettle in Israel to seek refuge in East and West

Germany during the spring and summer of 1990. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 coincided with the unexpected rise in the number of Jews from the Soviet Union entering Germany. Although Israel and the United States were the preferred destination countries several thousand sought refuge on German soil fueled in part by the U.S. government's new immigration restrictions. A further explanation lies with events taking place in East Germany in the fall and winter of 1989 - 1990 that culminated in the overthrow of the political order. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent social, political, and economic upheaval which immediately followed provided the soil for several grass-root citizen initiatives (*Burgerinitiativen*) in East Berlin which sought to advance the cause of Jewish immigration and resettlement to East Berlin. These initiatives slowly spread to West Germany culminating in a series of parliamentary debates in the fall of 1990.

The parliamentary debates surrounding Jewish immigration placed a newly unified Germany in an awkward situation. Still haunted by its National Socialist past, it wanted to tighten immigration controls but did not want to be perceived as anti-Semitic. The issue of Russian speaking Jewish immigration was finally formalized during the Conference of State Minister-Presidents in early January 1991. The accord permitted Jewish persons living in the territory of the former Soviet Union to enter legally and resettle in Germany. This decision, based upon humanitarian grounds, came as a result of the increasing pressure on Germany to legalize 8,513 Russian speaking Jews who had arrived in since spring 1990 and to accommodate the rising number of Jewish émigrés seeking haven in Germany. The new policy based upon the legal provisions outlined in the Quota Refugee Law of 1980 (which was originally adopted for Vietnamese "boat people" fleeing Southeast Asia) was revised in 1991 and then again in 2004 and remains the legal basis for the continued migration and permanent resettlement of Russian Jews to Germany.

Upon resettlement in Germany, the challenge of integration and acculturation begins. Russian émigrés are proportionally resettled throughout Germany's sixteen states as required by law. Unlike the U.S. where migrants are resettled in established migrant

communities, German refugee law allows a proportional resettlement whereby each state and locale are required to take in a certain number of Russian speaking Jews so as to equalize the financial burden on each of Germany's sixteen states. As a result of this apportionment scheme, many Russian Jews are resettled in small villages with no established Jewish community and far removed from the larger cities. As long as the émigrés receive social assistance, they are required to live in the towns and cities where they were placed. Because of the high unemployment rate of this cohort (roughly 40%) the majority of émigrés do not resettle to other German towns. In cities and villages with a local Jewish community in place, the Jewish Community plays an exceedingly important social welfare role. Although the law permitting the Russian speaking Jews to migrate to Germany guarantees a wide range of social benefits such as language instruction, job re-training, unemployment and housing assistance, migrants are faced nevertheless with an alien environment and foreign society. The established Jewish communal structures provide integration assistance in the form of language training, support groups, explaining general principles of civil society, and religious socialization or Jewish acculturation to name a few.

The organization officially charged with providing integration assistance to Russian speaking Jewish migrants is the Central Welfare Board of Jews in Germany which is funded by federal and state governments and is governed by The Central Council of Jews in Germany – the official representative of Germany's Jewish community. In early 2003 the German government signed the first-ever agreement with the Central Council of Jews granting Judaism the same legal status in Germany as the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches. Because of its official recognition, it is eligible to receive public funds for its operations. Yet, because funding is tied to matching contributions from the Federal Church Tax (*Kirchensteuer*), the Central Welfare Board is under-funded due to the Jewish community's small size (105,000 registered members) and considerable mandate having to serve such a large and recently resettled immigrant community.

One of the key challenges facing Germany's Jewish community is to promote Jewish communal living and religiosity among the newly arriving émigrés. As noted earlier Jews from the former Soviet Union have had little or no exposure to Jewish communal

and religious life. For many of the migrants being culturally Jewish is separate from the practice of religion. These new immigrants coming into Germany since 1990 are quite distinct from their forefathers fleeing Czarist Russia who arrived in Berlin and New York City between 1881 and 1920. The current wave of migrants spent most of their life under a Communist regime in which opportunities to practice their faith were strictly limited..

Another hardship faced by newly arriving migrants is finding employment. Russian Jews are over-represented in professions such as engineering, medicine and the natural sciences, finding suitable employment in an already strained German labor market is difficult at best. Arguably, the failure to integrate into the German labor market is the single biggest hurdle for integration into German society. This failure to find a secure position has led many of the “first generation” migrants to essentially resign and stop the job search creating a sense of loss and low self esteem among large numbers of middle aged and elderly émigrés. A recent survey of Russian speaking Jewish émigrés found that 60% reported feeling “not at all” integrated into German society and an additional 29% felt only “a little” integrated into German society. The challenges to societal integration among this cohort have been highlighted in the German government’s decision in late 2004 to restrict the number of Russian speaking Jewish migrants only allowing Jews from the former Soviet Union to immigrate to Germany if they speak German, can show an invitation from a German Jewish community and can prove that they will not receive social welfare. These controversial changes in the law are designed to improve the integration of the immigrants. However, impressionistic evidence shows that the children of these migrants are beginning to enter the German middle class after becoming fluent in German and taking advantage of educational opportunities thereby leaving a hopeful sign for future generations.

Many Russian speaking Jewish migrants have created their own cultural niches by forming cultural and social clubs. As could be expected, Russian speaking Jews in Germany have demonstrated a strong willingness to retain their Russian cultural heritage and pass these same cultural traits along to their children. Yet, when asked which culture - Russian or German - was most important to be part of, an overwhelming majority (80%)

responded that both were important identity goals. Although there is no current data on intermarriage, roughly 60% of respondents preferred their children marry a Russian speaking Jew. Since German society is still “foreign” to the large number of Russian speaking Jewish migrants, many resort to looking within their cultural group as a survival mechanism. Many wish want to preserve Russian culture and language not only at home and among friends, but also in public. They are eager to meet fellow Russian-speakers in Russian cultural centers or clubs and even to socialize with Russian-speaking German repatriates (*Spaetaussiedler*) from the former Soviet Union. As such, Russian Jews have established Russian language newspapers, radio programs and television stations which offer special programs for Russian-speakers in Russia, the United States, Israel and Germany. Unfortunately, this has lead many in the German speaking Jewish community to assert that “the Russians” are more concerned with being Russian rather than becoming part of the German-Jewish community.

As incredible as it may seem barely half-a-century after Germany had tried to exterminate European Jewry, Germany now has the world’s largest growing Jewish population. Jewish cultural centers, schools, restaurants and synagogues have opened in Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Munich and elsewhere. Even in provincial towns such as Augsburg, Potsdam and Fulda, Jewish life is enjoying an improbable renaissance and rebirth. Yet, major challenges still remain. Because of the high unemployment rate in Germany, many migrants have been unable to successfully integrate into the German labor market. Successful integration into German society is the single most important indicator of their willingness to make Germany their permanent home. Although the number of Jews in Germany are a little more than one-third their pre-War population, the immigrants have begun to rejuvenate and re-establish what was once a dying community. As a prominent writer on Russian Jewish immigrant affairs, Diana Pinto notes “the past is only now coming back to life in Germany whereas it had been preciously preserved in exile in New York and Jerusalem.”

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