

# Preserving Heritage in the Face of Change: Russian Jews and the Gentrification of Uptown

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As the rabbi of Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation in Uptown, I was delighted with the opportunity to use two anthropological researchers in our community. I suggested studying two particular senior groups in Uptown Jews from the former Soviet Union and seniors from several Asian countries that constitute a significant part of Uptown's population. Victoria Hegner, one of the researchers from the Urban Research Initiative of the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change at The Field Museum, did her research in the Russian Jewish community. It is to her report that I wish to respond.

It's hard to assess success in the rabbinate. Being Jewish defies a single definition: An affinity for Jewish religious practice, or Jewish culture, or Jewish peoplehood, or even Jewish social activism (not to mention Zionism) are but some of the examples of Jewish affiliation. In my particular situation, I was interested in knowing how I fare in my work with the majority of the congregation's members—seniors from the former Soviet Union—in bringing them back to their religion and helping them become more comfortable in their new home, the United States. Raised under the yoke of communism, these elderly Jews know little of their culture and religion.

Here's a typical example, which occurred at our community seder, the Passover meal at which Jews commemorate the Exodus from Egypt. The narrative is introduced by asking four questions, which is done by the youngest member of the household. In passing, prior to reciting these questions, I said in Yiddish (our folk language; many seniors still remember some Yiddish because it was the language used by their grandparents) that those assembled must surely remember the joy with which they asked the *Fier Kashas*. There was no response. Not only hadn't they ever personally asked these questions at the seder, they had never even heard of this well-known Jewish tradition.



This and other, similar events brought home to me the sensitivity with which we must address their plight, to avoid compounding the shame they feel of not knowing about their own Jewishness. Attending the seder and Sabbath and High Holy Day services gives these individuals a sense of connection to their Jewish roots they'd never felt before. Individuals thanked me for making the community seder, then confided in me that this was the first seder they'd ever attended! (Most are in their late 70s or early 80s.) In the former Soviet Union, of course, attending synagogue, or even speaking Yiddish, could have landed them in jail or, worse, the Gulag, the forced labor camps where inmates were starved and worked to death. The vast majority of Jews in the Soviet Union therefore had to avoid pronounced demonstration of their Jewishness. My seniors are truly "Stalin's children." My goal has been to reintroduce them to their religion and culture while helping them embrace American society. Yet I had no tool to assess the success of our efforts.

Victoria Hegner's report was therefore important to my rabbinate and to the work of our congregation. She assessed the community in terms of those Jews who attend synagogue and those who don't (referred to, respectively, as the "synagogue community" and the "Russian community", which was quite enlightening). She observed that the synagogue community tended to be more open to American culture and more willing to learn English. This observation was gratifying, to say the least.

Hegner concluded that members of the synagogue community were able to transition to American life more easily because they felt a deeper connection with Jewish religion and culture, rather than Russian culture. Jewish culture can blend with and reinforce the American way of life; Russian culture, not so easily. Her analysis underscored for my congregation and for myself the important results we were achieving in our modest programs, spurring us toward greater commitment and achievement.

In fact, we are making a tremendous effort to create a senior center—a goal that has become more important than ever as we seek to meet the cultural and social needs of our senior population. We envision a place that will offer classes in English, American history, programs in art and music, and opportunities to interact with other ethnic groups residing in Uptown, all of which will complement the religious activities of the synagogue.

Hegner's report has meant a great deal to our work at Agudas Achim in a practical sense as well. We have referred to her findings in our funding applications for a senior center. The prestige of The Field Museum, the professionalism of her report and all the reports published in *Perspectives in Civic Activism and City Life*, for that matter, have significantly influenced the funders who consider our applications. Recently, through the offices of state senator Lisa Madigan, we were awarded a significant state grant to remodel our kitchen. This will let us open a Golden Diner's Club, a senior citizens' luncheon program sponsored by the city's Department of Aging, which will serve as a cornerstone of our senior center. And, as our seniors become more comfortable with their lives in America, they will become empowered to tackle the issue of gentrification in Uptown.

In short, this unique Field Museum program has boosted our awareness and understanding of the nature of our community and, in tangible ways, supported us and others as we try to create an inviting home for all residents of Uptown.