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Coping with an exodus

The Soviet government's refusal to accept the conditions of the trade agreement with the United States has left in an equivocal position the Russian Jews waiting to leave their country. Meanwhile, Israel carries on with a reception programme which has handled 100,000 immigrants since 1970. Vera Rich reports from Tel Aviv.

THIS month, the 100,000th Jewish emigrant to leave the Soviet Union since 1970 arrived in Israel. In spite of Soviet claims that 98.5% of all Soviet Jews wishing to emigrate are allowed to do so, there is known to be a backlog of some 140,000 applicants still awaiting permission to leave. Although the effect on Jewish emigration of the recent Soviet rejection of the US-Soviet trade agreement cannot yet be gauged, there is no indication that it will lead to any official change of policy—indeed, a statement made by Colonel Alpachnikov of OVIR (the visa department of the Ministry of the Interior) on January 17, the day after the rejection of the agreement was announced, suggests that the policy will remain as before, one of frustrating delays and harassment, but with no absolute bar to emigration. The flow of Soviet Jews arriving in Israel may well slacken off for at least a time, but so far there are no signs of a total halt.

The problems of absorbing these immigrants into the Israeli economy are well known, and have become, indeed, the subject of a number of wry Israeli jokes ("What does one do with 50 professors of Russian philology?"). The

situation is aggravated by the fact that, on the one hand, some of the newcomers have a higher education and wish to continue to work in a learned profession, and, on the other hand, this higher education is sometimes so extremely specialised that even the smallest change of employment amounts virtually to a change of metier (one young engineer, at present going through the absorption process, quoted his first degree as having been in "Strength of Materials of the Aircraft Construction Industry"). And even those scientists who are able to be absorbed directly into Israel's higher education and research system may well find their practical problems only just beginning.

The problem, for a recently arrived scientist from the Soviet Union is largely one of adjusting his or her mental attitude from that of state-run, state-controlled research, to what has been described as the "anomic situation" of Israeli academic life. For the first time, they are faced with the problem of justifying their proposed research on an economic basis. It is not only the problem of what Israel can afford to pay for (some subjects such as

Immigrants at Lod airport. Photo Enkka.

high energy particle physics which can only be tackled on a multinational or superpower budget, are clearly ruled out); they have to cope with a whole new system of funding projects and buying materials. Coming from a system where new graduates are directed into industry or research, they have no experience of such basic procedures as interviews and applications. Some are distressed by lack of 'status'—the new immigrant working in an Israeli academic institution has his salary paid for the first two years by the government, a situation which bypasses the current cut-backs and redundancies necessitated by Israel's economic situation, and also somewhat relieves the budget of the department concerned, releasing funds for equipping the immigrant scientist for his research. During these two years, however, he is essentially on probation and his appointment still awaits confirmation. Coming from the Soviet system, where the status of a scientist is extremely high, some scientists seem to find difficulty in accepting, even temporarily, a position in which they have a salary but no status.

It is easy, of course, to exaggerate the importance of such difficulties—and the comments of the scientists themselves must be treated with a certain discretion. Many have, after all, chosen to come to Israel since they feel that the Soviet system is not conducive to academic freedom. One physicist in particular, who, when interviewed about his reactions to working in Israel, took advantage of the opportunity to offer extensive criticism of the absorption process, and, indeed, of the Israeli economy and political system, concluded by saying that he loved living in Israel "for here I can criticise as much as I like." Many criticisms seem to arise from a sense of enthusiasm. Scientists settled in a job have anecdotes of friends awaiting absorption, who want "to use their resources and experience" for their new country. More organisation is needed, they urge. "Here, in Israel, all things go slowly."

To hasten the process, the Israeli government set up, at the end of 1973, a Centre for Absorption in Science, under the auspices of the Ministries of Labour, Absorption, and Finance, and of the *Sochnut* (Jewish Agency). It is staffed by seven 'professionals'—themselves scientists who felt that their real metier lay in administration rather than research—assisted by a small secretarial staff. Doctor Uri Horowitz, Director of the Centre, explains their task of that of "intervention to get the scientist into the centre of his own communications network", in other words, to familiarise him with the whole job-finding routine and to introduce him to the various contacts he will need in his professional

life. Although the centre does not deal exclusively with immigrants from the Soviet Union, they do, in the present circumstances, form the majority of its clients. The centre aims to promote the good of the scientist rather than the product, and, accordingly, the new immigrant is presented with a set of forms to fill in, in his own language, with questions structured according to what he expects in an enquiry of this kind—even if, in certain cases, the information is irrelevant to the needs of the centre. Having completed his forms, the immigrant is interviewed and questioned about the work he would like to do. He is then asked to write a feasibility study of his proposed project, with the emphasis on the part he himself would play in it. (It seems that some idealists have submitted projects which they feel would benefit Israeli science, but have forgotten to write in a job for themselves.) After completion of this study, the centre then discusses ways and means of fitting the scientist and his proposed project into the existing structure of Israeli science.

