

Arrival of the new cultured tenants

Soviet immigrants to Israel and the displacing of the Sephardi Jews

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Put your shoulder to the 'Aliya effort!!" the large advertisement in *Ha'ir*, the Tel Aviv version of the *Village Voice*, exhorted homeowners. "Rental apartments of all sizes needed for the Jewish Agency. What's in it for you? (a) rent in advance every three months in U.S. Dollars; (b) cultured, university-educated tenants; (c) guaranteed tax-free rental income. For details call . . .", and here were three Tel Aviv area-code phone numbers. "Closed on the Sabbath."

The week the ad appeared, in mid-July 1990, I was doing anthropological field-work in my hometown of Holon, a busy Tel Aviv suburb, in the Jesse Cohen neighbourhood, named after a rich Los Angeles Jew, but called in my childhood Jesso Congo, for its "wildness", its otherness. I was visiting newly homeless Sephardim – Jews whose parents had emigrated to Israel from the Arab World in the 1950s. They had been living in tents since being forced out of their apartments because the landlords raised the rent to what they could get from the government for housing the cultured tenants – Soviet Jews. When we heard the peeps on the radio announcing the news, we all gathered to hear whether the reporter who had visited us that morning would air his story. No. But there was a "human interest" story: around noon, a young father had brought his son to the Haifa city hall plaza. Newly homeless, he poured kerosene on the child and himself and threatened to strike the match. From the announcer's remarks about the father's accent and appearance, I knew that he was Sephardi.

That same week, Mahmoud Hassan Suwa'ed's home in Ras al-Nabi', an officially non-existent Palestinian village in the Galilee, was deliberately blown up by the "Gray Patrol" of the Israeli

Occupied Territories. Yossi Sarid, a member of the Knesset, has summed it up: "The problem is not how many Soviet immigrants will be directed to the Territories, but how many new housing units will be built there."

The absorption of the Soviet immigrants will inevitably lead to a general decline in living standards. Israeli Arabs, who are already discriminated against in all aspects of their lives – particularly employment – simply because they are not Jewish, will be the first to suffer. Currently, only 12,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel are university graduates, and 42 per cent of them work in professions for which they are over-qualified. Many better-paying jobs are related to military industries, in which Palestinian Israelis, without security clearance, cannot compete with Jewish university graduates. With competition from the massive Soviet immigration, fewer Israeli Arabs will be able to enroll in Israeli academic institutions. Around 20 per cent of Israel's citizens are Palestinian. This should be translated into voting power, but their seven Knesset members control only 6 per cent of the Israeli legislative authority. Massive Soviet immigration will further shrink their relative electoral power at the very moment that they are bringing a genuine Israeli-Arab consciousness to bear in the redefinition of Israel. The delicate Hebrew voice that Palestinian Israeli intellectuals have established would also be silenced.

Since its conception, Zionism's ideological mission has been to Europeanize Palestine. Currently over 70 per cent of Israel's population of about 4 million people is from the Third World, either Sephardi Jewish immigrants from the

enabled the Ashkenazim to establish their hegemony in Israel and to develop their high culture. It is ironic that the Ashkenazim, many of whom had virtually no contact with Western European high culture in their Eastern European villages and urban ghettos, look down on the Sephardim for being non-European; in fact most Sephardim were middle-class in their Arab homelands, and had direct contact with Western European culture by being raised and educated in British or French-controlled colonies. These cultured people were forced into the lower class only when they emigrated to the promised land, and ran up against the institutionalized Ashkenazi discrimination that permeates Israeli society. The dominant culture Arabized them far beyond their actual Arab identity, accusing them of sharing the "primitive" culture of the dangerous enemy, and systematically prevented them from accomplishing anything that would prove otherwise.

The *raison d'être* of Israel is to create a homeland where Jews can escape the long history of European anti-Semitism. Since some Soviet immigrants are either Holocaust survivors or immediate kin, now that they live in Israel they may put pressure on Germany to make reparation payments to them too. This would only increase the unfair competition that the Sephardim, especially the second generation, face when they attempt to enter the Israeli middle class. Only some of the second-generation summer tent dwellers have high school diplomas. Even fewer are college graduates. *Per capita*, fewer Sephardim than Palestinian Israelis have completed graduate studies. Like other institutions, the universities are dominated by an Ashkenazi oligarchy. Currently, Israeli's unemployment rate is around 10.5 per cent, but almost

