JERUSALEM LETTER
Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 374 17 Tevet 5758 / 15 January 1998

HOW ISRAEL ABSORBED THE IMMIGRATION WAVE OF THE 1990s

Iris Geva-May

A Ten-Fold Population Increase in 50 Years / Immigration Profile — 1989-1991 / State Social and Educational Assistance / Employment as an Absorption Solution / Special Groups: Scientists / Engineers / Physicians, Dentists, and Nurses / Artists / Above Age 45 / Language and Socialization / Conclusions

A Ten-Fold Population Increase in 50 Years

Israel's very raison d'etre is to be a homeland for any Jew who wishes to join Israeli society. The Law of Return enacted in 1950 by the Knesset gave a legal basis to the clause in the Declaration of Independence stating "the State of Israel will be open to the immigration of Jews and the ingathering of the Exiles," proclaiming that "every Jew has the right to immigrate to the Land of Israel." This was a most ambitious goal since the Jewish diaspora was so vast relative to the Jewish population of Israel in 1948, as well as very widely dispersed. Moreover, according to the Law of Return, any Jew is immediately granted citizenship when he or she immigrates to Israel.

From the very beginning of statehood, the country confronted waves of immigration in unprecedented proportions, requiring the absorption of hundreds of thousands of immigrants by an existing population of merely 600,000, leading to a 100 percent growth in 2-3 years and 300 percent in the following 10 years — reaching two million in 1958. Experts in demography at the time had projected a maximum population growth of 100 percent. Up to the present, the population of Israel has multiplied tenfold, from almost 600,000 to almost six million.

Moreover, immigration could never be predicted. The State of Israel considers it to be its duty to save Jewish people wherever they are in peril: hundreds of thousands of survivors came to Israel from the DP camps of Europe after World War II; 100,000 were brought from Yemen in 1951, 200,000 from Iraq in 1950, thousands from Egypt after the war of 1956, 35,000 from Ethiopia in 1984 and 1993, and approximately 900,000 immigrants from the former USSR since 1989. If in 1989 the Israeli population was 4.5 million, by 1998 it had reached 5.9 million.

Of the close to 400,000 Soviet immigrants who came to Israel between the end of 1989 and 1991, 160,000 were college-educated and 6,000 were scientists in various fields of science and technology. The majority of these scientists were universi-

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hait., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 02-5619281, Fax. 02-5619112, Internet: elazar@vms.huji.ac.il. In U.S.A.: 1616 Walnut St., Suite 507, Philadelphia, PA 19103; Tel. (215) 204-1459, Fax. (215) 204-7784. ISSN: 0334-4096.

The Jerusalem Letter is a periodic report intended to objectively clarify and analyze issues of Jewish and Israeli public policy.

ty professors or research engineers who had to face the problem of finding suitable academic or research positions.

However, as in any immigration context, finding suitable employment was a problem. So were language and communication skills. The mentality of the immigrants was different — very strict and custodial as opposed to the very open Israeli way.

The Israeli government views employment and integration as a fundamental responsibility of the state. Employment, language, learning, and social absorption are regarded as interwoven, and the procedures undertaken by the state serve these three main absorption goals. This *Jerusalem Letter* looks at the wave of immigration between 1989 and 1995 and how Israel coped with the problems of social absorption and employment of the new immigrants.

Immigration Profile — 1989-1991

In the early and mid-1980s, the immigration influx to Israel was steady but ranged between 12,000 and 13,000 people per year. Only about 55 percent came from so-called "countries of distress" and needed intensive social and financial support. In 1989, especially in the last two months of that year, a huge wave of immigration started flowing into Israel at an unprecedented rate: in 1989, 24,050 immigrants (77 percent from countries of distress — COD); in 1990, 199,516 immigrants (96 percent from COD); and in 1991, 176,000 immigrants (97 percent from COD). In the following four years the immigration rate ranged between 76,000 and 80,000 annually.

Demographically, over 75 percent of the immigrants coming to Israel between 1989 and 1995 were under the age of 45 and half were under 25. Only 13 percent were 65 and over. Although the age level was young, it was on the whole slightly older than the veteran Israeli population.

