For Russian Jews, A Bit Of Odessa Grows In Brooklyn — Part II

The Old World mentality shows up in other ways as well. "They're cash people, not credit people," reports Peter Ford, manage of the Brighton office of the Lincoln Savings Bank. "No matter how much we try to explain the safety of checks, they prefer cash — even for large transactions involving thousands of dollars."

American-born bankers and police are learning Russian to better deal with the newcomers. At the Brighton branch of the Lincoln Savings Bank, 23 employees took a six-month course in Russian. At the 60th and 61st police precincts, 40 men studied the language. "I don't think that's right," one police officer grumbles privately. "If I went to Russia, would anyone learn English for me?"

Given the language barrier and differences in standards and requirements, many of those who were professionals in the Soviet Union have been forced to settle for other kinds of jobs. A woman who taught music works on a watchmaking assembly line. One waiter is a former psychologist who complains: "In Israel, where I went first after leaving Russia, they'll recognize your diploma. Here they won't".

But some have achieved their old status. Anatoli Ginsburg came here in 1975 from Kiev, where he headed the dentistry department of a hospital with 32 dentists under him, but still his monthly take-home pay was only 220 rubles — $306, of which 150 rubles went for food. Here he stated a dental technician, qualified for a dentist's license at New York University, worked for a year in the office of another dentist and finally last November opened his own practice with the help of a government loan that he is now repaying. "If I could do this at 55", he conludes, "it means it can be done if one has the head and the will."

"There, People Live in a Cage"

What those who have made it here seem to share with those who have not is a sense of the promise of a better tommorrow. "And that," says one immigrant, "is what you don't have in the Soviet Union. Over there, whatever you are, that's what you die as."

Among longtime residents, the newcomers have a reputation as a hard-working, hard-playing, hard-drinking lot, somewhat clannish and given to boisterous parties. Many are said to carry knives. "There are speculators and thieves and murders among the new immigrants," an old-timer confides darkly. But an Irish cabdriver, having criticized the immigrants as being pushy and insufficiently grateful to America, adds: "One thing you've got to hand to them: They stick up for the neighborhood. If they see a woman being mugged, they don't run away. They'll jump out of a window if they have to and smack the guy on the head.'

Capt. John Vorburger, commanding officer of the 60th Police Precinct, reports: "There have been very few arrests of Russians for violent crimes so far."

Minor forms of friction florish, however. Longtime residents resent being kept awake late at night by the blaring hi-fis of the immigrant's Americanized youngsters. Some traditional "lox-and-bagel delis" have been displaced by newcomers' stores serving more Russian, less traditionally Jewish foods. Rabbinical eyebrows went up when an immigrant opened a food store and a Star of David in the window and included ham — a nonkosher food — among the offerings.

Immigrants complain of not being invited to the synagogues for holidays celebrations. Natives claim that, when invited, immigrants don't come.

Unlike some earlier waves of immigrants to this country, these newcomers were impelled to come here neither by and Irish potato famine nor by a Nazi holocaust. What drove them, they say, was a totalitarian way of life and a subtle anti-Semitism which deprived them — and especially their children — of freedoms they craved and career and schooling opportunities to which they felt they were entitled.

Typical is an emigre physician who says: "I wanted to see the world, yet I could not travel. A man always wants to broaden his horizons, to explore the unknown, to pursue a dream. When this is shut off, and you are bound hand and foot, you feel heavy at heart — even if you're not starving." That frustration is echoed by 22-year-old Boris Altman, who reports: "Although I had high grades in mathematics, I would have had difficulty, as a Jew, getting admitted to the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, and even if admitted, I would have wound up as an ordinary engineer earning 120 to 150 rubles a month" — equal to $160 to $200.

Here Altman is enrolled at New York University with a triple major — mathematics, computer science and economics —and also holds a part-time job as a computer-software analyst.

The refugees generally praise and enjoy life in America, but they do not hold back criticism of what they view as the negative aspects — such as the prevalence of crime.

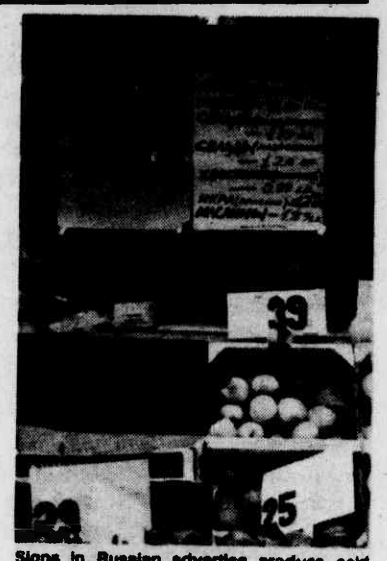
"Crime is the first topic that comes up every time they meet with local officials," reports Pauline Bilus, executive director of ARI. The Jewish Union of Russian Immigrants recently staged an anticrime demonstration in reaction to a local murder. "They are very conservative on the crime issue, very critical of the revolving-door aspect of American justice, very much in favor of capital punishment and gun control," notes a local social worker.

Some do regret having left the Soviet Union. One such is a cobbler who asks: "How can we be happy here when we don't dare walk the streets at night or leave our children unattended? The people here are destroying this beautiful country, burning it down. There is no order, no leadership. Why did we leave? Because we were idiots, that's why."

Far more typical, however, are those whose lives show that the fabled Horatio Alger success story is thriving in Brighton Beach.

Take Michael Katz, a former engineer at an auto plant in Gorki. Since coming here with his family in 1975, he has washed floors, worked in a stockroom, sold vacuum cleaners, clothing and insurance. By January, 1979, he had saved enough money to open a store and now conducts a thriving business selling TV sets, electrical appliances, porcelain, ceramics and clothes.

Asked to compare life here and in Russia, Katz says bluntly: "No comparison. Over there, people live in a cage; the state takes 80 percent of what a man earns and uses it to strengthen the regime. Here, everyone has the opportunity to test himself in any sphere, and the state works for the benefit of society."



Signs in Russian advertise produce sold from stands along Brighton Beach Avenue.