musicians. Rather than current hits, they performed the same old "Zemlya Russkaya" songs of my Yemeni childhood. 'Aliya, the ascent to fully Jewish life in Israel, is the heart of Zionism. Zionist mythology reserves a cherished place for the Second 'Aliya (1903–1914), those Russian heroes who drained the swamps, paved the roads, dreamed of and built the kibbutzim, and made the desert bloom, even though many of them soon gave up on Palestine and now rest in peace in Brooklyn. The Ashkenazim long for the new Russian 'Aliya to fill the allegorical vacuum left when the idealistic values of the Second 'Aliya were overwhelmed by reality. The current wave of Soviet Jews, perceived nostalgically now, is unlikely to be able to re-enact the Zionist myth, as most of them know little about the connection between Eurocentrism and the Zionist rejuvenation of Palestine. They simply want a three-bedroom flat, a nice job, and a Subaru. When average Ashkenazim realize this, I predict that their warm welcome will turn into the same cold shoulder Ashkenazim show to all other non-Sabras. Even though 'Aliya is the heart of Zionism, Israelis hate those who ascend to the promised land after they have, because the government incentives given to the newly ascended are taken from the scarce resources of those already there. So I suspect that although the Russians are, as an ethnic group, being used by politicians to re-Europeanize Israeli culture, they will end up rejected and ghettoized like all other post-1948 immigrant groups after the initial 'Aliya enthusiasm.

Jewishness is defined in terms of one's maternal genealogy. Civil marriage is unavailable in Israel, and both Jews and non-Jews must have marriages performed only by their respective Orthodox

Interior Ministry, in spite of the severe housing crisis among Palestinian citizens of Israel. Like about fifty other villages, his was built in the early 1950s by Palestinians who became internal refugees when their original houses were uprooted so kibbutzim could be built. The government declared their new settlements illegal and omitted them from the maps.

In Israel internal problems such as housing and unemployment are unmanageable, yet the government issues 1,500 visas a day to Soviet Jews. In 1990 alone, 181,759 arrived, and in 1991, from January to May, another 66,194 have joined them. Many Soviet Jews, however, openly admit they were totally secularized Soviet citizens, do not fear a holocaust from the Russian anti-Semitic Pamyat movement, and have come to Israel not because of Zionist zeal, but because the US gates were closed at Israel's request. Why would the Israeli government actively promote the massive immigration of the million or so Soviets it plans to absorb in the next five years? And what can the Israeli government hope to gain from its current Soviet immigration policy?

The immediate gain is an abrupt 20 per cent increase in Israel's Jewish population. This might damage possible future talks, not only with the Palestinians but also with Israel's Arab neighbours. Arab anti-Zionist sentiment can be traced to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which permitted a Eurocentric, Jewish settler-state in Palestine. Since the turn of the century, Arab fears that massive Jewish immigration would lead to Israel's territorial expansion have proved correct. These fears subsided in recent years as the number of immigrants lessened. But the forecast of a million new arrivals has let the old genies of Arab paranoia back out of the bottle.

In the past decade, the Likud government has directed most of the affordable housing construction to the Occupied Territories. Due to the housing shortage in Israel proper, and because of the Soviet government's stipulation that all Jews who leave for Israel must be settled inside the pre-1967 borders, many recently-arrived Soviet families have moved on to army bases situated within them. The soldiers have been relocated to the West Bank. And with the winter rains, and the media distracted by the Iraqi crisis, homeless Sephardim are also quietly moving to the Jewish settlements on the West Bank and in Gaza, because of government incentives, or merely because Israel's current housing minister is Ariel Sharon – the great architect of the settlement of the

Arab citizens, or Falashas or Palestinian citizens of Israel. Sephardim constitute 68 per cent of Israel's Jewish population. By adding a million Soviet Jews, the Israeli government will be able to reduce the Third World majority in Israel to less than 60 per cent, and to re-Europeanize the Israeli cultural fabric. The Zionist left and the left-leaning Israeli media both consist of Ashkenazim – Jews of European descent. Leftist Ashkenazim treat the demographic majority of Israel, the Sephardim, with even more contempt than they treat the Palestinian citizens of Israel, whom they nostalgically perceive as the exotic Other. Indeed, the moment a tent settlement of newly homeless Palestinian Israelis appeared in Jaffa, it received more media attention than any of the Sephardi tent dwellers had. Journalists were also more sympathetic to the Palestinians' plea for housing, and did not blame the Palestinian victims, unlike the Sephardi ones, for lack of social mobility and causing their own evictions.

The Sephardi majority has only a small minority of representation in all Israeli political and cultural institutions, and the Ashkenazi centre of power exploits the Sephardi periphery. In the 1950s, the Labour Party elite transported newly-immigrating Sephardim to border towns, where they would serve Israel as human shields. Since the government provided no long term employment options, they became blue-collar labourers for their idealistic, kibbutznik neighbours, who contradicted their own egalitarian ideology by degrading the Sephardim's Arab culture. While the kibbutzniks went to universities for professional training, the Sephardim received only government-sponsored training programmes for production-line jobs.