In terms of education, the immigrant population was characterized by a higher level of higher education than the veteran Israeli population: 40.5 percent had 13 or more years of education, as compared to 24.2 percent of the veterans. The education level also influenced the occupational profile of the immigrants, with about 60 percent having worked in higher education-related, scientific, or free professions, compared with 29 percent of the native Israelis. According to the Israel Bureau of Statistics, among the immigrants who came to Israel between 1989 and 1995 were 68,100 engineers and architects, 30,900 teachers, 14,700 nurses, 14,300 physicians and dentists, and 14,100 artists, musicians and writers, recognized as such according to professional criteria set by the Ministry of Absorption.

State Social and Educational Assistance

The mass immigration from the former Soviet Union had a major impact on immigration and absorption responsibility, which had been shared by the Ministry of Absorption and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI). The overwhelming costs involved dictated major reforms in immigrant absorption policy and forced a redelegation of responsibility, primarily from the Jewish Agency to government bodies.

One major change was the adoption of a policy of "direct absorption." The majority of immigrants now received cash payments based upon a basket of services, and moved directly into permanent housing instead of absorption centers. The "absorption basket" was a computation of the average costs previously covered for immigrants. This included a subsistence allowance for six months, rent subsidy for the first year, transportation costs to and from *ulpan* for six months, certain education costs for children based on their number and age, and costs of translations and resumes. A four-person family received about $10,000 for their first year in the country (compared with a $5,000 minimum annual wage rate in Israel). After the first year, housing options included remaining in the same apartments but paying rent from the immigrant's own resources, purchasing an apartment with heavily subsidized mortgages, or receiving public housing (available only in development areas in the south and north of the country). Although in conceptual terms, the "direct absorption" and "absorption basket" methods introduced in the early 1990s were dramatic new approaches, the authorities involved do not as yet have indications of possible greater integration of immigrants. The main visible by-product was the high immigrant concentration around Tel Aviv and Haifa, with 50 percent and 20 percent of the total immigrants respectively.

Two trends soon became visible: the demand for rental apartments grew and, accordingly, rents increased for both immigrants and veterans. Quite often two or three immigrants families shared one apartment, but with this, the general annual cost of living went up. Former "downtown" or commercial areas started being inhabited again by new immigrants, some of them highly educated. They became the neighbors of a socioeconomically very low local population, thus changing the social and cultural, if not the economic, profile of those neighborhoods. Another effect, mainly in these cities, was the higher degree of unemployment

among immigrants or their employment as cheap labor. The cultural setting in these cities and throughout Israel was radically influenced (see more below).

While the Ministry of Absorption and the Ministry of Housing had jurisdiction over the absorption tracks, education was mainly the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, which supervised the *ulpanim* in both absorption centers and in other study centers. All new immigrants have the right to take a free six-month intensive Hebrew course while they receive financial support from the state. Those in special professions could take an additional advanced professional language *ulpan* for another six months.

Immediately upon arrival, immigrant children were integrated into regular classes and were the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. In addition to regular classes, they attended Hebrew language classes for new immigrants within the schools. Since the Ministry of Education retrained and employed teachers from the former USSR, these teachers served as tutors and advisers for the new immigrant students. Immigrant students at the high school level were allowed to take some matriculation exams in their mother tongue and be examined in subjects they had learned in their country of origin — such as Russian literature. The Ministry of Absorption financed private lessons either in small groups or on an individual basis and, in cooperation with municipalities and volunteer groups, organized various social activities including field trips and summer camps.

Employment as an Absorption Solution

The Israeli government viewed employment as a major requirement for social absorption. Therefore, a number of steps were taken to ensure employment, with a major emphasis put on the training and retraining of immigrants, and on finding suitable employment for special groups such as scientists, engineers in special fields, entrepreneurs, physicians, and artists, as well as the 45-64 age group.

Traditionally, the funding for retraining courses was provided by the Ministry of Absorption, but the actual courses themselves were run by the Ministry of Labor. Moreover, the Ministry of Absorption had special funds for subsidizing immigrants' wages for a certain period of time so that employers — whether private or in state-owned enterprises — would be encouraged to continue their services. In 1973 a new entity was created by the Prime Minister's Office, and later transferred to the Ministry of Science and Technology, which dealt with the professional needs, training, and employment of immigrant scientists. Retraining for teaching and for industry was initiated in universities under this patronage.

The main concerns of the government in the face of this wave of immigration were lack of employment opportunities for the 45-64 age group and for women, lack of proper job opportunities for immigrants in academic professions and the need to create new opportunities, and lack of job security and low salaries in jobs offered to immigrants.

