

Fred Lazin

Ben Gurion University of the Negev (Israel)

## The Response of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to the Crisis of Soviet Jewish Émigré Dropouts (Noshrim) in the 1970s<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The JDC is an American Jewish organization that assists overseas Jewish communities in distress. It is responsible to “American Jewry” and those organizations that fund it. Bauer (1974, 19) argued that the JDC has been guided by its founding “pledge of impartiality – it steers clear of political involvements” and takes pride in being “probably the only really non-partisan organization in Jewish life.” This paper examines the role of the JDC in caring for Soviet émigrés who left on visas for Israel but chose to resettle elsewhere. They were known as “dropouts” (*Noshrim* in Hebrew). It also deals with the JDC policy toward recently settled Russian Jews who left Israel to resettle elsewhere. In its work with Soviet Jewish emigres did the JDC serve the interests of the Israeli government, its donors and or the emigres? Did the JDC abide by its pledge of impartiality? Did the JDC try to force them to resettle in Israel against their wishes? The paper focuses on the spring of 1976 when the number of dropouts outnumbered those resettling in Israel. This led to a joint committee of Israelis and American Jews to coordinate a response. The ‘freedom of choice’ debate ensued; should Soviet Jews resettle in Israel or have the freedom to choose where to resettle? The findings here are based on archival records in the JDC, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the CJF (Jewish federations) and the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The author also conducted interviews and reviewed secondary sources. The paper should contribute to a better understanding of the JDC and its past ties to Israel and the American Jewish community.

**Keywords:** JDC; dropouts; refugees; transmigrants; resettlement organizations; Jewish organizations; Israel; Soviet Jews

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the workshop “The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee: 100 Years of Jewish History” in NYC, September 2014 and at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual EAIS Conference, University of Wrocław, Poland, September 10–12, 2017.

## Introduction

The American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) is an American Jewish organization that provides aid and relief to overseas Jewish communities and individuals in distress. It has also funded projects in Israel and Israeli governmental operations helping Jews in other countries. It is responsible to “American Jewry” and those organizations and individuals that fund it (Rosen 2010). Bauer (1974, 19) argued that the JDC has been guided by its founding “pledge of impartiality – it steers clear of political involvements” and takes pride in being “probably the only really non-partisan organization in Jewish life.”

This paper examines the role of the JDC in caring for Soviet émigrés who left on visas for Israel but chose to resettle elsewhere. Known as “dropouts” (*Noshrim* in Hebrew), most preferred to resettle in the United States (US). It also deals with the JDC policy toward recently settled Russian Jews in Israel who left to resettle elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. In its work with Soviet Jewish emigres did the JDC serve the interests of the Israeli government, its donors and or the emigres? Did the JDC abide by its pledge of impartiality? Did the JDC try to force them to resettle in Israel against their wishes?

The paper focuses on the spring of 1976 when the number of dropouts outnumbered the number of émigrés resettling in Israel. This led to a joint committee of Israelis and American Jews to coordinate a response. The ‘freedom of choice’ debate ensued and culminated in the General Assembly (GA) of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds (CJF) in October 1976.

Ralph Goldman, the JDC’s executive director, played a significant role in these events. He worked closely with the Israeli government’s Liaison Bureau which handled the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel.<sup>3</sup> He favored all Soviet Jews going to Israel. For him, the struggle of Soviet Jewry was “the fight for their right to return to their homeland – Israel.” In his view “American Jewry complicated the Soviet Jewry exodus movement (to Israel)... by introducing the slogan “Freedom of Choice.”

The findings here are based on archival records in the JDC, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the CJF and the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The author also conducted interviews and reviewed secondary sources (Lazin 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> Jews who leave Israel are referred to in Hebrew as *Yordim*.

<sup>3</sup> Over the years JDC transferred tens of millions of dollars to the Liaison Bureau for activities without requiring receipts or records on expenditures (Shachtman 2001, 27ff, 110).

