

Earl Raab

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The Vanishing Soviet Jew

There are fewer and fewer Jews in the Soviet Union. About a quarter of a million Jews have been allowed to emigrate in the last dozen years -- but there is another reason for the diminishing Jewish population which is less pleasant.

Even without emigration, the Jewish women of child-bearing age in the Soviet Union today will not be replaced by an equal number of Jewish women of child-bearing age. For one thing, the Jewish fertility rate is very low. In addition, a large proportion of children born into mixed marriages are registered and raised as non-Jews.

The pressure for assimilation in the Soviet Union is much higher than it is in the United States. In the Soviet Union, Jews can change their identity, and there is great pressure for them to do so. The official society is openly opposed to Jewish existence, and does not permit organized Jewish life or education.

In the United States, Jews can also change their identity. But official society does not frown on them or repress their institutions. As a result, for example, fewer children of mixed marriages are raised as non-Jews.

Some of the factors leading to a decreasing Jewish population in the Soviet Union also lead to the *noshrim* ("drop-out") phenomenon, still a subject for much discussion. The number of Soviet Jewish emigres coming to the U.S. now far exceeds the number going to Israel; but there is a startling difference in drop-out rates among Soviet cities.

In 1976-1978, for example, about 4 out of 5 Jewish emigrants from Moscow and from Leningrad were drop-outs. But from Kishinev and Chernovtsky, fewer than 1 out of 5 emigrants were drop-outs.

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Several factors are at work in this *Noshrim* differential, including some manipulation by Soviet authorities. But one strong factor has been differential de-Judification in different areas. The assimilation rate is lower in the more newly-annexed areas of the Soviet Union, and highest in the older areas, and in those areas where de-Judification has been most intense, the *noshrim* rate tends to follow the assimilation rate.

As Yoel Florsheim, Soviet Jewry expert in the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, writes this month: "No doubt many Jews are only taking advantage of the opportunity to leave the USSR. Nor should this surprise us. We must suppose that most Jews of Zionist conviction have already emigrated, and now others, who do not share their beliefs are following in their steps."

Thus, the drop-out trend is even increasing in cities where Jewish life was strongest. The rate of *neshira* from Kishinev was 15 per cent in 1976 and 20 per cent in 1978. Of Chernovtsky emigrants, 8% were *noshrim* in 1976, 15% by 1978.

This trend would not change if the *noshrim* were treated less generously by the American Jewish community. They do not come here because of that treatment but because of the greater economic opportunity America provides in the long run.

And since they come, the American Jewish community must treat them generously. The position of the San Francisco Jewish community reflects that of the entire Jewish community: we would support any educational program to urge Soviet Jews to go to Israel, especially since they are able to leave only because of Israel's existence, and with Israeli visas. But we welcome those who finally decide to come here. We welcome any escape of Jews from the Soviet Union and its contemporary atmosphere of anti-semitism.

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But then, of course, our obligation is to provide them with a flourishing, re-Judaizing environment. The struggle will have been partly in vain if the disappearing Jewish population in the Soviet Union were to become a disappeared Jewish population in America.

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