According to a survey among 517,000 immigrants above the age of 15, the employment situation in December 1995 showed that out of the 268,000 who had entered the labor force, 60 percent were men and 40 percent were women; of these, 90 percent were employed, i.e., 243,000 — 91.5 percent of men and 89 percent of women, and 25,900 were unemployed. The total rate of unemployment was more or less stable during 1990-1994; the average did not exceed 10 percent and was only slightly higher than the unemployment rate among the veteran population.

Several entities were in charge of these policy concerns — the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Finance — all in coordination with the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption. The decisions that needed to be made were taken in light of budgetary constraints, national priority considerations, and objective conditions. Consistent effort was placed on the training and retraining of immigrants, although in time there was a need to reevaluate the effectiveness of these programs. Railway engineers were retrained as mechanical engineers; physicians who could not pass the very demanding academic and practical exams for accreditation in Israel were retrained for nursing; scientists such as physicists and mathematicians were retrained for teaching science subjects in high schools, where there was a great need for highly qualified science teachers. Teachers were trained for teaching using different pedagogical and methodological approaches — generally less centralist, authoritarian, or custodial, and using inquiry procedures common in the West. Engineers and scientists were exposed to advanced computers and updating in their fields of expertise.

Special Groups: Scientists

In the case of special groups such as scientists, for example, some were encouraged to join retraining programs if they could not be absorbed in academic institutions. In the case of scientist retraining for teaching, for instance, out of the 174 scientists in the program, 60 percent found jobs as teachers, of whom 98 percent continued teaching in the second and third

year after retraining. A major byproduct was the benefit to the educational system which received qualified science teachers, especially in development towns, low socioeconomic areas, and in weak student classes. The immigrant scientist teachers were willing to teach in these regions and classes, and thereby reinforced science teaching in those areas to a significant degree. Another attempt at assisting employment involved some 300 scientists who in 1995 were included in the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption's Giladi program which assisted universities and other research institutions, which did not have the required financial resources, to extend the period of employment of outstanding scientists by another three years. In 1996 another 120 scientists were included in the program.

Out of the 10,965 immigrant scientists registered at the Center for Absorption in Science, about 1,800 were placed in jobs at universities, about 1,400 more in the private sector, and some 3,500 were placed in various scientific or quasi-scientific jobs by the Center. Approximately 500 scientists worked in unrelated jobs which they found by themselves. The overall number of immigrant scientists employed in 1995 was 8,250, with about 2,700 remaining unemployed.

A study by the Guttman Institute encompassing a random scientist population showed that the target employing institutions were universities, technological "incubators," industry, research institutions, colleges, and hospitals.

Engineers

Another problematic special group involved engineers. Some 61 percent were up to 44 years of age and 27 percent were aged 45 to 55. 97 percent obtained their engineering degree in the former Soviet Union and 93 percent worked in their profession prior to immigration. 65 percent received their degree in day programs, 22 percent in evening programs, and 13 percent in correspondence courses. There was a major problem in identifying their professional level on account of the different universities at which they obtained their degrees. Significant differences were found, especially with regard to professional updating, among different engineering institutions. Registration of engineers followed Israeli professional certification standards.

In terms of specialization, 32 percent were mechanical engineers, 20 percent civil engineers, 12 percent electrical engineers, 9 percent electronics engineers, 4 percent in industrial management and economics, 3 percent chemical engineers, 3 percent in electromechanics, and 17 percent in other fields such as mining, nutrition, metallurgy, automation, and computers. Of the overall number of immigrant engineers, 76 percent applied to the Registrar in Israel, and 85 percent of these were recognized and registered in the Engineers Directory; this figure is equal to 65 percent of the overall number of people who declared upon arrival that they were engineers.

A Brookdale Institute study in 1994 found that 95 percent of engineers were employed at some job. However, only 25 percent (28 percent of men and 20 percent of women) worked as engineers. 2 percent worked in other higher education-related professions, 5 percent as junior engineers and technicians, 33 percent as skilled workers, 17 percent as non-skilled workers, and 18 percent in sales and services. Those immigrants who worked as engineers were mainly absorbed in industry (31 percent), building (19 percent), business, services, and consultation (21 percent), and public services (29 percent).