Since the early 1970s, the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories have taken on the blue-collar jobs for even lower wages, so some Sephardim have found themselves jobless and without the means to train for better jobs. Others have managed to penetrate the Ashkenazi middle class by "forgetting" their Arabic, changing their last names and their Hebrew accent, and avoiding the summer sun. The influx of Soviets, however, most of whom are professionals, threatens this fragile upward mobility.

Reparation payments by Germany to survivors of the Holocaust have given Ashkenazim momentous financial advantage in hard currency. The Sephardim has had no comparable resources. While fully acknowledging the suffering for which these payments are a mere token, one must nevertheless note that it was this money that

all of the unemployed are the Third World citizens of Israel – Sephardim and Palestinians.

In 1977, a great political change occurred when the underdog Menachem Begin and his Likud Party were swept into power on the votes of the Sephardi majority. The Sephardim voted for the Right to protest against the patronizing Ashkenazi oligarchy of the Labour Left, even though most of the leaders of the Likud are Ashkenazim. The Sephardi Likud voters could sympathize with Begin's anti-Arab ideology because the Labour party, in the process of socializing Sephardim into the Jewish nation-state, taught them to hate themselves for originating in the "primitive" Arab world. A corresponding cultural shift did not immediately follow the political one. But from 1977 on, Ashkenazim have gradually begun to lose their status as the sole arbiters of Israel's fate. Representatives of the majority are infiltrating the élite. This is happening, in spite of the élite's reluctance to accept Sephardim – just as the rest of the Western World has had to tolerate Third World infiltration into its hierarchies. One of the main reasons for the Ashkenazi euphoria over the Soviet immigration is that it will disrupt this process. One million Soviet Jews have the potential of smothering any indigenous Middle Eastern voices in Israeli culture.

In my childhood in the early 1960s, I used to turn on the radio and hear the Red Army Chorus, and Yevtushenko's poetry in Hebrew sung to old Russian melodies. In my early youth, I danced the Cossachok, and dutifully sang the Communist Internationale at the weekly Zionist youth movement gatherings. All this was my middle-class cultural baggage, even though it had nothing to do with my Yemeni Jewish identity. Yemeni music was not encouraged on the state-run radio, because the Eurocentric ruling élite considered it suitable only for the National Folkloric Sound Archives. In the mid-1970s, however, the underground economy prized cassette recordings of non-Ashkenazi music, and thriving markets sprang up in bus stations in major cities. Ten years later this music was on the radio an hour a day in non-prime time, on programmes entitled *Pearls from the Orient* or *Mixed Mediterranean Grill*. Only recently has this music been to some extent integrated into the broadcasting schedule. But now the Russians are coming, and the Cossacks might kick the pearls off the air.

The Israeli Defence Force radio station, oddly enough the most progressive official voice, has organized and broadcast concerts by Russian

clergy. If an immigrant's pure Jewish descent line is not proven, back through many generations of foremothers, his or her name is put on the ostensibly secret list, widely available in rabbinical courts, of "dubious" Jews, ineligible for marriage within the Jewish community (*Psulei Hittun*). Many Soviet immigrants to Israel are unable to provide the required proof due to generations of Russian anti-Semitism, severe state repression of all religions in the USSR, intermarriage, or lost records. As a gesture of good will, Israeli civil law recognizes existing Soviet marriages as legitimate. But the rabbinical courts do not, and these people's children are also listed. How will these Jews get married? And to whom? How will they bury their parents? Those listed cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery, and all cemeteries in Israel are religiously defined. And what about all the secular Soviet Cohens and Kagans and Kahanes who are married to divorced women? Such a practice is outlawed in Israel. Their children are considered bastards (*mamzerim*) – total outcasts from the Jewish community.

Russian-speaking representatives of the Ultra-Orthodox religious parties of the Knesset are flying from Israel to approach the long lines of Soviet visa applicants, to warn them of the personal agonies and bureaucratic red tape awaiting those who cannot prove their pure-bred genealogies. Israel is defined as a Jewish state, thus conflating religion and politics. It is ironic that some members of the government, the most religious of Ashkenazi Jews, subvert abroad the policy they vote for at home, even while the Israeli government is knowingly inviting Soviet Jews into an untenable future.

As an Israeli citizen, I firmly believe that Israel ought to be committed first to those who already inhabit it. I would like my government to solve the problems of unemployment and homelessness for its own people before admitting any more Soviet Jews. I therefore call on the US government to open its gates to them. This would put a brake on the Israeli momentum to re-Europeanize Israel, and would allow Israel's Middle Eastern majority to reclaim what it considers its centrality to a genuine Israeli identity.

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