## Dropping out

Between 1969 and 1973 almost all Soviet Jewish émigrés resettled in Israel. By 1976, however, a near majority resettled in the US and elsewhere. This led to a disagreement; the Israeli government wanted all émigrés to resettle in Israel while many American Jewish leaders supported “freedom of choice” – the right of Soviet Jewish émigrés to choose where to resettle.

Most Soviet Jews left on visas for Israel via train to Vienna, Austria. No emigres dropped out in 1969 and 1970. Fifty-eight persons dropped out in 1971. Of thirty-two thousand Jewish émigrés in 1972, two hundred and fifty one dropped out. In 1973 when thirty-five thousand Jews left the number of dropouts reached one thousand five hundred. By 1976, forty-seven percent dropped out (Dominitz (1996, 118); Memo, Akiva Kohane, “Soviet Jewish Transmigrants....,” April 13, 1977 (JDC files).

Until 1973 Israeli authorities may have coerced some émigrés to go on to Israel against their wishes (Charles Jordan, “Administrative Report”, March 1, 1966 (JDC files). The Jewish Agency, the HIAS and the JDC opposed changing resettlement destinations so as not to anger the Soviets (Johnston 1976).

Until September 1973, the Jewish Agency referred all “dropouts” in Vienna to the JDC and the HIAS for assistance to go to other countries<sup>4</sup>. Since the Soviet Union allowed few to leave on visas for the US, most Soviet Jews, regardless of desired destination, applied to leave on visas for Israel<sup>5</sup>.

The Jewish Agency, the HIAS and the JDC moved the dropouts to Rome where they applied for visas. In Rome the JDC provided rental housing, a subsistence allowance and supported schools and social activities (Memo, Paul Bernick to Max Braude, May 7, 1976; Minutes, the JDC Executive Committee, March 22, 1977 (the JDC files).

When the number of Soviet Jews wanting to resettle in the US increased, the HIAS and others lobbied to have Soviet Jews admitted to the US (Goldberg 1996, 183–184). US policy accepted almost all Soviet Jewish émigrés either as refugees (conditional immigrants) or “parolees.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Jewish Agency, was an NGO representing the Israeli government and world Jewry. The Liaison Bureau feared that a growing dropout population would result in an Austrian refusal to allow the entry of additional emigres.

<sup>5</sup> The Soviets preferred Third Country Processing (TCP) to the West (Memo, A. Kohane, April 13, 1977 (JDC files). Between 1971 and the first quarter of 1977 there were 2,581 TCPs and 134,945 Soviet Jews left on Israeli visas.

<sup>6</sup> The US government met the bulk of the cost of maintaining and transporting Soviet Jewish refugees (Bernstein, 1983, 75).

### Soviet Jews leaving Israel (*Yordim*).

Prior to the major confrontation over dropouts an altercation occurred in the early 1970s involving several thousand recently settled Soviet Jews who wanted to leave Israel and immigrate to the US.<sup>7</sup> Many of them had problems leaving Israel because they owed money to authorities for their transportation and initial absorption in Israel.

In August 1973 officials of the HIAS, the JDC, the Israeli Liaison Bureau and the Jewish Agency met to discuss the issue of *Yordim*. The Jewish Agency treasurer, Aryeh Dulzin, explained that the government could not stop Russian Jews from leaving but that they could limit the phenomena, if American Jewish organizations did not provide them with aid and assistance. He proposed a six-month moratorium on aid for Soviet *Yordim*<sup>8</sup>. The officials decided that as of September 9, 1973 those Russian immigrants leaving Israel on Laissez Passers would be told that if they intended to use the document for emigration that “international Jewish organizations in Rome were no longer assisting returnees from Israel.” There would be no official announcements; the policy would be spread by word of mouth among Soviet Jewish circles. The HIAS did not want to publicize that it would no longer be helping Israeli-Russian émigrés in Rome.

