

Translation / Traduction

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**Assist, Educate, Unite: New Canadians from
the Soviet Union and a Vision of Soviet Jewish
Community**

Translator's Introduction

At the end of 1975, the United Jewish Welfare Fund of Toronto disbanded its seven-month-old Task Force on Russian Jews and handed over all responsibilities for the absorption and integration of Soviet Jewish immigrants to the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society (JIAS). In a matter of weeks, JIAS formed the Coordinating Committee on Immigrant Services, and then a subcommittee tasked with guiding the social, cultural, and religious integration of the city's rapidly growing population of Soviet Jews, which had surged from one in 1971 to 785 in 1975. By the end of the following year, some 2,000 Soviet Jewish immigrants had settled in Toronto, backed by government rent subsidies and ESL classes sponsored by the Department of Manpower and Immigration. At that point, the Coordinating Committee reckoned that "a significant proportion" of the new immigrants had by and large "overcome" the basic challenges confronting most newcomers to Canada: housing security, job placement, and facility with English.¹ Having surmounted the initial hurdles of resettlement, "Russian immigrants," as they were known in the JIAS vernacular, had now swiveled their focus to grassroots cultural programming rooted in Russian language and culture. It was a development that if left unaddressed, JIAS feared, could very easily parochialize the population, distancing it irrevocably from the mainstream rhythms of Jewish social and cultural life in Toronto.

While JIAS would learn soon enough that standard absorption concerns remained paramount for most new immigrants, its handwringing over the potential disassociation of Soviet Jews from communal life was not entirely unfounded. Rifts had been developing between Soviet Jews and the city's Jewish communal establishment since the first arrivals in Toronto earlier in the decade—driven in large part by conflicting expectations embedded on both sides of the relationship. Toronto Jewry, whose political advocacy and communal dollars had contributed immensely to the global cause of Soviet Jewish rights in the first half of the decade, was frustrated by new immigrants' apparent disinterest in accessing the community's existing cultural-religious offerings—a sure-fire path, communal leaders believed, toward integration into the Canadian Jewish firmament. Soviet Jews, for their part, found their communal sponsors out of tune with the needs and desires of a highly educated, largely secular, and culturally distinctive immigrant group far more preoccupied with, say, professional training and childhood education in Russian than pettifogging lessons on Jewish praxis. Similar contretemps simmered in most every North American Jewish community that welcomed Soviet Jews in the 1970s and 1980s, with the pattern continuing well into the 1990s.²

To its credit, JIAS, which bore much of the responsibility for Soviet Jewish resettlement in Toronto in the late 1970s, recognized the inefficacies of local community stewardship when it came to the "Russian immigrants." The agency acknowledged its struggle to comprehend the particular cultural grammar of Soviet Jewish immi-

grants, fashioned in the delimited environs of a state hostile to independent Jewish expression, and their general lack of religious affinity. And it admitted a tendency to push programs and initiatives that failed to treat “Russian Jews as adults instead of children.” By the autumn of 1976, it had become clear to JIAS representatives that both sides would benefit from an institution designed “to express and explain the needs, hopes and aspirations of the Russian Jews.” And so, on December 1, JIAS convened seven recent emigres—Boris Furman, Arkady Shafirovich, Gregory Volozhin, Anna Mostovoy, Isaac Tsimberg, Mikhail Lefel, and Yuri Tsisis—to discuss the feasibility of a formal organization set up to tackle the burdens of integration while serving as a conduit for immigrants’ “absorption into the broader Jewish community.” Or, in the mildly exasperated words recorded in the minutes of that meeting: a “place where Russians can go with their problems.”³

Eleven days later, the first planning meeting of the “Association of Jews, Emigrants from the USSR”—a placeholder name soon reworked as the Association of New Emigrants from the USSR—took place at Holy Blossom Temple, a midtown Reform congregation. Lefel, Tsimberg, and Tsisis helmed the proceedings, unveiling a provisional agenda that consisted of three broad goals: to develop cultural and educational programming “in the spirit of national Jewish traditions”; represent the voice of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants and seek cooperation “with the Jewish community of Canada”; and function as a sort of mutual aid society tasked with easing the adaptation of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants in Toronto and the thousands expected to follow in the coming years, effectively resuscitating the landsmanshaft model that by the 1970s had all but vanished into obsolescence. They pledged to move quickly, and on February 6, 1977, at Beth Tzedec Congregation, a Conservative synagogue just south of Holy Blossom, some 800 new immigrants turned out to ratify the association’s programme and elect a forty-five-member executive committee.⁴ The crowd represented a staggering 40 percent of Soviet Jews living in Toronto at the time.

