

Shalom Y'all

Project Renewal



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Project Renewal in Charlotte, commented: "It is wonderful to see the willingness to help and the understanding of the need. Here in Charlotte we are embarked on our own project for renewal of our Jewish life. We can take pride in the way the Board and others have extended themselves to pledge their support for renewing life in Nazareth Illit as well."

In February, Marvin Bienstock, Federation Executive Director, was in Nazareth Illit as part of a budget consultation for Project Renewal. His report provides an insight into the background of the people of the Shalom neighborhood and the work needed and being done to help them achieve full participation as citizens of Israel. The following is the first of several monthly installments:

Introduction

On February 19 and 20 I participated in a budget conference designed to determine program financing for the Shalom Neighborhood of Nazareth Illit for the coming year. It was my first intensive involvement with the realities of Project Renewal.

I found myself deeply moved by both the intensity of the problems being addressed in this neighborhood and by the level of accomplishment already achieved. In this report I hope to detail both of these areas as well as to indicate a number of specific recommendations made by the members of the cluster of SE cities who are twinned with Nazareth Illit (abbrev. NI).

The Process Of Renewal And NI As Exception To The Rule

We have long known that scattered site housing or low income housing projects built in the U.S. quickly become "neuvo-slums." To upgrade living conditions without altering the value systems of the occupants is futile. Our bureaucracy cannot seem to obtain the support necessary to focus on prevention as opposed to treatment.

In Israel, where the future of the nation is dependent on the optimal functioning of each and every individual, prevention, in the form of Project Renewal, focuses on developing, in both adults and children, an active role in assessing their own needs and in developing programs and projects to meet these needs. This concept of resident participation is key to the success of Renewal.

There are three groups who comprise the Renewal team for each neighborhood. The first is a committee of residents; the second a committee of professional workers in the fields of education and social services and government. The third is the committee from the twinned city or cities in the U.S.

It is characteristic of the problems found in NI that a viable residents' committee has not been in existence until now. And, even at this time, the committee is embryonic.

Moreover, the process of establishing twinned cities for NI was not accomplished until recently—almost three years after

the inception of Renewal in NI. The assessment of the problems and the development of programs to meet them has come exclusively from the professionals working in NI. In my considered opinion, the professionals I saw have done an excellent job faced with having to perform alone (i.e. without residents or U.S. participation). In reality, NI is now, at the end of three of the five years, at the point where Renewal can actually begin. There is recognition of this on the part of the residents with whom I spoke as well as by the professionals. Both groups have deep concerns about being able to financially support the programs beyond the two remaining years.

The Problems Of NI And The Shalom Neighborhood

Of the 6000 residents of the neighborhood, 2000 came in the mid 70's from the section of Russia known as Georgia. They are characterized as being self enclosed, fiercely proud, prone toward violence, mistrustful of any outside authority and prone to set and operate only by their own values. The process of assimilating these "Gruzini" Jews into the Israeli society is the central problem in NI.

The remaining 3000 people in the neighborhood are a mixture ranging from Eastern European to Moroccan to a new group from Ethiopia. This half of the population makes excellent use of the education, recreation and social services offered. While I am certain there are those who do not participate, I saw one of the two extremely active programs for the elderly as well as a small community center filled with programs. The participants included parents learning how to play with their children and senior men who volunteer their time working in pre-schools and kindergartens. The program charts in the office of the director of the JCC show hour by hour packed schedules of activities. So much so, that many of the mission participants who spend an afternoon and evening at the center were envious of the level of programs and wanted similar ones in their own JCCs.

But, with only an emerging handful of exceptions, the Gruzini do not participate. Those who do, often do so by requirement as in the case of the adjudicated delinquents assigned to a special work program for youth.

In separate discussions held with the administrators, the professionals and the newly formed residents' committee, we asked each to specifically state the most severe problem - the one requiring the most attention. All three groups agreed on the issue of the Gruzini youth, ages 13-18.

This group is characterized by almost everyone as male school dropouts who are active drug users, have criminal tendencies and include a small group of female prostitutes. The stated fear is that not even the compulsory army service will be able to overcome the ingrained anti-social patterns developed during these formative years. It may even be the case that many will be rejected by the army and become total pariahs.

The Patterns Of Gruzini Life

With the exception of the few female prostitutes, the problem is entirely male. This is because the parents have developed in Israel or brought with them from Russia a practice of marrying off their daughters at age 12-14. The husbands are ages 19-23. Not only is early marriage the norm, but so is the practice of immediately having children. Being a 15-year-old mother of two children is common as is becoming a grandmother at age 30.

The reason given for the early marriage is to protect the girls from the permissive Israeli society. In point of fact, the marriages can only take place with the consent of the parents since the right to choose to marry is not permitted by the government till a minimum age of 17. These marriages are performed by a Gruzini rabbi.

A few words need to be said about the pattern of life among the adult Gruzini. There is relatively little unemployment in NI. If there is unemployment it is because an individual is seeking a job with higher pay and better change of advancement than the factory jobs which are available. Opportunities for better jobs are extremely limited because the Gruzini lack education and are unwilling to leave the neighborhood and their extended families.

The two major employers are a munitions factory and the Elite candy factory. Both work around the clock with 3 eight-hour shifts. We visited the Elite factory where the work is a combination of extreme noise and mindless repetition. When not working, the Gruzini socialize among themselves. The older adults can be seen sitting on benches along the street or in front of their homes playing cards. They are often accompanied by knots of youth or adults standing and talking.

The rate of pay is low. In the Elite factory it ranges from \$140-200 a month. A recent government study listed a monthly income of \$500 as essential for a family of 5. Since adolescents cannot work and since early marriage leads to early childbearing, a home may contain many more than five mouths to feed with only 2-3 employable adults.

(Next Issue: Teenage mothers and dropout fathers.)

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BBYO

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