Consequently, some Jewish émigrés used the “refugee” services of other agencies including the World Council of Churches/the Church World Service, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Tolstoy Foundation, the International Catholic Migration Commission and the Rav Tov organization. As with the HIAS and the JDC, the US government contracted with and reimbursed these agencies for services provided to refugees. The number of Russian Jews leaving Israel did not decrease. By January 1974 the HIAS distanced itself from the agreement and resumed handling Soviet Jewish *Yordim* (Letter, Carl Glick to Aryeh Dulzin, January 7, 1974 (HIAS files)).

The issue resurfaced as more and more Soviet Jews from Israel arrived in Rome and Vienna and sought the help of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations to enter the US as refugees<sup>9</sup>. Those who had received citizenship or had been permanently resettled for more than a year were ineligible to receive a conditional entry (refugee) visa. But, the INS General Counsel ruled on January 6, 1975 that “in the absence of an overt act signifying acceptance of Israeli nationality, its involuntary acquisition neither precludes a Soviet Jew from conditional entry eligibility nor constitutes evidence in itself of firm resettlement. Further admission into Israel as an immigrant creates a presumption of firm resettlement, that the presumption is

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<sup>7</sup> *Haaretz* of June 15, 1976 reported that eight thousand of the one hundred and sixteen thousand Soviet Jewish immigrants in the past five and one half years had left.

<sup>8</sup> He noted that Prime Minister Golda Meir was “au courant and endorsed this position” (Meeting in Jewish Agency, Jerusalem, August 23, 1973 (HIAS files)).

<sup>9</sup> From 1974 to April 1976 3,634 received US funded assistance from voluntary agencies while awaiting resettlement in other countries (GAO 1976, 49).

rebuttable and that a conditional entry applicant who claims that he can prove that he has not firmly resettled should be given an opportunity to present his evidence.” He concluded that the burden of proof is with the INS to prove ineligibility (Letter, the INS to Evi Eiller (the HIAS Rome), February 10, 1975 (CJF files); JDC Exec. Comm., April 3, 1974 (JDC files)).

Thus, many Soviet Jewish *Yordim* were eligible to enter the US as refugees. American law required them to return to Europe. For years the Israeli government acted to deny them entry into European countries. The Israelis feared that this “remigration” might influence the Soviets to close their gates and lead to a greater exodus of Soviet Jews from Israel. Thousands of *Yordim* demonstrated in HIAS and JDC offices in Rome in July 1976. Eventually most found entry into the US or permanent settlement in Europe (Letter, Carl Glick to Congressman Joshua Eilberg, March 9, 1976; Memo, Gaynor Jacobson to the CJF Advisory Committee on Resettlement (CJF files, Box 710); Telex, R. Goldman to Ted Feder (#1362), June 23, 1976 (CJF files, Box 710).

## The Dropout Controversy

Israeli leaders argued that without financial assistance and requests by American Jews for visas for Soviet Jews that fewer persons would have dropped out (Frankel 1989, 23). Yet, many Israeli and American Jewish leaders realized that the overwhelming majority leaving after 1973 were motivated more by economic betterment than by Zionist ideology. They saw Israel as a very small market with fewer opportunities (D. Harris, Interview, August 8, 2002).

The Israeli press and some Knesset members blamed the HIAS and the JDC for “agitating for emigration to countries other than Israel and actually ‘kidnapping’ Jews to North America” (Dominitz 1996, 121.) The Liaison Bureau head Nehemiah Levanon (1995 441), however, saw the JDC as Israel’s ally and partner on the dropout issue. He claimed that the JDC lacked the power to overcome the CJF and the HIAS on this issue<sup>10</sup>.

Even before the monthly figure rose above fifty percent in March 1976, the dropout situation alarmed the Israeli government. In early 1976 Nehemiah Levanon urged the JDC and the HIAS to tell Soviet Jews that if they dropped out that they would not get aid (R. Goldman notes, JDC Executive Committee Meeting, April 19, 1976 (JDC files).