The type of assistance provided by the state primarily included retraining and/or updating in various fields of expertise in special programs offered by the universities, the Bashan project, and the technological incubators program. The Bashan and incubators programs were intended to advance the employment of engineers, to establish a pool of ideas and inventions from immigrant engineers and scientists, and to lay the foundations for or reinforce start-up factories. Within the Bashan project, seven centers were established around the country for receiving, classifying, and promoting ideas and inventions. The incubator program (similar to technological research farms) sought to promote inventions and patents, and establish small industrial enterprises involving 50 percent veteran Israelis and 50 percent immigrant engineers. After a period of three years, these enterprises were supposed to become financially independent. By the end of 1995, out of approximately 700 proposals submitted to the Bashan project, 120 successfully passed the stage of technical/economic investigation and were referred to the Israel Innovation Center, entrepreneurship development centers, industrial factories, technological incubators, and Bashan. Moreover, centralized advisory services and government loans were granted to entrepreneur engineers. In 1996 the number of immigrants applying to these advisory centers was over 5,000, twice as many as in 1993, and total loans reached NIS 17 million (about $5.5 million).

The technological incubators project has achieved notable successes but has also been criticized because it serves a relatively small number of immigrants, because it has proved very costly for the state on a per person and per initiative basis, and because some of the

incubator environments have not succeeded in raising the independent funds needed for commercial survival after the first three government-supported years.

Another project that answers many of these deficiencies is currently under consideration within the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The concept is to match scientists who have inventive ideas with a technical marketing manager who will guide a proposal toward commercial application. A related idea is to link such proposals to information on export possibilities.

Physicians, Dentists, and Nurses

A third special group included physicians, dentists, and nurses. A total of 14,590 physicians immigrated to Israel between 1989 and 1995; in 1990 and 1991 respectively the figures were 5,820 and 3,370. 1,575 dentists also arrived, of whom almost 1,000 came in the two years 1990-1991; 14,341 nurses, 1,831 paramedicals, and 1,606 pharmacists also immigrated — the majority in 1990-1991. 58.8 percent of the doctors, 80.6 percent of the dentists, and 87.4 percent of the nurses passed the required practical and professional exams and received their licenses. (Only doctors who had practiced less than 15 years had to take these exams; the others were exempt.) According to research published by the Brookdale Institute, 72 percent of those who were licensed actually worked as doctors (that is, less than 45 percent of the immigrant doctors), but only a minority received tenure in medical institutions. The majority were employed on a temporary basis. This meant that many doctors worked as nurses or paramedics, or provided "alternative medicine" which does not require a license and can be conducted privately. Thus, 2,989 people were licensed in paramedical professions, the majority being former doctors: 2,310 became laboratory workers, over 600 became physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists, and over 1,000 worked in a variety of other of the health professions.

The Ministry of Health took upon itself the retraining of some two hundred physicians for paramedical occupations such as x-ray technicians and geriatric assistance. The employment rate after retraining was 100 percent since the program answered an identified need in the health care system.

Artists

The huge number of recognized artists who immigrated to Israel imposed two main tasks on the absorption system: finding them appropriate employment and taking advantage of their presence to develop Israel's cultural infrastructure and artistic education.

While 15,500 immigrants declared themselves to be artists upon arrival, 7,250 were officially recognized as such and an additional 4,150 considered as outstanding artists. Approximately 3,200 outstanding artists were assisted by the Ministry of Absorption, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Jewish Agency in purchasing instruments and equipment, about 250 were aided in professional training, and others were helped to receive exposure through concerts, exhibitions, performances, and writer's evenings, as well as with the development of sources of employment. The Center for Absorption of Immigrant Artists provided various forms of assistance to approximately 3,000 artists. Symphony orchestras were set up in almost every major town in Israel, the Opera House and the opera tradition in Israel were reinforced, and many artists served as classical music teachers in remote towns or Arab villages where classical music had never been stressed so widely.

Above Age 45

With these groups, the chief problem was in finding jobs for those above age 45. (Approximately 120,700 immigrants were aged 45-64, 74,800 were part of the labor force, and 46,600 were scientists or in free professions.) The Ministry of Absorption explained that "not even a growing economy can provide jobs for those above the age of 45." This is connected with a perception that employees this age are not profitable to hire, but which in turn results in a significant loss to the economy of an average of 15 work years for at least 20,000 immigrants, many of whom were at the peak of their careers and professional ability. Instead they threatened to become a social burden on their host country. The initiatives taken by the Ministry of Absorption and Ministry of Labor to meet this problem were mainly job fairs and initiated employment projects. While as yet some 20,000 have not obtained suitable employment, 15,000 in this age group have found work in their occupations or in related ones.