When it came time to cast ballots, the meeting, an otherwise staid, procedural affair, exploded in rancour and petty bickering. Some participants argued that voters had not been adequately briefed on those running for an executive seat. Others cast aspersions on the integrity of candidates they had known back in the Soviet Union, prior to their emigration. One G. Swirsky, incensed by the organizers’ decision to offer up a precooked list of candidates, smeared the association as a KGB front.⁵ But the programme itself, outlined over the previous eight weeks with level-headed input from Donald Schwartz, a political scientist at the University of Toronto and expert on Soviet nationalities policy who led the Coordinating Committee, was irreproachable.

The document translated below—an invitation to that February 6 gathering—captures the association’s vision as it stood on the eve of its inauguration. The vision proposed eight working groups focused on employment, housing, medical assistance,

legal aid, cultural events, business development, youth programming, and allyship with social organizations and local politicians. It promised good-faith collaboration with local Jewish organizations. And it would be shaped not only by pre-existing social relations and shared experience of language, culture, and traditions, but by an impulse to pursue the practical work of building visible communal infrastructure with all its bureaucratic and administrative entanglements as well.

While translating this document—one of about seventy that comprise the New Canadians from the Soviet Union Inc. collection at the Ontario Jewish Archives, in Toronto—my mind drifted frequently to what is perhaps the seminal work on late- and post-Soviet Jewish immigration to North America, Fran Markowitz's 1993 ethnography *A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Émigrés in New York*. In that book, Markowitz argued that despite the absence of formal organizations in the Soviet Jewish émigré community—in her case the Brooklyn enclave of Brighton Beach—a community formed nonetheless, cut in the abstract by its members' affective similarities, informal social relations, and a uniquely Soviet understanding of Jewish inner being.⁶ New Canadians from the Soviet Union—the third and final iteration of the Toronto association's name, registered in its September 1977 incorporation filing—proposed an altogether different model of Soviet Jewish community formation. While New Canadians' rather conventional bearings drew inspiration from the political scientist-cum-JIAS professional Schwartz, and were clearly intended to add symmetry to the work of JIAS, Jewish Vocational Services, Jewish Family and Child Services, and other agencies working on Soviet Jewish resettlement under the purview of the Toronto Jewish Congress, they were ordered in service of a far loftier purpose, "to unite all Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union into a single community of people."⁷

In a review compiled on its one-year anniversary, in February 1978, New Canadians asserted its pivotal role in the lightning transformation of Toronto's Soviet Jewish immigrants from a disjointed multitude into a coherent community within a community. The association, chaired in that first year by a Leningrad-born lawyer named Yuri Lurye, boasted overwhelming success in all but one of its sections: forty-three immigrants received pro bono legal aid; eighty children were placed in Jewish day schools; thirty-four people found jobs through contacts assiduously cultivated by the labour committee; and so on. There was even talk of taking the association national, recruiting new immigrants in Hamilton and Winnipeg.⁸

"At the beginning of our work we often encountered indifference, misunderstanding, and sometimes opposition from the local community," the association reported in 1978. "Now, our organization is seen as equal to others."⁹ That evaluation would turn out to be premature, as the same internecine frictions present in the mid-1970s persisted into the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period in which Russian-speaking Jewry in Toronto grew more than 600 percent. New Canadians experienced dimin-

ishing influence as the Russian-speaking community expanded—among the association’s few lasting achievements was Orah, a Sunday school founded in 1978 and later administered by the Toronto Board of Jewish Education. Nevertheless, the spirited ambitions and determined, activist ardor contained in the document below capture an extraordinary, if fleeting, moment in the history of sometimes conflictual relations between Soviet Jewish emigres and the Toronto Jewish community in which they settled. Here, shattered expectations, the deep-rooted anxieties of integration, and a peculiar admixture of humility and pride spurred this group of emigres from a community “in spite of itself” into one self-empowered, self-possessed, and very much intended.

Source: Accession 1979-9-28, File 2, New Canadians from the Soviet Union Inc. collection, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

77 Д О Р О Г И Е С О О Т Е Ч Е С Т В Е Н Н И К И ! 3572

Э г. Торонто к началу 1977 года живет около двух тысяч эмигрантов из СССР, прибывших сюда в семидесятые годы.

Всем нам известны многочисленные трудности, с которыми пришлось столкнуться в первое время пребывания в новой стране. Многие проблемы возникали и возникают до сих пор в результате недостаточности нашего опыта, слабого знания языка и условий жизни в этой стране, а также из-за отсутствия системы в обмене информацией.

Несомненно, Менпауэр и ДМИАС оказывают нам большую помощь. Однако работа этих организаций могла бы быть более эффективной при лучшем знании наших особенностей, нужд, сил и недостатков.