The Israelis and their supporters made several arguments in favor of Soviet Jews only resettling in Israel. First, Israel needed these émigrés for its survival; Soviet Jews would help in the demographic struggle between a declining Jewish majority and very fertile Arab minority. Moreover, their high education and skill levels would make an important contribution to Israel’s economic development.<sup>11</sup> Second, since the establishment of Israel,

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<sup>10</sup> Goldman (1995) wrote “to...link JDC with HIAS on issue of Neshira is erroneous.... HIAS invokes slogan freedom of choice and encourages Soviets who come out on Israeli visas to go to America. JDC opposes and fights against dropping out.”

<sup>11</sup> Israelis emphasized that in the past the country had absorbed poor and uneducated Jews from

it was not the responsibility of the Jewish people to help Jews move from one Diaspora to another. Third, the émigrés were not “refugees” since Israel welcomed them (Goldman 1995, 22). Fourth, Israel offered Soviet Jews the best opportunity for their re-immersion into a Jewish way of life (Gitelman 1989, 180–182 and Levanon 1995, .82). Fifth, the Soviet willingness to allow Jews to leave was based on family reunification in the national Jewish homeland (Israel) (Dinstein 1989, 36–38). In going to the US, the arch capitalist enemy of the Soviet system, the dropouts negated the justification for their special status. Finally, it was dishonest and an insult to Israeli sovereignty to leave the Soviet Union on an Israeli visa and then to drop out (Goldman 1995, p. 21). The misuse of visas could lead to the Soviets closing its gates.

### Freedom of Choice

Initially most American Jewish advocates for Soviet Jewry favored Soviet Jews going to Israel. Once they realized that many preferred not to do so, they then favored freedom of choice.

Underpinning freedom of choice was the collective memory of the American Jewish experience during the Holocaust. They recalled that Jewish refugees trying to flee Hitler’s Third Reich found the gates to the US closed. Jim Rice (letter to Leon Jick, June 1, 1976 (JDC files) asked “Shall American Jewish organizations put themselves in the position of going to our government to say: “We want this door closed to Jews?”

The position had roots in the Jewish tradition of rescuing those in danger (*Pidyon Shvuim*). To restrict emigration only to Israel might result in many not leaving (Letter, Frank Reiss to Len Seidenman and Irving Haber, August 30, 1976 (JDC files) and Minutes, the JDC Exec Com., February 22, 1977 (JDC files). Who could predict what the future would bring for them in the USSR?

Freedom of choice also found support in traditional American liberalism which held that you cannot force people to go anywhere they do not want to go. “They want to come to the US? It’s too bad, we don’t like it, but it’s their basic right to make the choice” (Decter 1990, 34).

Proponents also disagreed on the ethical implication of the misuse of Israeli visas. They argued that the best way for a Jew to leave the USSR was via an Israeli visa. The goal of maximizing the exodus of Soviet Jews justified the “misuse” of Israeli visas (Leonard Fein, Telephone interview, June 12, 2003). Others ridiculed Israeli concern over deception saying that Jews had falsified documents for hundreds of years to save lives. They also had doubts that the misuse of visas would cause the Soviets to close its gates. They suggested that Soviet

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Arab lands. Unstated was the assumption by many that most Soviet Jews were Ashkenazim (European), a declining minority amongst Israeli Jews. An Ashkenazi establishment had dominated Israel since its founding (Lazin, 2006).

authorities may have manipulated exits to insure a high dropout rate to show Arab allies that Soviet Jews were not going to Israel.

While many American Jewish leaders sided with Israel on the issue of need, a few did not. Jim Rice (Comments...,UAHC, Los Angeles, December 4, 1976), of the Chicago Jewish Federation, represented a position supported, behind closed doors, by some Jewish professionals. He argued that American Jewry could demand a maximum number of Soviet Jews because restrictive immigration policies had kept out Jewish immigrants until the present. This was an opportunity “to replenish” our communities.

Finally, many American Jews were self-conscious about forcing others to go to Israel. One retold the account of an American Zionist who encouraged a Soviet émigré in Ladispoli, Italy, to go to Israel; the émigré retorted “*und Du?*” (and you?).