Language and Socialization

Hebrew language acquisition for adults was regarded as the responsibility of the state. *Ulpan* courses were given as part of the general absorption policy for six months to one year, during which time the adults involved were financed by the "absorption basket." In 1995, for instance, over 65 percent of all new immigrant adults attended Hebrew classes (involving over 47,500 immigrants; 2,080 classes opened in 74 towns, and some 53 classes functioned for special groups such as physicians and nurses, engineers or scientists, the

blind and deaf, and drop-out youth).

Beyond language learning, a total budget of NIS 26,740,000 was allocated in 1995 for various absorption activities within local communities, in addition to other budgets provided by municipalities or various agencies. Over 25 percent was allocated to social and cultural activities in Hebrew acquisition programs, 20 percent to enrichment programs for the 3 to 18-year-old age group, 11 percent to increase interaction between veteran and immigrant youth, and 18 percent to preserve language, culture, and traditions from the native country.

Out of some 119,000 students in the educational system, 4,500 dropouts aged 14-18 were identified, 2,500 of whom are being assisted to return to school. Each school receives NIS 350-880 per immigrant child according to age and country of origin in order to assist in social absorption. A particular effort is put on preparing youth prior to compulsory military service after high school through special summer camps and the involvement of youth movement counselors with teenage immigrants. Special guidance, rights, and benefits are allotted to immigrant soldiers. This teenage integration in the IDF — which functions for all of Israeli society as a strong social melting pot — has proven successful. The Ministry of Absorption also finances special staff to deal with soldiers' problems and difficulties (some 2,340 soldiers were recognized in 1995 as "alone," without a family in the country, thus being eligible for special support and financial assistance).

Out of some 22,000 immigrant students in institutions of higher education in 1993-1996, about 16,000 were from the former USSR. Their integration was not reported to pose special problems.

Conclusions

Israel is unique as a country in that its very existence is based on its duty to accept, give citizenship to, and assist any Jewish immigrant. This supersedes any other considerations such as age, profession, financial status, or any other threshold entrance requirements. Thus, the majority of absorption procedures from housing to employment and education are largely controlled by the state, especially in the first year when the immigrants are heavily subsidized.

A byproduct of the "direct absorption" approach was an accumulation of the immigrant population in the main cities which, on one hand, resulted in employment and housing problems, but, on the other hand, reinforced socially weak areas.

While children were very closely catered to socially in the schools, socialization between veteran and immigrant adults did not receive high priority. Assistance, mutual visits, or adoptions of families was not officially orchestrated and at times was found wanting, mainly due to lack of awareness by the host society.

The unanticipated high academic level of the immigrants posed employment problems, but reinforced the human capital of the state and the quality of its population. If the state finds ways of utilizing this tremendous capital, this could have a major impact on the economy. A study of the economic contribution of Soviet immigrants to Israel back in the 1970s stated that "immigrant families' discounted net balance with the veteran population is positive by the third year, becoming very large and positive in successive years....We conclude that (their) acceptance...is a healthy, beneficial policy for the economy and for the standard of living of the veteran Israelis."

Finally, the political awareness of the Soviet immigrants turned out to be very high. People such as Natan Sharansky and others formed the Israel B'Aliya party before the last elections on the basis of defending immigrants' rights and in June 1996 won seven Knesset seats in their first campaign. Two of the party's members became ministers — Sharansky as Minister of Industry and Trade, and Yuli Edelstein as Minister of Immigrant Absorption, both positions of importance for immigrant interests. Moreover, the party has significant political power that helps to ensure a majority for the government coalition in the Knesset.

* * *

Dr. Iris Geva-May is affiliated with the Department of Political Science at the University of Haifa, specializing in policy studies and comparative policy analysis. Her recent publications include *An Operational Approach to Policy Analysis: The Craft*, with Aaron Wildavsky (1997), and articles and chapters in books on immigration, health care policy, and education policy. Dr. Geva-May is founding editor-in-chief of the international *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*.

This *Jerusalem Letter* is based on a presentation originally prepared for the JCPA's Metropolis Project conference on world migration. A more complete version will appear in *Still Moving: Recent Jewish Migration in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Daniel J. Elazar and Morton Weinfeld (forthcoming).