Обсудив опыт прошлых лет, многие из нас пришли к выводу о необходимости создания новой общественной организации - Ассоциации /объединения/ Новых Эмигрантов из СССР, прибывших в Канаду в последние годы. Такая Ассоциация, не противопоставляя себя уже существующим организациям помощи эмигрантам, работала бы в дружеском контакте с ними, не дублируя, а дополняя их деятельность.

Цель Ассоциации - содействие и помощь ее членам и вновь прибывающим из СССР в самых различных аспектах. Речь идет, в первую очередь, о содействии в трудоустройстве, а также о помощи эмигрантам во многих насущных проблемах: информация по медицинским вопросам, юридические консультации, помощь в овладении языком, бытовые, жилищные и пенсионные вопросы, организация досуга, вопросы культуры и религии и многое другое.

В этих целях мы предполагаем узаконить создание Ассоциации и получить возможность официально обращаться в Правительственные и другие учреждения для решения наиболее важных проблем нашей эмиграции. Кроме того, мы имеем возможность использовать собственный опыт - среди нас есть квалифицированные врачи, инженеры, юристы, филологи и многие другие специалисты, прошедшие в Канаде хорошую школу. Их советы и помощь намного облегчат трудности адаптации.

Будучи официальной организацией, Ассоциация сможет в необходимых случаях защищать интересы своих членов, если они нарушены.

Разумеется, это не исчерпывающий перечень наших задач. Мы ожидаем ваших советов и предложений, которые просим направлять как можно скорее на имя Ассоциации Новых Эмигрантов из СССР в Джиас - *Association of the new emigrants from the USSR, 152 Beverley street, Toronto, M5T 1Y5*, чтобы учесть их в нашей будущей деятельности.

Translation

- 2 -

Адрес временный; в дальнейшем будет решен вопрос о собственном помещении для Ассоциации.

В качестве иллюстрации работы организации предлагаем ориентировочный проект секций, из которых она будет состоять.

1. ТРУДОВАЯ СЕКЦИЯ /помощь в вопросах трудоустройства с ориентацией по профессиям/
2. МЕДИЦИНСКАЯ СЕКЦИЯ /связь с мед.учреждениями, направление в них нуждающихся в помощи/
3. КРИДИЧЕСКАЯ СЕКЦИЯ /консультации, связь с соответствующими организациями и пр./
4. ЖИЛИЩНО-БЫТОВАЯ СЕКЦИЯ /жилищные дела, проблемы людей пенсионного возраста, вопросы устройства детей, различные бытовые вопросы/
5. КУЛЬТУРНО-ПРОСВЕТИТЕЛЬНАЯ и РЕЛИГИОЗНАЯ СЕКЦИЯ /обучение английскому языку, организация досуга, вопросы религии и т.д./
6. СЕКЦИЯ РАБОТЫ С МОЛОДЕЖЬЮ /вопросы образования, спортивная работа летние лагеря и т.п./
7. СЕКЦИЯ ВОПРОСОВ БИЗНЕСА /ориентация в организации, связь с учреждениями и частными лицами, способными оказать помощь и прочие вопросы/
8. СЕКЦИЯ КОНТАКТОВ С ОБЩЕСТВЕННЫМИ И ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫМИ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯМИ.

Наша ближайшая задача - созвать конференцию будущих членов организации, утвердить образование Ассоциации, ее программу, и избрать оргкомитет, который будет полностью подотчетен ЕЖЕГОДНОЙ КОНФЕРЕНЦИИ ЧЛЕНОВ АССОЦИАЦИИ.

Мы приглашаем вас всех принять участие в Учредительной Конференции Ассоциации Новых Эмигрантов из СССР.

Конференция состоится 6-го февраля 1977г. в 3 часа дня, по адресу: 1700 Батерст стрит.

Программа конференции.

1. Сообщение о проекте создания организации.
2. Сообщения о структуре, секциях и их задачах.
3. Запись в члены Ассоциации.
4. Выборы Оргкомитета и Актива Ассоциации.
5. Художественный кинофильм на русском языке.

Инициативная группа.

DEAR COMPATRIOTS!

At the beginning of 1977, around 2,000 emigrants, who arrived here from the USSR in the 1970s, are living in Toronto.

We are all aware of the many challenges we have had to face in the early days of our sojourn in a new country. Many problems have arisen and continue to arise as a result of our insufficient experience, poor knowledge of the language and living conditions in this country, as well the lack of a system of information exchange.

Manpower and JIAS undoubtedly offer us a great deal of help.¹⁰ However, the work of these organizations could be more effective with better knowledge of our peculiarities, needs, strengths, and deficits.

