

Pathfinder for materials on Soviet Jews

History and Issues

Displaced Persons and Refugees

After World War II, Europe was faced with the problem of what to do with the large number of people, primarily Jews, who no longer had a home. These people were referred to in popular accounts and for policy and administrative purposes as Displaced Persons (DPs). Temporary camps were established through out central and eastern Europe to house the DPs while a permanent solution was found to the housing issue. While some DPs stayed on in Europe after the war, for most Jews there were two options: immigrate to Israel or the Americas.

Three main agencies were established in the United States to deal with the influx of immigrants: The American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), United Service for New Americans (USNA), and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). Minnesota was a destination for many of the European Jewish refugees. Locally, Jewish Family and Children Services (JFCS) and Jewish Family Services (JFS), Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) and the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) took part in different aspects of the resettlement of the refugees, helping them situate in a new country.

By the 1970s, those who had immigrated to the US during the post-war period had established themselves within the Jewish community and become “Jewish Americans.” At this same time, Soviet Jews were struggling to emerge from under the Communist thumb and were making their way to Israel and the US.

Refuseniks

The Soviet Jewry movement began in the mid-1960s. Its aim was to create awareness of the plight of, as well as advocate for, the rights of Jews living in the Soviet Union. From the end of WWII on, the Soviet government refused to allow Jews to practice their religion. They were also denied visas to emigrate to the West or Israel. It was this refusal to grant visas to dissidents that contributed to their being labeled ‘Refuseniks.’

In the United States, numerous committees were founded for the purpose of creating awareness about the plight of Soviet Jews. In Minnesota and the Dakotas, the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) started a committee to advocate for Soviet Jews. The committee, in conjunction with the greater movement, had three main goals:

- To educate and mobilize the regional Jewish community;
- To aid in sustaining Jewish life in the USSR;
- To do everything possible to get those Jews who wished to immigrate out of the USSR.

Gathering momentum during the early 1980s, the Soviet Jewry movement became widespread throughout the world. In Minnesota the Committee focused on publicizing the issues and marshalling public support for immigration reform. They organized rallies, letter writing campaigns, traveled to the Soviet Union to meet their Russian counterparts, and lobbied US politicians to become involved in diplomatic efforts. The Soviet Jewry

movement continued throughout the 1970s through the early '90s. By 1995 the movement had ended, completing its mission of helping the Jews in the Soviet Union.

The Russian Community Today

Today the Russian Jewish community has integrated to a major extent into the Jewish community at large. They are involved in all aspects of the community, and are employed as professionals, technology experts and service workers. Many, if not most, identify as culturally Jewish but are not active synagogue members. As of 2004, the FSU (Former Soviet Union) population in Minneapolis and St Paul was roughly 6,188 people. The population is centered in the downtown Minneapolis area, concentrated in four high-rises. The FSU community has established Russian markets, restaurants, and cultural centers to serve needs related to their Russian culture and identity. FSU Jews today are able to move in between the Soviet, Jewish and American communities relatively easily.

Resources

JHSUM Document and Oral Collections

Post war refugees and DPs

The collection is composed of xx oral histories and transcripts conducted in the 1990s by St Paulite Nahum Kipnis. The interviews focus on interviewees experiences in Russia leading up to and during WWII, and the process of leaving the Soviet Union after the war and resettlement in the United States.

Jewish Soviet WWII Vets

Six oral histories conducted in 2006-2007 with Jewish veterans of combat in the Soviet Union during WWII. The interviews were conducted in Russian, and translated by Russian-speaking transcribers. Events covered include interviewees childhood and family life in Russia, participation in the military, life after the war, and migration to the United States.

Soviet Women

There are 17 oral histories within the "Old Lives, New Lives" collection pertaining to Soviet women, all of which have been transcribed. The collection consists of stories of women who were born and raised in the Soviet Union and who moved to the United States. It shows the contrast of life between the two places as well as the struggle of Soviet Jewry, women in particular, to make a new life for themselves in the United States. The collection covers pre- and post World War II, life during the war, and Jewish life under Soviet rule.

Soviet Jewry

The collection consists of 28 oral histories and a variety of documents including: correspondences, newsletters, publicity, various committee meeting minutes and papers. All the documents deal primarily with local involvement; however, there are a number at the national level. The documents begin roughly in 1969 and go through 1999. The oral history collection covers a range of topics including: Soviet women, interviews with Russian Jews, and New Americans.

Other Local Collections

Minnesota Historical Society

- Max M. Kampelman papers, 1935-1999. Correspondence, newsletters, published and unpublished articles, speeches, government reports, press releases, newspaper clippings, television footage, memoirs, interviews, and related materials documenting the public life of Max M. Kampelman as legislative counsel to Senator Hubert H. Humphrey (1949-1955), as friend and advisor to Humphrey throughout his political career (1956-1978), and as United States ambassador (1980-1992). The papers also reflect Kampelman's activities in community and professional groups, including Kampelman's work on immigration policy related to Soviet Jews. Refer to the online finding aid at MHS at <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00772.xml>
- Gerry Sikorski papers, 1971-1995 (bulk 1976-1992). The papers include bills, committee hearing transcripts, constituent correspondence, subject files, selected case files, audio and video cassettes, newspaper clippings, and some newsletters, press releases, and speeches. There is information about Sikorski's work on behalf of Soviet Jews immigrating to Minnesota.
- Publications:

Books

Altshuler, Stuart. From Exodus to Freedom: a History of the Soviet Jewry Movement. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

Biber, Jacob. Risen From the Ashes: a Story of the Jewish Displaced Persons in the Aftermath of World War Two: Being a Sequel to Survivors. San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1990.

Chemin, Albert, and Murray Friedman: Editors A Second Exodus: the American Movement to Free Soviet Jews. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999.

Kochavi, Arieh J. Post-Holocaust Politics: Britain, The United States and Jewish Refugees 1945-1948. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001

Sjoberg, Tommie. The Powers and the Persecuted: the Refugee Problem and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR), 1938-1947. Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1991.

Wyman, Mark. DP: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.

Websites

Minneapolis Jewish Federation: <http://www.jewishminneapolis.org/page.aspx?id=201261>

Russian Cultural Center Minneapolis: <http://www.rusculturemn.com/page.php?17>