### The Committee of Eight (8)

In April 1976 meetings on dropouts between officials of the Liaison Bureau, the HIAS, the CJF, the JDC, the UJA and the UIA, the participants failed to reach a consensus on how to respond to a dropout rate of fifty percent (Memo, A. Kohane to Ralph Goldman, May 6, 1976 (JDC files). In June 1976, the Jewish Agency in Vienna stopped transferring to HIAS/JDC Soviet émigrés (dropouts) with relatives in Israel and none in the West (Memo, A. Kohane to R. Goldman, June 15, 1976).

At the July 1976 Jewish Agency Board of Governors Meetings in Jerusalem, American Jewish lay leaders met with Israeli government and Jewish Agency officials on the dropout issue. Max Fisher presented an American proposal recommending that émigrés who exited on Israel visas and dropped out should not be aided (Dornitz, 1996).<sup>12</sup> This policy would go into effect once Soviet Jews had sufficient time to learn about the new policy. Those not wanting to go to Israel would have to apply in the Soviet Union for visas to other countries. American Jewish organizations would pressure their government for visas for family reunification and provide aid to the refugees coming to the US. They would discourage non-Jewish American refugee support organizations from helping dropouts.

Fisher proposed closed deliberations by a committee of eight to work out within ninety days an operational plan for a unified Israeli-American Jewish policy (Shachtman 2001, 124).<sup>13</sup> Those present agreed that American Jews should not embark on a *campaign* to get visas for those not wanting to go to Israel (Notes of ... meeting ..., July 15, 1976 (JDC

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<sup>12</sup> Participants at the Coordinating Committee for Immigration and Absorption included Max Fisher; Phil Bernstein, Exec Director of CJF; Don Robinson, President, JDC; R. Goldman; C. Glick; Gaynor Jacobson, Exec Director HIAS; Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Alon; Yosef Almogi, Chair of Exec of the Jewish Agency; and N. Levanon of the Liaison Bureau.

<sup>13</sup> Prime Minister Rabin appointed the Committee of Eight. N. Levanon and R. Goldman co-chaired. Others included Yehuda Avner (Office of PM), Uzi Narkiss (Jewish Agency), Zeev Szek (Foreign Office),

files). Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reiterated that: "...we succeeded in opening Russian gates on the assumption that the Jews are leaving for Israel and Israel only..." (Hand notes of R. Goldman (JDC files). Dulzin argued that the "first duty is not to save Jews, we must save only those who will go to Israel." At a second meeting Nehemiah Levanon suggested withholding documents from dropouts so that the HIAS would "break its neck (Hand notes of C. Glick (HIAS files).

The Committee of 8 met in Geneva from August 12–15<sup>th</sup>. It proposed that once in possession of a *vysov* (letter of invitation) from a relative in Israel, those wanting to go to Israel would go to the Dutch Embassy in Moscow (which handled Israeli affairs) to obtain a visa for Israel. Upon arrival in Vienna, Jewish Agency representatives would assist them to continue to Israel.

Soviet Jews wanting to resettle outside of Israel would apply in Moscow for a visa. This would require a *vysov* from relatives in that country and approval by Soviet authorities. The HIAS and the JDC would assist, maintain and resettle those Soviet Jews arriving in Vienna with a visa for a country other than Israel. Jews arriving on Israeli visas who decided to drop out would receive no assistance.

The Committee of Eight hoped to make an announcement before September 10, 1976 with the new policy going into effect three months thereafter.

While the plan gave Soviet Jews freedom of choice within the Soviet Union, several problems remained. First, it was unclear whether the Soviets would permit Jews to leave for family reunification in countries other than Israel. Second, Israel's absence of diplomatic relations and direct flights with the Soviet Union required the use of Austria for transit to Israel. Until now, Chancellor Bruno Kreisky had insisted that the Jewish Agency guarantee each person entering Austria freedom to choose where they wanted to resettle.