Considering the experience of years past, many of us arrived at the conclusion that it is necessary to create a new public organization, the Association (Union) of New Emigrants from the USSR, who have arrived in Canada in recent years. Without opposing existing organizations already helping emigrants, such an association would work in friendly contact with them—not duplicating but rather complementing their activities.

The purpose of the Association is the support and assistance of its members and new arrivals from the USSR in a variety of ways. First and foremost, this means assistance in securing employment, as well as helping emigrants with a range of urgent problems: information on medical matters, legal consulting, assistance with language proficiency, domestic concerns, housing and retirement issues, leisure activities, cultural and religious matters, and many others.

To that end we intend to legalize the establishment of the Association and be able to turn to governmental and other institutions for solutions to the most important problems of our emigration. In addition, we have an opportunity to use our own experience—there are among us qualified doctors, engineers, lawyers, philologists, and many other specialists who have studied at a good school in Canada. Their advice and assistance will greatly alleviate the challenges of adaptation.

Being an official organization, the Association will, in necessary cases, be able to protect its members if their interests are violated.

It goes without saying that this is not an exhaustive list of our goals. We expect our advice and suggestions, which we ask you to send as soon as possible to the Association of New Emigrants from the USSR, at JIAS, so that we can take them into consideration for our future activities. The address is temporary; the matter of

the Association's own facilities will be decided at a later time.

To illustrate the organization's work, we present a preliminary plan of its sections.

1. LABOUR (assistance in employment matters according to professional orientation)
2. MEDICAL (communication with medication institutions, referrals for those in need of assistance)
3. LEGAL (consultations, contacts with relevant organizations, etc.)
4. HOUSING-DOMESTIC (housing matters, problems of retirees, the arrangement of children, various domestic issues)
5. CULTURAL-EDUCATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS (English-language classes, leisure organizations, religious matters, etc.)
6. YOUTH (education issues, athletics, summer camps, etc.)
7. BUSINESS (understanding of organizations, connection with institutions and individuals able to provide assistance, and other matters)
8. CONTACTS WITH PUBLIC AND GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS.

Our immediate goal is to convene a conference of future members of the organization, approve the Association's constitution, its agenda, and elect an organizing committee that will be fully accountable to an annual conference of the Association's members.

We invite you all to take part in the Founding Conference of the Association of New Emigrants from the USSR.

The conference is taking place on February 6, 1977, at 3 p.m. at 1700 Bathurst St.

The conference program:

1. Report on the organization's creation.
2. Report on structure, sections and their objectives.
3. Membership registration.
4. Elections of the Organizing Committee and Association's leadership.
5. Russian film screening.¹¹

Initiative Group.

1

Minutes of Meeting of JIAS Co-Ordinating Committee on Immigrant Services, November 9, 1976, File 2, New Canadians from the Soviet Union Inc., accession 1979-9-28, Ontario Jewish Archives [hereafter OJA], Toronto, ON.

2

The most comprehensive (if slightly outdated) study of the Toronto case remains Mindy Avrich-Skapinker, "Canadian Jewish Involvement with Soviet Jewry, 1970-1990: The Toronto Case Study," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1993). See also Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), esp. 279-312.

3

Summary of Meeting of JIAS Sub-Committee on Social, Cultural and Religious Integration of Russian Immigrants, December 1, 1976, File 3, 1979-9-28, OJA.

4

This figure is drawn from Russian-language meeting minutes. Protokol sobraniia 6 fevraliia 1977, File 3, 1979-9-28, OJA. In its coverage of the event, the *Canadian Jewish News* reported 400 people in attendance. Rochelle Carr, "Russians Form Own Association," *Canadian Jewish News*, February 18, 1977.

5

Protokol sobraniia 6 fevraliia 1977, File 3, 1979-9-28, OJA.

6

Fran Markowitz, *A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Émigrés in New York* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

7

Report on one-year anniversary, February 19, 1978, File 3, 1979-9-28, OJA.

8

Only the medical section failed to deliver. Report on one-year anniversary, February 19, 1978, File 3, 1979-9-28, OJA; Invitation to discuss Canada-wide organization of Soviet Jewish immigrant associations, undated, File 2, 1979-9-28, OJA.

9

Report on one-year anniversary, February 19, 1978, File 3, 1979-9-28, OJA.

10

The Department of Manpower and Immigration, created in 1966, was reconstituted as the Department of Employment and Immigration in August 1977.

11

The film, screened while the newly elected forty-five-member Executive Committee (referred to in item four of the program as the "Organizing Committee") stepped out to appoint a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer, was Andrei Tartakovsky's World War II classic, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962). Protokol sobraniia 6 fevraliia 1977, File 3, 1979-9-28, OJA.