In general, the impression gained from interviews with scientists who have been absorbed is that remarkable efforts have been made to keep them within their same general discipline. Some of the cases of “change direction” quoted prove on investigation to be nothing more than change of employment. Thus the Kinneret research station (attached to the Technion) has absorbed five immigrants from the Soviet Union, only one of whom is a limnologist, the other four being physicists and chemists, who are, however, still working in their original fields, although now on the physics and chemistry of lake water. The need for ‘retraining’ often referred to may cover nothing more than the need of a computer expert to learn a new programming language. Some scientists arrived with a choice of interests, and have found their subsidiary interests in Russia can be their main interest in Israel. The main problems seem to arise with those who qualified not in one of the big state universities, but in a small Institute of Higher Education, where the subjects taught are extremely narrow and the graduate is, by western standards, more an applied technologist than a scientist. For some of these, retraining becomes, in effect, a chance to bring one’s education up to full academic standard, and to advance from being, say, a computer technician, to a systems programmer.

Even for the best qualified scientists, there is, on arrival in Israel, generally a backlog of study to be made up. Under the current Soviet practice towards academic would-be emigrants, application for a visa is followed by a number of forms of harassment, including

dismissal from professional employment and the cutting off of one’s telephone, which entails long and tedious journeys to arrange even the simplest details connected with one’s hoped-for departure. If, as is often the case with scientists, the initial application is rejected, one may spend months or years as a “refusnik”, with neither the opportunity nor the necessary time to keep up one’s reading or think about one’s own research. (The famous ‘Sunday seminars’ were started as an incentive to scientists in this position to attempt to keep up their work. On arrival in Israel, therefore, the scientist is not only faced with learning a new language, but with making up vast arrears of essential reading.

As far as possible, the universities do assist in the problem of learning Hebrew. The Ben-Gurion University (Beer Sheva) employs its immigrants on a kind of sandwich-course basis, half their time being devoted to studying Hebrew. Tel Aviv University, which has absorbed some 280 immigrants (including postgraduate students) has its own *ulpan* (Hebrew school for immigrants). The backlog of reading presents a greater problem—and is one cause, in the case of long term “refusniks”, of scientists deciding not to continue in their chosen profession but to turn to some other field of activity like administration. Once an effort is made, however, and the reading started, the greater and more rapid availability of journals, and the chance to correspond freely with colleagues throughout the world, begin to show results and the information gap is rapidly reduced.

This freedom of correspondence, and the chance to work on one’s own initiative, instead of as part of a closely controlled team subject to state direction, are seen by the scientists as the greatest benefits of their new academic life. The universities in their

turn find the immigrants from the Soviet Union a source of new vitality and expansion. The Pure Mathematics Department at Tel Aviv University was “virtually non-existent” until the wave of Soviet immigrants arrived; now it is acquiring a considerable reputation and the university is hoping to expand its Astronomy Department in a similar manner. The Ben-Gurion University, having absorbed seven Soviet pure mathematicians into senior teaching posts, is making tentative plans (subject to funding) to develop an Institute of Applied Mathematics that could take, initially, about 20 or 30 applied mathematicians. This university also offers considerable scope to Soviet scientists, especially those dealing with the more applied branches of physics and chemistry, in its raw materials programmes, and also to agronomists in its desert research programme. The vast scientific complexes of the Technion and the Weizmann Institute likewise still seem to offer considerable possibilities for absorbing further immigrants. The main problem remains that of funding—but Israel has a long history of foreign endowments for academic institutions and, in spite of economic difficulties, one feels that in the long run the money will be found.

Although an upper limit to absorption must at some time be reached—if only when the whole state of Israel is transformed into one vast academic campus, coterminous with the state frontiers, with the entire population either engaged in academic research or providing the ancillary services to keep the academics alive (the “think-tank of the western world”, as one scientist described it)—that time has not yet come. And in the meantime, Israel provides a fascinating case study of the problems of transition from state-controlled research to one based essentially on personal initiative. □

Immigration officials check the papers of Viktor Polski, on arrival in Israel.