The Committee proposed that the boards of the JDC, the HIAS, the CJF, the UJA and the UIA be convened as soon as possible to ratify the agreement. Also, they proposed dealing with the American government at the highest level which meant having Max Fisher contact President Gerald Ford. They wanted the American government to influence the Soviet Union to allow direct resettlement of Soviet Jews to the US; cease reimbursement of non-Jewish organizations aiding dropouts; issue necessary visas; find sites other than Rome for third country processing (TCP); and funding for direct flights from the Soviet Union to the United States.

The Committee of Eight proposals reached the various organizations and rumors of the cutting of aid to dropouts followed (Memo, L. Seidenman to G. Jacobson, September 22, 1976 (JDC files).

At a JDC Executive Committee Meeting on September 21, Ralph Goldman reported that the Committee of Eight had been guided by the principles to maintain freedom of

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Phil Bernstein (CJF), Gaynor Jacobson (HIAS) and Irving Kessler (UIA). HIAS, JDC and CJF were to be party to the agreement.



choice for all perspective immigrants, assist every Jew who needs help to leave the country of emigration and go to the country for which he has a visa and to bring out a maximum number of emigrants from the Soviet Union. Goldman hinted at problems with the Dutch, the Austrians and Italians He indicated that Max Fisher was optimistic about getting additional visas for Soviet Jews wishing to emigrate directly to the US. At the meeting, Phil Bernstein (CJF) emphasized that the Israelis want to help “anyone to get out of the Soviet Union. Nor do they want to limit the freedom of choice of every Jew to go where he wants to go” (R. Goldman report, JDC Exec. Com., September 21, 1976).

At the time, Gaynor Jacobson argued that the Committee of Eight wanted to guarantee maximum Soviet Jewish emigration regardless of destination. The question was whether they should exercise freedom of choice in the USSR or in Vienna (Greenway 1976).

Each side in the freedom of choice debate encouraged their “Soviet Jews” in Israel and the USSR to speak out. Former prisoners of Zion Mark Dymshiits and Josif Mendelovitch strongly opposed aiding dropouts. Sylva Zalmanson and Dr. Mark Gelfand warned that if Israel became the only option fewer would leave (Letter from Sylvia Zalmanson et al to American Jewish community, November 1, 1976, (HIAS files). Eleven recent Soviet immigrants to Israel charged that cutting aid would abet the KGB efforts to reduce Jewish emigration (Alexander Lunts, letters to Mr. Jacobson, Y. Rabin et. al., September 1976 (JDC files); Open letter to Committee of 8, Lunts et. al., August 18, 1976) In contrast, a group in the Soviet Union argued that those dropping out should not be aided with Jewish communal funds (Letter from Soviet Jews received by phone by V. Lazaaris from Tallinn, Leningrad, Riga, Vilna and Kiev addressed to N. Goldmann et. al., September 22, 1976 (JDC files).

Former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban attacked efforts to coerce people to come to Israel. Joseph Tekoa, President of Ben Gurion University and head of an organization of Soviet immigrants charged that service arrangements for dropouts in Vienna, sponsored by the HIAS and the JDC “encourage, legitimize and increase the flow of dropouts.” He predicted the Soviets would use this as an excuse to close the gates (Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada Information Bulletin, January 3, 1977, (CJF files).

Many diverse American Jewish organizations supported freedom of choice. A special task force of the Synagogue Council of America (SCA) concluded that “the traditional Jewish concept of *Pidyon Shvuim* imposes an overriding moral obligation to assist all Jews who have managed to leave the Soviet Union. Moreover. not to assist may undermine the entire moral basis of our struggle on behalf of Soviet Jews, which is based on the principle of reunion of families and on the right of free movement of population grounded in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Rabbi Alexander Schindler, Chairman of the Conference of Presidents also favored freedom of choice (Memo, Rabbi W. Kelman to SCA Plenum, November 26, 1976).

