

For children of Russian immigrants, mainstream Jewish community remains elusive

By [Sue Fishkoff](#) · February 22, 2010

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Participants at the Feb. 12-14 Mitbachon weekend in San Rafael, Calif., explored their Jewish identities using theater and other creative arts. (Rozana Saveliev / Jewish Agency)

SAN RAFAEL, Calif. (JTA) -- Alex Varum was 8 years old when he left Russia. Now 35 and a real estate developer in Silicon Valley, Varum grew up in California, speaks English like a native -- much better than Russian -- and feels American in every way.

So why would he spend an entire weekend exploring Jewish identity with a group of other young Jews from the former Soviet Union, many of whose personal ties to the Old Country are as negligible as his own?

“I feel somehow that I don’t belong to the American Jewish community,” he says. “I don’t feel Russian -- I’m American. But I don’t identify as an American Jew.”

That’s the reality of the Russian-speaking Jewish population in the United States.

More than half-a-million strong, scattered in hundreds of cities and towns from New York to Seattle, it spans a range of religious observance, income levels and career choice.

But even those who came as young children and barely speak Russian feel a bond with their landsmen that sets them apart from what they still perceive as a monolithic, powerful and elusive American Jewish community.

“Our concept of Jewish peoplehood is more ethnic than religious,” says Mark Khmelnitsky, 30, a lawyer who has been in this country since he was 16. “With American Jews it’s much more about what you do than what you are. I know I’m Jewish -- now what do I do about it?”

That question is what brought Varum, Khmelnitsky and 80 other young professionals from New York and the San Francisco Bay area to Mitbachon, a weekend leadership and identity-building seminar for Russian-speaking Jews held this month in San Rafael, 30 miles north of San Francisco.

Five years ago the Jewish Agency for Israel began reaching out to this second generation, sending young Russian-speaking emissaries from Israel to New York, Toronto and San Francisco -- cities with large, young, Russian-speaking Jewish populations -- to help them find bridges to the larger community.

It’s a tough challenge, acknowledges Anna Vainer, one of three New York emissaries and a co-organizer of the Mitbachon weekend.

“There are very few bridges to reach this population,” she says. “Not synagogue, not camps, not Jewish schools.”

Even those who grew up in the United States talk about “American Jews” as something apart from themselves.

“The ‘booze and schmooze’ model that is popular with young American Jews doesn’t reach them,” Vainer says.

Her colleague Alexandra Belinski, Jewish Agency emissary in San Francisco, agrees: “There is something in the Russian mentality that wants to go deeper. They’re ‘Russian from the inside,’ even those who don’t speak Russian well.”

All weekend, the conversation veered back and forth between the two languages, with occasional snatches of Hebrew. In one session, participants were asked to describe themselves -- young Russian Jews -- versus American Jews of the same age.

The words on the “Russian Jewish” list showed pride in their cultural heritage -- “intelligentsia,” “smarties,” “ambition,” “loves Pushkin” -- combined with embarrassment at their immigrant status: “fresh off the boat,” “xenophobic,” “lost,” “strong accent.”

Their view of their American-born peers was similarly schizophrenic: Envy was reflected in descriptors such as “synagogue,” “went to Hebrew school,” “Hillel,” “making donations” and “part of the community,” mixed with disdain conveyed by terms such as “privileged” and “naive.”

“The Americans have the privilege of going off to do what their hearts desire, but we are immigrants, we don’t have that luxury,” said one young San Francisco woman. “We become engineers, doctors, lawyers.”

Many in this group juggle two, three, even four identities, and just as many passports. Nearly one-third have lived in Israel, and most have family there. Some still have family in the former Soviet Union.

This gives them a deep attachment to Israel, a personal history with anti-Semitism and the shared immigrant experience of living between worlds.

“In a way, we’re homeless,” says Khmelnsky, who recently moved from New York to San Francisco. “I don’t feel very American. Israel is the place where I could have ended up, and might still end up, so I have a very positive view of it.

"American Jews are already home. They can stand to the side and criticize.”

Few of the second generation group hold leadership positions in Jewish organizations, even though many of those raised in America attended religious school, even Jewish day schools.

“In New York, none of this population has taken a real leadership role yet,” Vainer says.

That’s not because they disdain the organized Jewish community -- quite the opposite. It’s that they can’t find their way in, or don’t feel they need to participate.

One goal of the weekend seminar was to change that perspective.

Lev Weisfeiler, who immigrated to the United States at 22, says he’s never been part of a Jewish community and belongs to no Jewish organizations.

“As a Russian Jew, you didn’t have to show external symbols of your belonging; it was obvious,” he said.

Now that his daughter is 13, however, he wants to develop tools to articulate his Jewish identity so he can pass it on to her.

Finding their way into the community doesn’t mean the Russian immigrants don’t have a deep sense of who they are and where they come from.

The notion of “discovering” their Jewish identity seems foreign to many of them, even laughable. They’re Jewish because they’re Jewish, they say -- what eludes them, for the most part, is Judaism.

“This is something that really interests me, the Jewish part, not the Russian part,” says Luba Prager, who recently made her first visit to Israel as part of a Jewish Agency trip.

Those who do become involved in Jewish organizations often turn to those with which they are familiar, particularly groups that work with their own Russian-speaking community.

At the Feb. 6 Emigre Community Gala in San Francisco for Jewish Family and Children's Services, which resettled the city's 45,000 recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union, more than 70 of the bejeweled attendees -- one-fifth of the crowd -- were younger than 35.

Not only were they enjoying the caviar and dancing the hora with their elders, they were helping to raise funds for the organization and making their own donations.

It was the largest youth contingent in the gala's nine years, according to Gayle Zahler, the associate executive director of the Jewish Family and Children's Service. Their presence represents the younger generation's growing confidence in themselves, she says, and their growing willingness to give back.

"My grandmother goes to the L'Chaim Center," says Yelena Frid, 26, co-chair of the event's young adult leadership committee and a native of Odessa, referring to a drop-in center for Russian-speaking seniors. "These people took time from their life to make my life better, and it's our job to give back."

The young people at the Mitbachon weekend, and at the JFCS gala, don't know if their children will speak Russian or their grandchildren will appreciate Pushkin. But just because they feel apart from the mainstream American Jewish community doesn't mean they aren't flexing their muscle and looking to build something of their own.

"There's a whole base of us, a community that speaks the same language and has a specific way of being," says Veronica Price, 32, of New York. "We are a community, and a relatively strong one, and we can teach other communities how to find their identity."

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