Si Frumkin of the Council of Soviet Jewry in Southland, affiliated with the Union of Councils, opposed all limitations on entry into the US (*Southwest Jewish Press*, September 3, 1976 & October 29, 1976).

In the fall of 1976 the Jewish Defense League sat in at the HIAS's office charging treachery, perfidy and betrayal of Soviet Jewish refugees. They argued that dropouts were foolish and weak but should not be abandoned. *They referred to the Committee of Eight as a "latter day Judenraat"* (Meir Kahane, *The Magazine of the Authentic Jewish Idea*, Volume 1, #7, November 1976 & "Jewish Defense League Pamphlet, "Treachery and Perfidy" (HIAS files). In late October the AJC opposed unofficially the proposed implementation of the Committee of Eight proposals on grounds that they would deny freedom of choice (Letter, Bert Gold (AJC) to R. Goldman, October 28, 1976 (JDC & CJF files). The Jewish Labor Committee also argued that Jewish communal organizations have an obligation to help Jews resettle in the country of their choice (Draft Resolution, December 13, 1976 (HIAS files)).

In October, the Committee of Eight became the Committee of Ten with the addition of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) and the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (NCSJ). The body became a technical subcommittee for a CJF sponsored Interorganizational Committee. Headed by Max Fisher, it consisted of presidents and executive directors of the CJF, the JDC, the HIAS, the UJA and the UIA (Memo, C. Glick to HIAS Board, December 7, 1976 (HIAS files ). American Jewish organizations dealing with the dropout phenomena became officially independent from their Israeli counterparts.

Initially the new committee supported the Committee of Eight position not to aid dropouts. On October 26 it endorsed the principles of freedom of choice and a maximum number of Jews leaving the Soviet Union (Summary of the JDC Exec. C, November 16, 1976 (JDC files). Soviet Jews would exercise their right of freedom of choice in Moscow. It decided that the HIAS would limit their help to those with visas for other countries (Note, Max Fisher to the HIAS, October 25, 1976 (HIAS files); J. Goodman, "Paper on Situation, NCSJ", November 24, 1976).

Carl Glick, the HIAS's President, attacked the Committee's proposals. He argued that since the Soviets would probably not allow Jews to leave on American visas then only the Israeli option remained. This might result, he feared, in some Jews not leaving. He warned that Soviet Jews might face physical persecution in the future. At the same time, he argued that with an Israeli commitment not to refuse anyone a visa, Soviet Jews could continue to drop out as before and receive assistance from non-Jewish and anti-Zionist organizations who would replace the HIAS (Memo, Emergency Meeting, October 26, 1976 (HIAS files).

Max Fisher publicly supported the Committee proposals. The Israeli government sent Nehemiah Levanon to speak in favor of the proposals at Jewish federations from coast to coast (Rager 1990 and Gold 1990, 32).

Despite Glick's position, the HIAS Board of Directors on October 26, 1976 passed a resolution stating that the HIAS "will join in the search for a means by which Israeli visas would be used for Jews going to Israel; and American, Canadian and other visas would be used by Jews who wish to go to these countries (JDC files, n.d.). The HIAS recommended the "sending of invitations or affidavits into the Soviet Union for those Jews who wish to

come to countries other than Israel for family reunion.” In effect, the HIAS gave qualified support to the Committee proposals.

At a meeting on October 16, 1976 the Executive Committee of the JDC endorsed the Committee proposals. The JDC Board had yet to approve the proposals. At the JDC Executive Committee meeting on October 26, 1976 members passed a resolution that “every effort should be made to develop such procedures to assure that the maximum number of Jews wanting to leave the Soviet Union will be helped to do so.” Those present at the JDC Executive Committee meeting on October 26, 1976 endorsed the Committee proposals (Summary & Minutes of special meeting of the JDC Exec., October 26, 1976 (JDC files).

The JDC Executive Committee next met on November 16, 1976. *President elect Donald Robinson endorsed the cessation of aid to dropouts.* Those present discussed the issue of setting a date to begin implementation. N. Levanon argued that Soviet Jews would not apply for American visas until they realized that dropouts would not be aided!<sup>14</sup> The overwhelming majority favored a resolution (two persons opposed) that the Interorganizational Committee goes forward with a date as soon as possible (Minutes and Summary of JDC Exec. C. Meeting of JDC, November 16, 1976 (JDC files).

At the end of October Max Fisher and others remained optimistic that the the recommendations could be implemented (Memo, P. Bernstein to R. Goldman “Next steps ...” October 29, 1976 (JDC files).

The Committee proposals were on the agenda of the 45<sup>th</sup> Annual GA of the CJF in Philadelphia in November 1976. At the Assembly Levanon of the Liaison Bureau lobbied delegates. Session chair, Max Fisher reported on the proposals. He delivered a poorly prepared and ineffective speech. Carl Glick spoke in opposition. A person in the audience, probably Leonard Fein, gave a powerful emotional address favoring freedom of choice. He mentioned the Holocaust and recalled American gates being closed to Jewish refugees in the 1930s. His moving comments together with Glick’s efforts increased the opposition to the Committee proposals. Sensing this, Max Fisher did not bring the issue to a vote. Consequently, the CJF, representing Jewish federations throughout the US, did not endorse the Committee proposals to end aid to dropouts. The status quo remained in force.

For the time being both the HIAS and the JDC continue to aid dropouts. Importantly, the percentage of dropouts increased for the rest of the decade until the gates of the Soviet Union closed in 1982.

## **Conclusions**

When the number of Soviet Jewish émigrés dropping out in Vienna reached fifty percent Israel’s Liaison Bureau proposed that the HIAS and the JDC cease providing them with aid

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<sup>14</sup> He also confirmed that he told the Dutch Foreign Minister to issue visas to all applicants including probable dropouts.

and assistance. They also urged American Jewish leaders to pressure their government to stop reimbursing non-Jewish refugee relief organizations assisting dropouts who sought refuge in the US.

The JDC under Ralph Goldman supported the Israeli position. This raises a question of the JDC's impartiality: to what degree did it support Israeli interests versus those of the American Jewish community and Soviet Jewish émigrés who preferred to resettle in the US? Evidence here suggests that in the 1960s and 1970s on the issues of *Yordim and Noshrim* (dropouts) the JDC served the interests of the Israeli government.

Action taken by the CJF which indirectly funded the JDC vetoed the Committee of Eight proposals and led to a continuation of the status quo which favored 'freedom of choice.' The federations revolted against Max Fisher, the JDC, and the Liaison Bureau. Around the country various federations opposed cutting aid to dropouts on the grounds of freedom of choice and the Jewish tradition of rescuing prisoners. In the minds of many were memories of their government refusing entry to Jews trying to flee Hitler.

Orbach (1979, 76) referred to the defeat of the Committee of 8 proposals as "an American Jewish Declaration of Independence" from Israel. It clearly signified an independent position on the Soviet Jewry issue. Freedman (1989, 79) saw this as the first-time American Jewish establishment opposed "an Israeli policy preference on Soviet Jewry."

Two final points for thought and future research. To what extent do the events of 1976 involving the role of JDC in the plight of Soviet Jewish dropouts mirror the events of post World War II in the DP camps? Were there similar attempts to force Jewish DPs to resettle in Israel? What did the JDC do vis a vis Jewish Agency /Israeli pressure?

Finally, by 1988 these divergent views between Israeli and American Jewish leaders would converge when Mikhail Gorbachev decided to allow free emigration of Soviet Jewry. When the gates of the Soviet Union opened in 1989 for free emigration for Jews, the US government placed a quota on Soviet Jewish refugees. All major American Jewish organizations abandoned freedom of choice, supported the quota policy of their government and urged that Soviet Jews be resettled in Israel.

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## Author

### Professor Dr Fred Lazin

Ben Gurion University of the Negev, The Lynn & Lloyd Hurst Family Professor Emeritus of Government. Contact details: lazin@bgu.ac.il.